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The Gem State Guardian

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116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team brings big guns to battle at the National Training Center

The 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team (CBCT) brought big guns to the fight in the first “force-on-force” Army National Guard versus U.S. Army Opposing Force (OPFOR) heavy-weight match-up since before 9/11.

The 116th CBCT (Armor), headquartered in Boise, Idaho, conducted the first Decisive Action integrated combat and maneuver training operation the Army National Guard has completed since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. The brigade spent 12 days conducting live-fire exercises and large-scale simulated battle scenarios in the sweltering heat of the Mojave Desert at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., Aug. 14-25, 2015.

“The purpose of this NTC rotation is to allow the brigade to advance its collective training skillsets and our proficiencies as a brigade combat team,” said Idaho Army National Guard Col. Russell Johnson, commander of the 116th CBCT.

Every aspect of the training was designed to increase war-fighting capabilities at all levels, from the individual Soldier up to the higher headquarters echelons. In this case, the main focus was to synchronize the brigade’s use of combat multipliers to battle against the U.S. Army’s 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry



Fire team leader Sgt. Dustin Schwarz uses his magnified weapon sight facilitating a request for indirect fire on an enemy position at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., Aug. 25, 2015. Today was the fourth and final day of a brigade-size force-on-force simulated battle between

Regiment (ACR), also known as the world-class OPFOR.

The 116th CBCT pulled no punches as their Abrams tanks; Bradley Fighting Vehicles; Paladin Howitzers; Apache helicopters, from the Idaho Army National Guard’s 1st Battalion, 183rd Attack Reconnaissance; and engineer assets, from the Arkansas Army National Guard’s 875th Engineer Battalion, collided with enemy “opposing forces.”

“The National Guard is part of the total Army force and we have combat

formations within our team ... so it’s important that we give these organizations the opportunity to come out and go against world-class OPFOR to grow and train,” said Lt. Gen. Timothy Kadavy, Director of the Army National Guard.

Kadavy said that NTC training ensures combat units in the National Guard achieve the readiness levels required by the Army in order to meet the nation’s demands.

The 116th CBCT hasn’t participated in a force-on-force armor training

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training, including National Guard units from 10 states, 11 units from the U.S. Army Reserve, and three active-duty U.S. Army units.

“We rarely, if ever, get the opportunity to take all 4,000-plus Soldiers out and train together at one time,” said Johnson. “The National Training Center is one of those rare resources in today’s Army that allows us the opportunity to do that.”

The 116th CBCT is composed of Army National Guard units from Idaho, Oregon and Montana. Other states provided enabler units to augment the brigade during NTC, including Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.

Idaho Army National Guard Sgt. Casey Barnes, an intelligence analyst with Headquarters and Headquarters Troop (HHT), 2-116th Cavalry Regiment, 116th CBCT, said training alongside so many units with all their equipment simultaneously made the experience more realistic for him as an intel analyst.

“It’s really fun to see how we integrate,” he said. “I like the cohesion, the aspect of working together with these other units and actually seeing how we operate when things get intense.”

Tent cities, known as tactical assembly areas, peppered the desert terrain. Each unit had to maintain security of their location and react to

Soldiers with the 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team (CBCT) dismount from a M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle into restrictive terrain during a battle simulation exercise at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., Aug. 25, 2015. Today was the fourth and final day of a brigade-size force-on-force simulated battle between the 116th CBCT and opposing forces (OPFOR) of the 2nd Squadron, 11th ACR. (U.S. National Guard photo by Maj. W. Chris Clyne, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment/Released)

exercise at NTC since 1998, due to multiple deployments in support of the Global War on Terror. The 116th began preparing for NTC in 2014, immediately following their transition to the Army’s most modernized armored fighting vehicles. The brigade quickly switched gears from a counterinsurgency focus back to their tanker roots and began training with the U.S. Army’s most advanced new armor equipment.

“We’re now back to full-spectrum operations; heavy metal threats

against tanks and armored vehicles,” said Idaho Army National Guard Lt. Col. William Smith, commander of 2nd Squadron, 116th Cavalry Regiment (Armored Reconnaissance). “It’s been good because the guys are back in their vehicles doing what they enjoy, maneuvering in the terrain and working against those armor threats.”

