

# Training in Contested Spaces

*How Fort McCoy's COVID-19 Risk-Mitigation Protocols set Conditions for the Army Reserve to Resume Training*

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## Introduction

**A**s a Total Force Training Center, Fort McCoy, WI, has primary responsibility to support the training and readiness of military personnel and units of all branches and components of America's Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup>

Since the early days of the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in the United States, the Army and its installations have been challenged to find ways to maintain a high degree of readiness in this "contested environment."

One Army installation, Fort McCoy, developed and implemented a series of COVID-19 risk-mitigation protocols that set conditions to enable safe and effective training to resume on the installation, resulting in the successful training of thousands of military personnel through the summer of 2020. This publication is about Fort McCoy's leadership, specifically the garrison commander and his staff, following Army guidance to create safe, effective, and innovative policies and practices that significantly mitigated the COVID-19 risks for its training populations.

## A Global Virus: A Responsive Army

Before the COVID-19 virus outbreak reached national crisis levels, the Army had taken steps to respond to the growing risks associated with this global pandemic. The Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA) issued a series of orders and promulgated policies across the Army enterprise to provide clear guidance.<sup>2</sup> HQDA issued travel restrictions, activated emergency response units to support the Federal Emergency Management Agency, mobilized Army Reserve medical teams, issued stop-movement orders, raised health protection condition (HPCON) levels, and imposed a variety of other restrictions on operations and training across the Army

to reduce the spread of the disease among the force.

HQDA's issued an execution order (EXORD), in June 2020, which gave broad guidance to commanders about how to resume operations and training under COVID-19 conditions. This reinforced the time-honored principles of mission command and empowered the commanders to make decisions based on local conditions. Garrison commanders were directed to determine how best to support a large backlog of training from units across the components, which had been delayed in conducting individual and collective training tasks, because of the virus.

Fort McCoy is a 60,000-acre Army installation located in the heart of the upper Midwest with a mission to strengthen total-force readiness by serving as a training center, mobilization force generation installation, and strategic support area. Fort McCoy offers an environment for units to train on multi-domain operations across the range of military operations allowing simultaneous conduct of individual through brigade-level training, static live fire and maneuver live fire training and force-on-force operations in both urban and unimproved terrain. The installation regularly supports the training of more than 150,000 military personnel each year providing full-scale support to transient units. This includes institutional schoolhouses, exercises such as combat support training, global medic training, and exportable combat training center exercises that test and validate mission readiness for individuals and units across the joint, inter-agency and multi-national organizations.

In accordance with guidance and instructions provided by Army senior leadership, Fort McCoy's garrison command team was able to employ risk-mitigation protocols that were tailored to local conditions. The first of these protocols was a formal policy that addressed additional sanitation requirements related to mitigating

the COVID-19 threat on the installation. This policy was one of two garrison policies that enabled units to train safely and effectively under COVID-19 conditions.<sup>3</sup>

## **Engaged Leadership**

The garrison commander understood the magnitude and difficulty of reopening the installation in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak. He communicated to his leadership team and support staff that, under Army guidance, local leaders were to continue to assess conditions and were empowered to make decisions girded by their experience and professionalism as well as a shared sense of respect, communication, and understanding. Fort McCoy's leadership wasted no time in interpreting and adapting Army guidance to the local environment by an updated publication of its installation Policy Letter #37, "Workplace, Customer Service, and Sales Point Disinfection to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19."

This initial official policy, following the Army's EXORD, promulgated garrison-wide guidance to address the issue of disinfecting public customer-service and sales points in places like dining facilities, the Exchange, Fort McCoy Commissary, etc. The policy issued guidance to Soldiers, civilians, retirees, contractors, vendors, and visitors and amplified guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the federal proponent for issuing national safety guidelines on COVID-19 responses. The policy applied to all Soldiers and patrons, both assigned to Fort McCoy and those training at Fort McCoy in a transient status.

