

MADISON, Wis. — Approximately 60 members of the Wisconsin National Guard make up one of the Wisconsin National Guard's more unique units – the 132nd Army Band.

And while most might associate these Citizen Soldiers with their instruments, approximately 30 have responded to meet the needs of the local community by either supporting the state's response to COVID-19 or assisting local elections throughout the spring of 2020.

“We are Army people first.” said Sgt. 1st Class Lauren Tredinnick, a non-commissioned officer and saxophone player in the 132nd Army Band. “We have been deployed to polling stations, and we have had a lot of our Soldiers on COVID response missions right now. We have also helped out with sandbag missions and border patrol missions (in recent years). We are Soldiers through and through.”

Tredinnick also explained how this year's modified annual training, which usually consists of public performances in communities across the state, creates a unique opportunity for Soldiers to focus on individual readiness.

“This annual training we're not able to get out into the public due to COVID-19.” she said. “So we are more focused on individual Soldiers' readiness. Training is focused on practicing our individual instruments, getting our uniforms squared away, and basic Army warrior tasks.”

One of her Soldiers, Spc. Austin Williams, a trumpet player in the 132nd Army Band, agreed that too often people have negative misconceptions of Soldiers in the band.

“A lot of people think we don't have to go to Basic Combat Training, but every single one of us had to go through it,” he said. “We also have to keep up our Army warrior tasks. Just yesterday we spent the day disassembling and assembling our M-16s.”

The 132nd Army Band was constituted in the Wisconsin Army National Guard in 1946 as the 32nd Infantry Division Band. In accordance with the 132nd Army Band website, their mission is to, “Provide music throughout the full spectrum of military operations and instill in our Soldiers the will to fight and win, foster the support of our citizens, and promote our national interests at home and abroad.”

“The band's mission really fosters a good sense of community.” said Sgt. Charles Bloom, a non-commissioned officer and tuba player in the 132nd Army Band. “The performances that we do, bring people together for a good cause.”

The 132nd has nine different ensembles including: Concert Band, Ceremonial Band, Forward Brass Quintet, Patriot Jazz Band, “EZ Jazz” Band, Soldiers of Sax, A.A.R., Badger Brass Collective, and Country Enough. Bloom plays instruments in multiple ensembles.

“When I joined the unit I played a lot of tuba, and I played in the brass band and quintet.” he said. “However, the rock band needed a guitar player and I played guitar in college, so I started taking additional guitar lessons. I then joined the rock band and have been there for the last three years. I really like the community we have within the band and within the unit.”

Joining the band is one of the few military occupations where the individual has to be completely proficient in the skillset before enlisting.

“My dad played the tuba,” continued Cooper. “So that’s why I ended up playing tuba in middle school. I’ve been playing ever since.”

Tredinnick explained that potential recruits must audition in their primary instrument before being approved for enlistment.

“This is not something the Army teaches you from square one,” she said. “Which is unlike a lot of other (military occupational specialties).”

While in training Soldiers learn basic warrior tasks. These warrior skills have allowed the Wisconsin National Guard Soldiers who also serve in the 132nd Army Band, to effectively support Wisconsin both through COVID-19 missions and election missions as well as other emergency mobilizations in recent years. All are expected to be ready to serve if the state calls for the Guard’s assistance.

Spc. Kayla McGuinnis, a trombone player in the 132nd Army Band and a full-time music education student at the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, had her first National Guard activation to assist during the Wisconsin primary elections April 7. McGuinnis was activated for a polling place in Winneconne, Wisconsin just 20 miles from her hometown of Neenah. She helped facilitate a safe environment for local voters and worked as a poll worker.

“Typically it’s the older community members who tend to volunteer for working the poll stations, but this year there was a lack of volunteers due to COVID.” she said. “The community drew from the National Guard to fill those gaps. We were disbursed to where we were most needed. I definitely had the sense I was helping my local community.”

Even with many of its members mobilized in support of the state in recent months, the band has continued to fulfill its more traditional role simultaneously – playing on multiple occasions at morale, welfare, and recreation events to lift the spirits of Wisconsin National Guard troops mobilized in support of various emergencies, at troop homecoming ceremonies and sendoffs, and at other traditional military ceremonies and observances.