

After Action Review for Task Force
Spartan
Operation COVID Hammer

Effective 6/6/2022

What was supposed to happen?

The Michigan National Guard (MING), Task Force Spartan commanded by the 63rd Troop Command, mobilized for Michigan's State COVID-19 response from September 2020 until July 2022, making it the longest MING domestic response in Michigan history. Task Force Spartan has the capability of deploying more than 1000 Michigan Army and Air National Guard members to answer the state's call to duty, supporting Food Banks, Multiple Veteran Homes, COVID-19 testing and COVID-19 vaccinations. Task Force Spartan stands ready to support state agencies and local communities with mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 virus, providing aid to citizens of the State of Michigan affected by the disease, and building trust and confidence as citizen soldiers supporting the citizens of Michigan.

What did happen?

TF Spartan was the beneficiary of a merger of multiple separate organizations, all of whom were tasked with assisting the citizens of Michigan with dealing with COVID. While the majority of the service members came onto mission in the last year or so, there is still a good number that have been on since the early months of the mission. Some comments are reflective of early days and possible under a different leadership than what is present today.

What was right and wrong with what happened?

Volunteer Process:

According to the soldiers interviewed, the volunteer process was varied across the board. Individuals were allowed to volunteer for the orders and then those individuals were scrubbed to find the best fit for each soldier. Most believed that the process was relatively simple and well put together for the scale and quick turnaround.

Some interviewees stated that some units were not submitting names to the volunteer roster and then those units that submitted names had a long wait with little to no word until just before their orders activated. The volunteer list was not scrubbed often at the beginning of the mission. One strong point was to have a transparent volunteer list where soldiers could see where they were at on the list. Strong objections to the command directed medic onboarding were prevalent throughout the AAR. It was also discussed that the parent unit of the soldiers were often unaware as to the actions and expectations of the task force participants. Whether this last issue was throughout the entirety of the mission or at the beginning was unclear.

Contact Information:

In regards to the contact information, it was said that once the soldier went on the volunteer list, soldiers were not receiving any information from their own unit. The only information was coming from MSG Hudson. Some soldiers received emails for dates and times, some received phone calls that discussed all of the info necessary. Some believe that despite some setbacks, the contact info leading up to the JRSOI process was easy and smooth.

On the other hand, a common issue that came across clear was that the potential task force member was not told they had been placed on orders until just before the JRSOI date. This issue reflected in more than one section's assessment.

JRSOI Process:

The JRSOI Process was designed to onboard soldiers into the task force. The process served two functions. First, it served to educate soldiers as to what their expectations, benefits, and tasking's would be with the task force. Secondly, it served as a way for S1 to go through all in processing ensuring all administrative requirements were completed for each soldier as they came in.

According to the AAR Comments, the process was varied throughout the length of the mission. Most seemed to believe that the JRSOI process was smooth and painless and by January 2021 the process was well rehearsed and efficient. Comments suggested that most saw the JRSOI as a positive experience. It was appreciated that HIPPA certificates were required before leaving the JRSOI to save from scrambling later.

Areas of improvement centered around understanding the difference in 502(f) orders as opposed to other orders and explaining the benefits better; specifically dental. It was also stated that during specific times in 2020 that there was no JRSOI at all or there was a very brief with little to no information given.

Travel Cards:

GTCC were a hard prerequisite before coming on orders. This allowed for maximized efficiency and little complications regarding hotel. When there were issues, they were addressed and fixed right away.

Most agreed that the GTCC was a fluid easy process and most soldiers had no negative experience and that Citibank, the contractor, was easy to deal with.

Those that did specify issues were varied in details but comparing between the different assessments would show that a majority of issues stemmed from people not having the card to begin with and paying out of pocket or issues surrounding late payments due to extensions.

DTS Process:

The Defense Travel System handled all Per Diem pay, hotel, mileage etc for each and every soldier. While consistently easy on the individual soldier, there were issues that seemed to stretch from beginning of the mission to the end. Due to many complications concerning DTS in the beginning of the mission, it was decided to move DTS processing in house, thus giving the task force awareness on any issues that might arise.