The updated policy was signed in June, effective immediately. Specific instructions were that all public customer-service and sales points must implement a complete and thorough disinfecting wipe-down upon each facility's daily closure in such areas as cash registers, counter surfaces, merchandise areas (baskets, carts, and belts), doors, handles, phones, keyboards, dispensers, faucets, light switches, buttons, and toilet handles and seats. Floors would be mopped using a bleach and water solution. All merchandise and customer interaction points that encouraged touch (i.e., touch screens, home entertainment systems, headphones, gaming systems, and signage) were discouraged. Additionally, all dining facility patrons were directed to wash their hands with warm soap and water before entering the service line. Finally, individuals across the installation regardless of organization

or unit affiliation, were asked to wipe down their workstations daily with disinfecting wipes or cleaners.

Such measures helped slow the spread of COVID-19 on post as evidenced by the extremely low numbers of positive test results from the garrison workforce and Soldiers. However, senior leaders across the Army Reserve, as well as in other components and across the services, were eager to resume training and conduct important training validation and certification to maintain their capabilities. A new policy was needed, one that would enable command and units desiring to conduct training on the post to do so safely and effectively under COVID-19 constraints.

## **Fort McCoy: Open for Business**

Fort McCoy's Policy Letter #38, "Risk Mitigation Guidelines and Requirements for Training Units to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19," was designed to educate and assist units that were given approval by their leadership to resume training and certification activities.<sup>4</sup> The policy built on the standards outlined in Policy Letter #37, but was more prescriptive to commands and units preparing to travel to Fort McCoy for training during 2020. The policy applied across Army, joint, inter-agency, inter-governmental, and multinational partners conducting individual or collective training on Fort McCoy ranges, training areas, and facilities or receiving base life support at the cantonment area.

The policy mandated that training units incorporate specific risk-mitigation measures in planning, preparation, and execution of training as part of their deliberate risk assessment and management to protect the health and wellbeing of their units and the greater Fort McCoy community. The policy was designed to support training, increase readiness, and protect the force while maintaining dignity and respect for everyone. The garrison commander signed the policy into effect and it will remain in place until the installation returns to HPCON normal.

First, the policy required, units submit a completed risk-assessment form provided by Fort McCoy and signed by the first commander (O-6 pay grade or equivalent) in their chain of command that included a residual risk rating for training at Fort McCoy coded as "high"<sup>5</sup> no later than 14 days before the start of training. The overall risk assessment was templated or pre-filled with required risk-mitigation measures. Under Army guidelines, residual risk authority for "high" is normally an O-6 commander with special court martial convening

authority. In this case, the garrison commander made the change to drive greater leadership engagement and awareness within that unit's chain of command given the seriousness of the COVID-19 threat.

Second, the policy mandated that commanders conduct pre-movement COVID-19 screenings and temperature checks at their home stations before departing for Fort McCoy. This was to be completed by a certified 68W (Army medic) military occupation specialty or civilian health-care professional, the results of which would be documented by unit commanders (O-3 and above) on a memorandum for record with an attached unit roster certifying all Soldiers had passed the screening.

Unlike many other Department of Defense (DOD) facilities, Fort McCoy's leadership did not impose a 14-day "restriction of movement" or quarantine requirement on units before starting training, given the nature of Army Reserve training requirements and limits on the number of training days available for training. In the policy, a process map was provided as an enclosure to help the unit medic or health-care provider determine which action to take if a Soldier tested positive (not authorized for movement); did not test positive but displayed symptoms (not authorized for movement); or did not test positive, displayed no symptoms, and recorded a temperature of 99.4 degrees or less (authorized for movement).

Third, upon arrival at Fort McCoy, first-line supervisors would be required to conduct daily health monitoring, the results of which would be reported through a mandated personnel status-reporting format provided by the garrison. If a unit failed to properly report its status, the garrison would suspend its training (i.e., close ranges) until the unit submitted the required paperwork, without error. A similar process to the pre-movement screening process map was included in the policy as another enclosure and outlined the steps a unit commander should take based on the screening results after Soldiers arrived at Fort McCoy.