The NTC training simulated an expeditionary experience, allowing large units to “deploy” together and work simultaneously. More than 5,200 Service Members participated in the

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M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle crew with the 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team (CBCT) discuss an enemy target location while in a battle simulation exercise at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, Calif., Aug. 25, 2015. Today was the fourth and final day of a brigade-size force-on-force simulated battle between the 116th CBCT and opposing forces (OPFOR) of the 2nd Squadron, 11th ACR. (U.S. National Guard photo by Maj. W. Chris Clyne, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment/Released)

any opposing forces that “attacked” with simulated indirect or direct fires. Units conducted several tactical “jumps” (packed up and moved to new locations) during the two-week training cycle in order to prevent the opposing forces from planning large-scale attacks. Some units dug berms around their perimeter to keep the enemy out.

“We’ve had several pokes and prods by different [simulated] guerilla groups that have tried come in, but the counter-mobility berm that we dug has actually stopped them from driving their vehicles in,” said Idaho Army

National Guard 1st Lt. Andy Ridinger, a platoon leader with the 126th Engineer Company.

All of the vehicles, weapon systems and Soldiers were fitted with a laser tag system, known as Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES). The laser system recorded “hits” appropriate for each weapon’s capabilities during simulated attacks. When hits registered, Observer-Coach-Trainers in charge of testing the units at NTC would notionally disable vehicles and require simulated casualties to be evacuated to a medical

aid station where medics practiced treating their wounds.

“It’s a lot different than the training we get back at home. It’s a lot more interactive; as close to deployment as you can get without actually deploying,” said Idaho Army National Guard Sgt. Cody McNelis, an intelligence analyst with HHT, 2-116th Cavalry Regiment.

The brigade’s first test at NTC included live-fire exercises with different combined arms weapons. Following live-fire, the units transitioned to the situational training

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exercises (STX) phase before the final test of force-on-force simulated battles against an active-duty Army unit.

“It’s a really intense training experience where we fight with tanks and infantry units, engineers and live artillery support. We also have air assets that move in and support us,” said Montana Army National Guard Sgt. 1st Class Matt Wemple, platoon sergeant with D Company, 1st Battalion, 163rd Infantry Regiment (Combined Arms).

During the force-on-force phase, the 116th CBCT successfully conducted running battles and retained the ability to continue projecting effective combat power during the training.

“The battalion defeated more than double its weight in opposing force combat troops, armor and equipment,” said Oregon Army National Guard Lt. Col. Brian Dean, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 116th Cavalry Regiment (Combined Arms). “It was an extremely challenging environment and a very difficult standard and the Soldiers did exceptionally well.”

Besides the ever-present “enemy threat” at NTC, the brigade commander said having so many units moving, living and working together over extended distances in a very austere environment presented unique training opportunities with communications and logistical challenges to overcome.

“It’s a challenge to collectively get everybody together and moving in the right direction, and to get all the



Staff Sgt. Jeremy Householder, Arkansas Army National Guard, 1037 Mobility Augmentation Company (MAC), shoots an M240B machine gun, from a gunner hatch, at the enemy while supporting the 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team, Idaho Army National Guard, during the first day of simulated combat operations at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., Aug. 22. This 12-day field training exercise is the first force-on-force training cycle the National Guard has participated in since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, and is composed of more than 5,200 Soldiers with National Guard units from 10 states as well as U.S. Army Reserve and active duty U.S. Army Soldiers. (Photo by Spc. Michael Germundson, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

supplies and resources that are needed at the right place and at the right time,” Johnson said. “This affords us that once in a lifetime opportunity to really train hard on those tasks that allow us to sustain, live and fight together as a combat team.”

The unforgiving desert environment made every resource a crucial commodity; from food to fuel, water and ice, generators and equipment repair-parts, and anything else needed to sustain the fighting force. That’s where Soldiers of the 145th Brigade Support Battalion, 116th CBCT, had to flex their muscles and problem-solve in order to deliver supplies that

were essential to the success of the brigade’s mission.

“There’s always something to be learned and we can always get more proficient, but this allows us to test and see exactly where we are,” said Idaho Army National Guard Lt. Col. Kimberly Tschepen, commander of the 145th BSB. “It’s important to always be a learning organization and that’s what we’re doing out here.”

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