DTS processing was fast and efficient allowing individual soldiers to continue mission stress free and without distractions. The payout after voucher process was quick and it was agreed that it was the fact that the S1 completing the DTS process that made the process smooth.

Points of conflict arose when it came to leave. Conflicting guidance came to whether or not individuals were supposed to sign out of their hotel and at different times this changed. At one time it was over 5 days, other times it was 3 days and in some cases, it was any day taken on leave meant to sign out on leave. In one case, the reaction stated that a service member had to pay for the night because S1 removed the night from DTS.

It was stated that a clear cut SOP and set of directions to each and every member in the task force and expectations for them to complete their own DTS authorizations and voucher would put the process in the service member's hands. All personnel having a good understanding would force them to know what they were capable of when it came to dual lodging or leave.

Orders:

Orders were created in an as needed fashion based upon many factors that came from out of house. Funding and the Governors approval were two key variables as to when, how long, and how much could be projected. Once approved, the G3 approved extension and published the orders.

It was stated that once the orders were published, orders were uploaded in personnel files within two weeks of the extension.

The overall view was that the long delays for many of the extensions were something needing improving. The delayed approval and quick reaction caused delays and continued coverage in Tricare, hotels, and pay. It was also stated that units were left unaware of the extension. There was also mention of inconsistency of orders. Specifically, TAMPS was included in early orders but then later were dropped from the orders.

Tricare:

Tricare is an entitlement for service members and their family members while on active orders. Service members serving on Task Force Spartan were asked what they thought of their Tricare benefits while serving on 502(f) orders and the reviews were varied.

It was discussed that young soldiers were given the opportunity to sign themselves and or their families up for health insurance benefits where they might not be able to afford premiums or co pays.

While the benefits of having Tricare was an overall positive, there were some issues that arose that the service members voiced as needing refinement.

First, consistency and dependability were a factor stated from several sources. In fact, some stated that in the beginning that soldiers did not receive coverage for many months. When the orders were extended, soldiers had to go back into their coverage to ensure that they still had coverage.

Another issue was the inconsistency of information received not by internal sources but by the Tricare or United Concordia personnel concerning their coverage for Tricare Prime Remote.

Family Separation Pay:

The complaints made over this issue was not about Family Separation Allowance but of the communication or lack thereof. Most responses stated that they were not receiving Family Separation Benefits and therefore did not discuss their views. The few comments made on FSA were all positive. It was stated that all back pay and benefits were paid as well.

DA 31 and Leave:

Filling out the DA 31 and going on leave was reported overall as favorable. Multiple mentions of how painless the process was and how quickly the response came back as an approval. This was overwhelmingly the voice of the review.

Contention came with Hotel Check Out during leave. More than one stated that the guidance was ambiguous on how many days a soldier had to take leave before checking out of their hotel. The only other comment of note stated that no leave was granted at the beginning of the mission.

Drill and AT:

Many did not favor the Drill and AT pushed down. Of those that went to drill, more than one comment stated that they went to drill and were not utilized at drill but it was also stated that this caused burn out. Others talked about this being treated more like a detachment than a deployment. It was said for future use, perhaps JAG guidance would help decide. It was stated favorably that some units did not push for soldiers to report to drill.

Units:

The view of the individual units towards TF Spartan, and the soldiers within, were mixed. Some stated that the units were indifferent. There were some that stated that they were checked in by their unit leadership, and others talked about extension issues and pay issues coming from their unit. It was said that units could be more involved in general support or just checking in.

TOC Placement/ Lodging:

This was overall received as a good thing by the soldiers. The platoon TOC's being in the hotel made it easier for communication. Many comments talked about they thought the hotels were good at solving problems and working with the National Guard. It was also stated that hotels were getting used to soldiers in their facilities and tended to not clean rooms as frequent.