Fourth, units training at Fort McCoy would continue to follow CDC and Army measures related to COVID-19 mitigation, such as line queuing with a six-foot separation between personnel outside of buildings and spacing chairs six feet apart for waiting areas inside of buildings. All personnel were required to wear face coverings if within six feet of other personnel. Six feet of separation also applied to billeting arrangements, ensuring separation between beds in the transient

training barracks and tents. No gatherings greater than 10 people were authorized without this separation. If a separation could not be maintained, face coverings were required. Commanders were directed to comply with any facility's mitigation efforts, such as tape markings on the floor and tables between customer point-of-service areas to maintain separation and minimize the need for sneeze and cough shields at locations like the central issue facility or at other administrative activities requiring face-to-face interactions.

Fifth, commanders were directed to employ risk-mitigation strategies throughout their training at Fort McCoy and to minimize non-essential face-to-face interaction or transactions with the garrison and tenant workforce. Special emphasis was on unit movement, billeting, sanitation, feeding, and laundry operations. CDC guidelines and other general health information relating to reducing the risk of contracting COVID-19 were included in the policy as separate enclosures. Figure 1 depicts Soldiers training during COVID-19 conditions.



**Figure 1: Soldiers Training at the United States Army Reserve Best Warrior Competition<sup>6</sup>**

Sixth, commanders were directed to implement a plan for isolation, testing, treatment, support, daily monitoring, and/or evacuation of personnel who displayed symptoms or tested positive for COVID-19 after arrival at Fort McCoy. Units were given guidelines on the policy for isolation and quarantine procedures, including strip maps to local COVID-19 screening locations and key emergency contact phone numbers on post (i.e., Fort McCoy Emergency Operations Center and Fort McCoy Dispatch) and off-post numbers (i.e., local health clinics and regional health clinics).



Seventh, units were directed to have trained teams in place to conduct contact tracing, cleaning, and monitoring for personnel who tested positive for COVID-19 after arrival at Fort McCoy. Units were also directed on how to assess, quarantine, support, and monitor personnel who may have had contact with an infected person.

Eighth, a letter of instruction was included in the policy as an enclosure that detailed daily cleaning requirements at each unit's training facility, the approved list of authorized disinfectants, and out-processing or turn-in requirements upon training completion.

Ninth, the policy summarized all these requirements in a one-page unit checklist to assist commanders in ensuring their training at Fort McCoy was in accordance with post expectations and requirements. Frequently asked questions were included in a later modification to the policy based on feedback from units that addressed such things as whether the policy applied to tenant units versus transient units, the CDC guidelines for contact tracing, the bleach-to-water ratio for disinfection requirements, what to do if the unit was unable to bring their own medical support or personal protective equipment, and other questions commonly asked of the garrison support staff over the summer months of 2020.

Finally, the policy also stipulated the types of services and support the garrison would provide to units such as billeting, isolation facilities, emergency medical evacuation services, hand-wash stations, limited quantities of personal protective equipment, and facilities service orders (i.e., facility maintenance requests, roads and grounds management, pest management, refuse collection and recycling, portable latrine and sink provisions, etc.). Figure 2 depicts the Best Warrior Competition graduation ceremony.

