

## **Annual Training in Times of Covid-19**

Summer is historically known across the globe by National Guardsman as Annual Training season. This summer has been a bit different for members of the Puerto Rico National Guard due to the global pandemic of Covid-19. Planned training was cancelled, leaving the need for an alternate training plan to maintain readiness and ensure Soldier safety. In true military fashion, Guard leadership adapted and overcame with a myriad of training opportunities across the island starting at the end of May.

National Guardsman carried out their mission by dispensing voluntary Covid-19 testing to all first responders, and non-emergency personnel as well as any member of the National Guard who would like to receive the testing. In addition to offering testing for the virus, various members of the National Guard stood ready to take body temperatures of cargo drivers at various ports in San Juan to assist with the early detection process and keeping our island safe.

Lt. Col. Raul Cordero, 130th Engineer Battalion Commander explained how he handled safety among his soldiers, "First was the briefing so that everybody could be aware of what we're doing and why." He then maintained the pulse of his soldiers' health daily throughout the training schedule, "Second was, taking their temperature every day. On the first day, we had everyone take the rapid test." Openness and communication were also encouraged, "Then we always give a daily safety briefing reminding soldiers to maintain social distancing, they must have a mask on, and that if anyone feels bad to let us know." All in all, he reflected, "COVID affected a lot, it was a big hurdle for this annual training."

In Salinas, Puerto Rico at Camp Santiago another group of soldiers from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion of the 296th Infantry Regiment worked on weapons familiarization and readiness. They were visited by the Adjutant General of the Puerto Rico National Guard, Maj. Gen. Jose Reyes along with the State Command Sergeant Major, Andres Ruiz-Sierra. While there, they observed Soldier training and carried out their personnel readiness mission by qualifying with the M9 Pistol.

Weapons qualification and familiarization wasn't the only training going on in Salinas. Soldiers of the 215th Engineer Company of the 190th Engineer Battalion repaired buildings at Camp Santiago Joint Training Center in hopes of raising morale and providing higher standards of living for service members who visit the

training site. Maj. Omayra Ramirez, 190th Engineer Battalion Commander detailed her extensive steps to keep her Soldiers safe, "First of all we developed a COVID packet for each Soldier to include the Department of Defense guidance, Puerto Rico National Guard Guidance, how to wear your mask, how to maintain social distancing. We had posters with the approved guidance to ensure education is continuous." Not only did she provide her soldiers with educational materials, "We also implemented taking daily temperatures for each soldier as they entered and exited their workstation. We prepared a sanitation kit for each Soldier to put into their barracks. So, they had all they needed to try to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 as much as possible."

This annual training cycle did not come without challenges. Lt. Col. Victor A. Perez, 101st Troop Command Commander explained the delicate dance of making sure soldiers were trained, while also ensuring safety as the utmost priority. "If we're going to assemble, we're going to maximize social distancing," he said. Distance Learning and training stations were used in a rotating pattern to maintain social distancing protocols. He said the training was planned as "a kind of a hybrid. We're going to do distance learning and Round Robin stations in a rotating pattern." He explained, "You have x amount of soldiers doing distance learning, x amount of soldiers doing maintenance, x amount of soldiers doing logistical support." Limiting the interactions between soldiers and increasing the chances of stopping any spread of Covid-19.

The Annual Training mission might have changed multiple times due to a global pandemic, however, the National Guard stood tall and met the challenge by carrying out multiple training missions across the island. Safety procedures were observed by all, and the overall readiness of each unit was maintained. Lt. Col. Victor A. Perez observed the success in overcoming the challenge presented by Covid-19 safety protocols by also noting the possibility of it having changed the future of training. He explained one example of having one Battalion running a range and having other Battalions rotating through the range so that each Battalion could focus on a specific task. He said, "What we saw was a high acceptance from various soldiers as we interviewed them at the ranges." All in all, "we conducted our training, soldiers felt secure, social distancing was in effect. Everything seemed to work out."