Hotel Process and Regulation:

Some hotels raised rates after they found out soldiers were National Guard. There were reports of hotel staff smoking marijuana on the premises and some hotels did not print receipts at the end of the month as necessary, even after a year into the process but as stated, this was addressed above.

Per Diem:

The comments were almost all sustain. One comment stated that a Per Diem issue delayed pay but overwhelmingly this was seen as a positive.

Monthly Pay:

Most said pay was always on time while others said there was inconsistencies. One comment stated a soldier was paid consistently as will full BAH but has no dependents claimed on it. A few said there were few delays during extensions. This discrepancy was reflective in a few comments

Logistics:

Nothing but praise on this regard for Supply Section. Comments ranged between the centralized C2 nodes and quarters to Rental Vehicles being swapped out. Binders were a great addition to the rental vehicles. One specific comment stated "The S-4 Shop did an outstanding job managing vehicle and driver needs."

It was stated that Enterprise was difficult to work with. Specifically, about Enterprise losing personal items during maintenance appointments

Equipment:

The TF had particular issue with some of the equipment. After reviewing, it centered around specific equipment and not all equipment. Printers were mentioned multiple times as either not working at all, not having printer drive access or not having enough printers.

Another point made was regarding the contracted phones. Contracts ended without notice and didn't renew for three months.

4th platoon up in the north had to overcome serious internet issues.

PPE:

Overall it was believed that PPE well supplied. The one location that was mentioned in less than favorable light was Traverse City.

Improvement came when it came to guidance. Different platoons used different PPE, Some soldiers were ill informed about SOP to be worn according to comments read.

Mission and Medical Training:

Mission Training was view overall as a positive thing. Specifically, antigen testing was streamlined. One comment said "training was thorough observe and then hands on, then be observed then complete task independently.

Another comment showed the challenges of training being recognized. "Developed processes while simultaneously training team on how/what to do – "building plane while flying it" exciting, challenging, but stressful, no time to write SOPs/too busy doing the work"

To counter that, comments also stated that Certs were lost very often, or lack of retention of certs for soldiers. JKO was difficult to finish certs on.

In the realm of Medical Training, praise was offered on the certification and recertification process. It was praised that service members were allowed to go to recertification without breaking orders.

Awards and Recognition:

Awards and Recognition were seen in favor and unfavorable light. Things to improve listed comments about no awards or awards being last minute or late. Service Members are not aware of their own awards. Soldiers believed Senior NCO's were threatening the troops about messing up awards.

It was stated that soldiers were adequately recognized. Many statements had wholly positive or mixed reviews. "This is a unique opportunity for Soldiers to perform, shine, and be recognized. I personally received more than my share of recognition. The only challenge I see with this process was time served after an award is conferred. For example, I received an award a year ago but due to regulatory limitations, only one award is available for the orders time-duration, even though an entire year's work was performed after the award was given. I wonder if this has been explained or how many other Soldiers fall in this same situation."

CCIR:

It was explained by the teams that the CCIR paperwork was easy to understand and process. The process was clearly laid out. Where the issues arose was that there while the process was streamlined, there was no SOP from which to get guidance on situations that were not COVID related. Another issue that was discussed was the communications and tasking between the Task Force and the MSC regarding CCIR processing.

Team Member COVID Positive response:

The general consensus from the responses was that the task force did decent on COVID Mitigation but lacked on responses or battle drill styled reactions. It was said that internal contact tracing was good throughout the mission and that once soldiers were positive they were generally taken care of. However, it was the time before they tested positive that seemed the weak point. People with symptoms were quick to dismiss it as a cold. Exposure to other team members was discussed.

Internal Testing:

The topic of internal testing produced mixed results. Depending on who the section or platoon was, there was vastly different responses. In this question "How did you view internal testing within the organization throughout the mission?" Some said it was good and that there was plenty of tests readily available while others viewed this part of the mission as severely lacking. Quoted answers went as follows. "Early morning tests were inconvenient, could never get enough sleep before these." "PCR tests were the only ones accepted for internal tests." "No easy access to PCR tests internally" "Tests were always available."