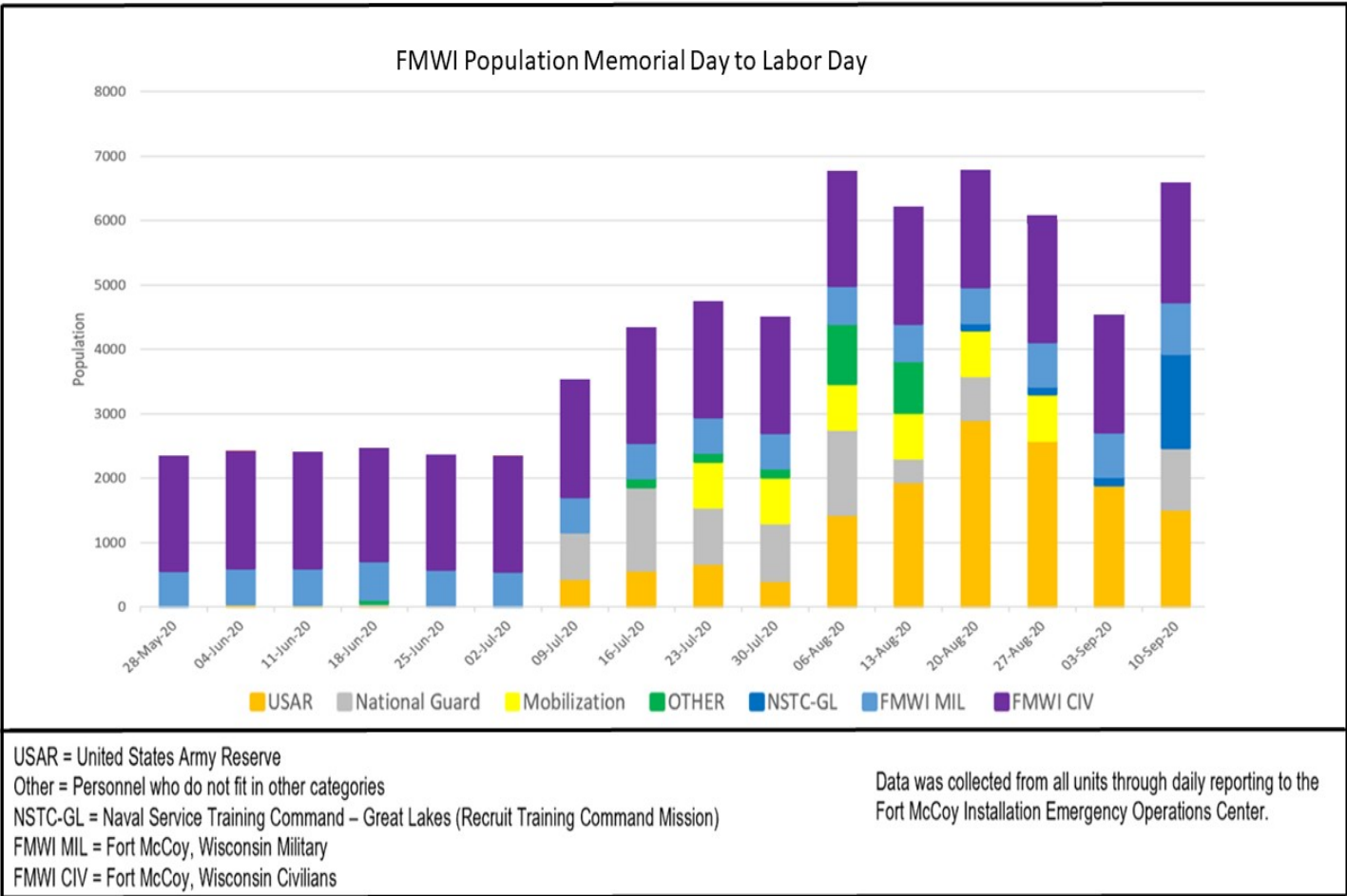


**Figure 2: United States Army Reserve Best Warrior Competition Graduation Ceremony<sup>6</sup>**

### **Leadership Plus Standards Equals Results**

As illustrated in the following chart (Figure 3), Fort McCoy supported scores of commands and units over the summer of 2020. During this period, the installation supported a training population averaging 4,300 military personnel each week, engaging in a variety of individual and unit-level training and pre-mobilization or mobilization activities.

In summary, approximately 21,000 personnel trained at or mobilized through the installation over the summer. Of that amount, 59 percent were Army Reserve, 36 percent were Army National Guard, and five percent were classified as other services or government agencies. During this period, the installation supported a number of major training exercises such as Operation Ready Warrior, Operation Desert Dragon, the Army Reserve Command's Best Warrior Competition, and many other training events that brought military personnel onto the installation for training that typically lasted 14-30 days.



**Figure 3: Fort McCoy Training Population, Summer 2020**

In the chart above, data were also reported each week about total personnel training on the installation. Despite these high training numbers, Fort McCoy had an exceptionally low COVID-19 positive test result over this period.

When compared to the local surrounding region, state, and national averages, (Fig 4) one could argue that the risk-mitigation protocols in place at Fort McCoy were highly effective in containing the spread of the virus within the training population.

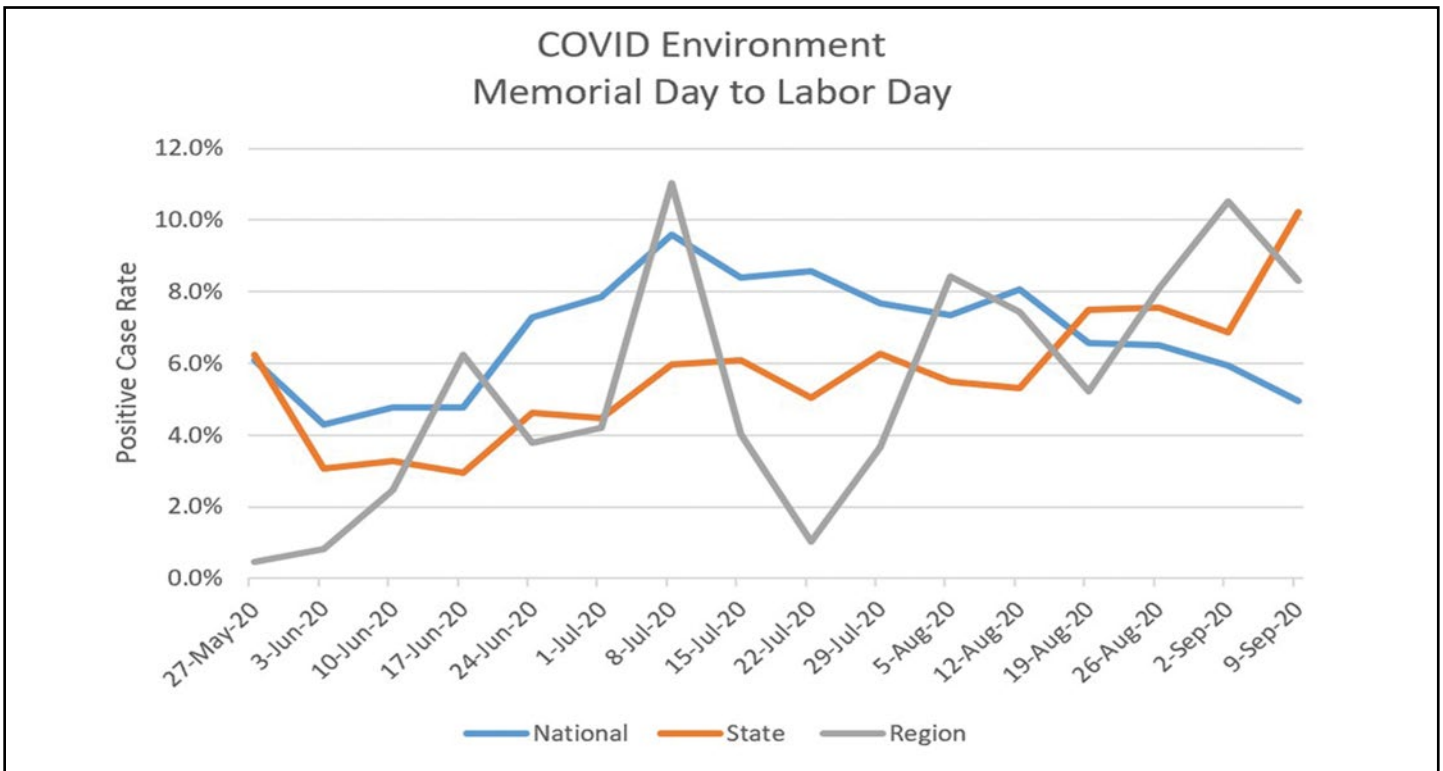


Figure 4: Macro Coronavirus Disease 2019 Positive Test Results<sup>8</sup>

It can be inferred that the vast majority of the units training at Fort McCoy during this period followed the installation protocols contained in the COVID-19 risk mitigation policies. Credit for this very low infection rate, despite the large training output, must go to the unit commanders and their first-line leaders who were key in enforcing garrison policies, especially the ones that detailed COVID-19 mitigation measures required for any unit conducting training on Fort McCoy.