PCR results process:

Many saw the PCR process as a good thing. In fact, one statement stated that the service members felt more confident with PCR tests and that it was a very thorough process with confident consistent results within 48 hours. Others viewed the PCR process as a hindrance because BOL did not have an SOP filled out for how to fill out the forms and that some positive personnel were never officially notified.

Last minute testing or vaccination events

The response to this topic ranged from "Soldiers are flexible" and "Everyone on the TF knew it was important to be flexible and might require an updated testing procedure for mission needs. Since our teams were well equipped with vaccines, there was no limit or concern for access to the vaccine. The process was simply to meet with one of the medics whether here in Lansing or at a vax site for administration of the vaccine."

It was also discussed as a toll. MCIR access could be difficult, Task Force Red Lion was abusive, lack of sleep, bad and/or ineffective leadership, self-check of morale of the personnel on the Task Force. Late or missing mission briefs from previous Task Force personnel. " and that "There was not proper information of the RFATO's"

Effective Communication for TF Spartan TOC and Higher:

The responses concerning the communication varied. One comment responded that the heavy turnover in the TOC posed challenges and phones were not answered during work hours, while other comments talked about how communication was effective depending on who the leadership was. It was also discussed that the leadership was approachable with communication as a priority.

Locations of teams:

The comments around the locations of teams was well received overall. The teams believed that being stationed in satellite locations across the state made it possible to adjust to whatever mission whenever it

was necessary. It was also discussed that the dual lodging option also was a positive thing that helped facilitate this.

Working with churches:

The overall belief of the soldiers was that in some cases, some churches were very difficult to work with. Some were rude and hostile towards soldiers, and in the eyes of the commenting entity, did not seem to care about the well-being of the general public. However, not all communication was bad. Some stated that the missions were very positive for the community but

Working with LHD/LTF/MDHHS:

There was a clear division of opinions and experiences concerning working with our civilian partners. In the Upper Peninsula for example, things were very easy going with the LMAS and MDHHS elements while down state things had a different turn.

Specific county's mentioned from the teams that were very easy to work with were, Chippewa, Ingham, Muskegon, Grand Traverse, and Oakland County.

“Assigning job duties that are outside of MING responsibilities. Taking on the task of handling backlogged MCIR entries, inconsistency of health departments, treating personnel like children or like they are ignorant, mistreating personnel, some LHD do not plan accordingly, not handling harassment of personnel appropriately, not calibrating or providing proper equipment to personnel, trying to have military personnel function as security, site restraining individuals (MING did not, but since there could be perceived as a part of it). Political discussions and viewpoints, volunteers engaging in conversations, LHD avoiding challenging patients and giving them to MING medics to conduct vaccinations. Aggressive patients with disabilities or fear of needles assaulting MING medics. Lack of communication, unable to contact POC at the sites.”

Different health departments provided different atmospheres. Muskegon Mercy Hospital didn't trust medics to do anything medical, however, the relationship with Muskegon County Health Dept was great. , Beaumont hospital improperly utilized medics and resources, Health departments wouldn't allow soldiers to work indoors causing improper delivery of vaccine, At the beginning, poor site recon by hospital for teams, Frankford had falsified info sent up about teams.

Collaboration with Air Force:

Consolidating the responses in reference to working with the Air Force, it soon becomes apparent that there were many personnel that shined through but the majority of the experience here was confusing and frustrating many times. The battle for jurisdiction seemed to reflect throughout but TF members going skipping the chain of command, and “sticking to their own” seemed to be the main area of concern. It was said that the Air Force personnel skipped duties, and did less than expected and that it stemmed from the Air Force Leadership enabling this behavior. Having said that, there was more than one comment that stated despite this environment, there were individuals that shined through.

Safety Protocols:

This was seen by our personnel as an overall positive experience. It reflected a safety-centric environment and there were not many complaints in this regard.