As Fort McCoy anticipates a larger training footprint, the garrison command team and the support directorates are confident that the policies in place will continue to drive down risk, enabling commands and units to conduct training on the installation with a high degree of confidence.

### Conclusion

The success of Fort McCoy’s ability to receive and support more than 21,000 personnel over the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis can be attributed to two key factors: engaged leadership and clear and enforceable standards. First, with regard to engaged leadership, Fort McCoy’s COVID-19 mitigation policies served to keep brigade commanders (or equivalent) involved in the active review and management of risk during their participation in training at Fort McCoy.

Requiring an O-6 commander to personally sign off on a risk assessment as a prerequisite for training might, at first glance, seem unnecessary. However, the results speak for themselves. Over a 90-day window during the summer of 2020, while infection rates continued to climb in the region and across the country, positive test results were low for the training population. This is a tribute to both the installation and the supported units that trained there and their leadership.

Second, clear standards with accountability built into those standards, were essential in allowing units to train on Fort McCoy. The vast majority of units followed procedures outlined in the garrison policies. Unfortunately, not all units followed the protocols and the consequences were severe. For example, one unit's entire chain of command and its key staff tested positive during training after it was discovered that they had not followed the protocols outlined in either of the installation's COVID-19 risk-mitigation policies. As a result, that unit had to conduct its training without the on-site presence and supervision of many of its key leaders, since many of them were immediately quarantined upon receiving positive test results.

### **Priorities Create Urgency**

When LTG Jody Daniels was sworn in as the Chief of Army Reserve and Commanding General, United States Army Reserve Command in the summer of 2020, her priorities were clear. In her first day in command she wrote to all Soldiers, civilian employees, and families of the Army Reserve that, "Resuming collective training is our goal. I will rely on leaders at all levels to make prudent risk decisions as we progress from virtual to in-person and increasingly more complex collective training and exercises."<sup>7</sup> She continued, "Readiness remains paramount...to employ the necessary capabilities to win the future fight."

Fort McCoy is an example of an installation that was able to meet large-scale demands for training through the development and implementation of an innovative post policy that resulted in helping ensure that 21,000 personnel were able to come, train, and achieve a level of readiness at Fort McCoy safely and effectively. What happened at the fort is instructive for other commands and garrisons that are considering resumption of large-scale training commitments. These policies and practices should be considered by any DOD installation struggling with how to operate and train safely and effectively under this new normal.

Training will always be the pathway to readiness and Fort McCoy, like other garrisons and installations across the Army, is a support platform for commands and units to attain the level of individual and collective capability necessary to fight and win.

Fort McCoy's COVID-19 response protocols and policies must be considered for tailoring and adoption across the Army at other training installations grappling with supporting training requirements in a pandemic environment. Because of the ongoing constraints, challenges, and dangers of this pandemic, Fort McCoy will continue to enforce proven disciplined policies and procedures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 infection amongst the formations that train there. Operational excellence, even under such conditions, must be viewed as a continuing journey rather than a destination.

<sup>1</sup> Fort McCoy Guide, page 2, May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See Department of Defense website to review a timeline of Department of Defense-related actions in response to the Coronavirus Disease-2019 pandemic at <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Department-of-Defense-Response-Timeline/>

<sup>3</sup> United States Army Garrison, Fort McCoy, WI, Policy Letter 37, 15 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> United States Army Garrison, Fort McCoy, WI, Policy Letter 38, 15 June 2020. A further update to the policy was published on 27 August 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense Form 2977 (Deliberate Risk Assessment Worksheet), September 2014.

<sup>6</sup> DVIDS, 2020 USARC Best Warrior Competition, Land Navigation

<sup>7</sup> LTG Jody Daniels message to the force, 28 July 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Data sources for the Coronavirus Disease-2019 Active Cases chart were collected from Johns Hopkins University for the national and state rates and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services for the regional rate.