There were improvements that were mentioned. For example, no safety officer was appointed. Distancing was not adhered to as closely as it should have been and lastly, one that stuck out was referencing safety protocols during winter driving.

As stated earlier, the overall attitude regarding safety was very positive.

Accident Reporting:

Accident reporting was not a terrible process for our soldiers according to the comments, all reflected an overall positive attitude towards our internal communications and processes. However, it was when dealing with the police that situations became a little more strained. The process was long and more than one team mentioned this.

SOP:

There was a great deal of discussion on the SOP. It was stated that there was no SOP early on, nothing handed over from other Task forces. This left a lot of teams to figure things out for themselves. One comment stated that the Task Force was so busy developing processes that they didn't have time to develop one.

Once the SOP's were developed, they provided a framework in which to establish and build upon and the working SOP's served their purpose but should have remained a focus for improvement as the mission changed.

S1, S 4, S-6:

S1 was well received for a good majority of the comments. It was discussed that they were very knowledgeable with information regarding benefits and programs that went well above their normal day to day missions. An honorable mention to SPC Preston was made. In fact, SPC Preston was mentioned in a positive light in a few of the topics across the AAR.

There wasn't much stated in the improvement area with the exception that it was observed that S1 had a wider berth of working off site for long periods of time than the rest of the Task Force. This was mentioned more than once.

S4 was well received. It was stated that S4 would go out of their way to ensure the platoons were always taken care of. There was nothing but glowing positive reviews for our entire S4 Section and an honorable mention of MSG Merriweather was made.

S6 was seen as a positive throughout. It was mentioned that new hires to the section often caused a break in the system temporarily suggesting better training but over all a good reception and review of S6.

CUOPS, FUOPS:

CUOPS was seen positively through the eyes of the team. It was stated that they worked hard to find last minute details often and always delivered a different course of action or resolved the issue in a timely manner.

FUOPS also held positive reviews with a few exceptions. It was stated that FUOPS communicated effectively and timely. It seemed they need a “Better understanding of what they initially were trying to do. They didn’t understand the limits and boundaries for the teams. In the beginning, FUOPS were over selling the capabilities of what the teams could do.”

RFATO’s:

The RFATO process developed and improved over time. In the beginning, 1st platoon on showed 24 hours in advance which caused issues. There were inconsistencies and missing information on RFATO’s that were not steady state missions. On the steady state missions, it was said that there was too much copying and pasting. There was also a mention that there were too many RFATO’s squeezed in too close to mission execution.

Consistency and weekly meetings:

C2 cells and platoon and team placements facilitated the foundation for the sense of consistency and there was honorable mention that 2nd platoon C2 cell ensured that the teams all felt that sense of consistency.

Having said that, reinventing the wheel too many times caused processes to be flipped frequently and that an SOP would relieve that necessity.

Weekly meetings were generally well received, however, some stated that there was background noise in some of the teleconference meetings, others stated that there were too many meetings and that some things discussed should have been discussed offline. It was also stated that a possibility in the future would be periodic AAR’s throughout the task force at one of the meetings.

Extensions:

The extension process seemed to reflect frustration. Some stated they knew about the extensions from the Health Departments before they knew about it from the task force. The last minute extensions caused not only issues in the personal side of the individual soldiers but it caused a slinky effect as the task force as a whole had to wait for official response in order to pursue new missions. The last minute extensions and ambiguities around it was a major point of discontent across the board.

MWR Events and Morale of the Task Force:

MWR Events were generally well received and useful for section leaders to gauge the morale of their troops. One comment discussed that they noticed at the MWR events that soldiers would stay secluded from each other at times. Many comments were positive stating that it allowed for soldiers to see each other outside of work environment and it built cohesion throughout the sections. There were one that stated MWR events during a pandemic was not a positive thing.

The morale of the Task Force was summed up as up and down as could be expected. Ambiguities during extensions and the uneasiness around that along with personnel conflicts or needed personnel transfers

contributed to this. It was stated that once these morale transfers came into effect, there was always the boost in morale and its effects reverberated across the effected team.