



(Photo by Tech. Sgt. Barry Loo, U.S. Air Force)

U.S. military personnel assigned to Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA) negotiate a water obstacle during a desert commando course 15 March 2016 in Arta, Djibouti. Through unified action with U.S. and international partners in East Africa, CJTF–HOA conducts security force assistance, executes military engagement, provides force protection, and provides military support to regional counter-violent-extremist-organization operations to buttress aligned regional efforts, ensure regional access and freedom of movement, and protect U.S. interests.

# Sustainable Readiness and Regional Alignment of Forces

Lt. Col. Chad R. Foster, U.S. Army

**T**he concept of regionally aligned forces (RAF) offers both challenges and opportunities for U.S. Army units at all levels. Perhaps most pressing among the challenges is the need to balance deployment mission requirements with the

imperative to sustain an appropriate level of unit readiness over time. No two overseas missions are exactly alike, and every unit has unique characteristics, capabilities, and needs. While this reality precludes a single, standardized solution, examining different

approaches can assist in guiding commanders as they plan, prepare, and execute these strategically important operations across the globe. The following attempts to define the relationship between RAF and the Army's concept of *sustainable readiness* while providing specific practices and observations from a cavalry squadron that recently participated in an RAF deployment as a possible way to approach achieving balance in that relationship.

## Sustainable Readiness Model

*The Sustainable Readiness Model will empower commanders and is flexible enough to accommodate differing readiness levels given anticipated mission requirements.*<sup>1</sup>

—Lt. Gen. James L. Huggins Jr.

The Sustainable Readiness Model is the successor to the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) Model that drove manning, equipping, and training cycles from 2006 through 2014. ARFORGEN was a “structured progression of increased unit readiness over time” that cycled battalions and brigades through three “force pools.”<sup>2</sup> This model assumed that formations would be unavailable for contingencies immediately following return to home station due to precipitous drops in overall readiness stemming from personnel turnover and a corresponding decline in training proficiency. Following this period (known as “reset”), commanders steadily rebuilt their equipment, manning, and training readiness on a schedule synchronized with the unit's timeline for the next deployment.<sup>3</sup>

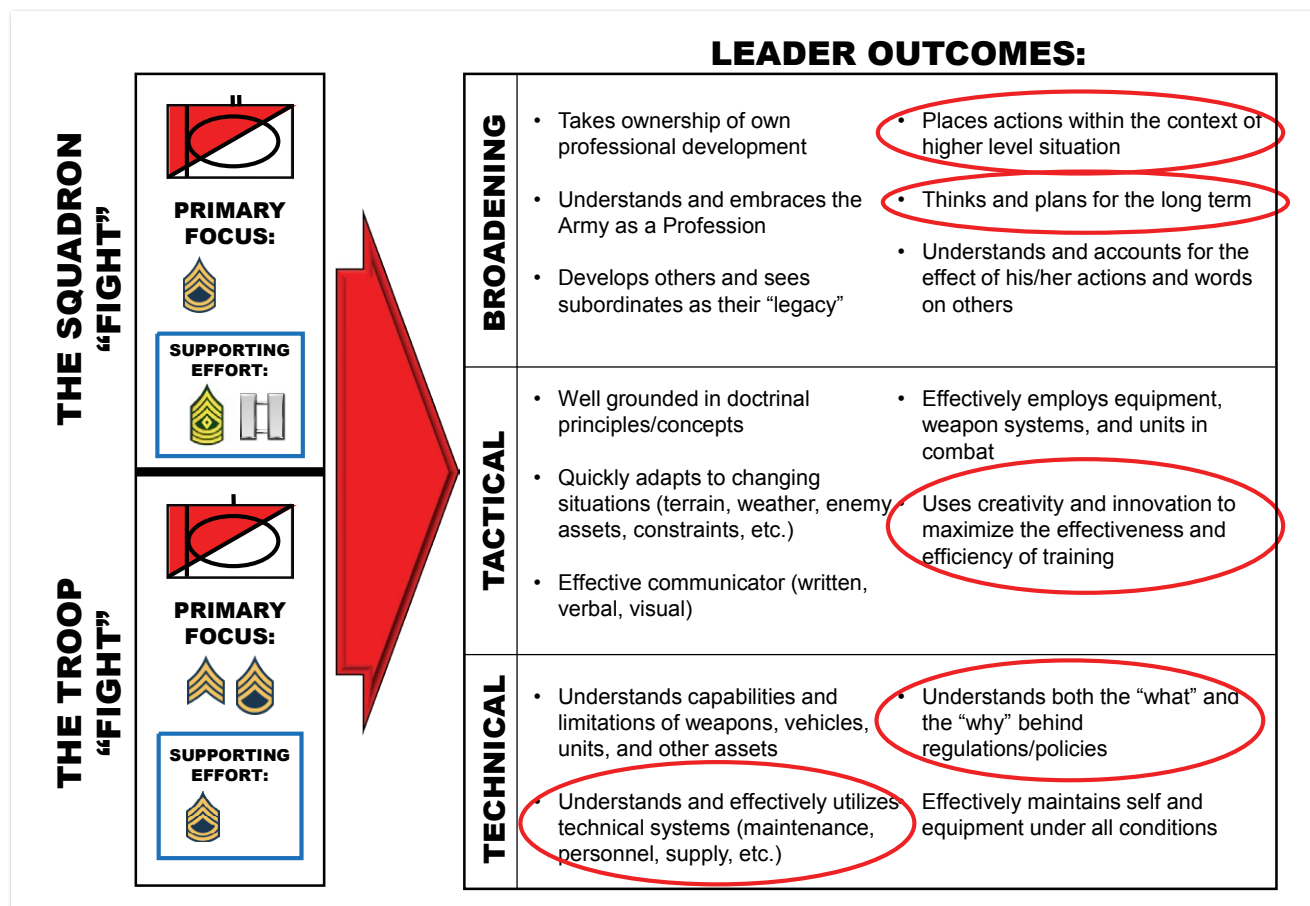
Due to the limited time available between deployments under ARFORGEN, training plans were often dictated by higher headquarters, leaving fewer opportunities for leaders below the battalion level to conduct their own planning and assessments. Though ARFORGEN provided much-needed predictability when yearly combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan were the norm, it also limited the Army's flexibility to respond to unforeseen contingencies, as large numbers of recently returned units were, in essence, out of the fight until they could work their way back to the “available” force pool. At the lower levels, the top-down approach to training and preparing for deployment allowed many officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to grow accustomed to having training plans provided by higher headquarters.

In contrast, the central idea behind sustainable readiness is the reduction of the “peaks and valleys” that characterized ARFORGEN.<sup>4</sup> It eliminates the planned period of unit nonavailability following deployments and requires that commanders maintain an acceptable readiness level *at all times*. Exactly what level of readiness is acceptable varies based on the nature of the unit's anticipated deployment. As the Army's number of brigade combat teams reduces to approximately thirty by the end of fiscal year 2017, there is also an increased urgency to avoid readiness “cliffs.”<sup>5</sup> The Army must maintain immediate responsiveness and deterrence along a broad spectrum of possible contingencies. Just as ARFORGEN was needed to support the Global War on Terrorism, sustainable readiness is what the Army needs to support RAF.

## Sustainable Readiness Tailored to Regionally Aligned Forces

The purpose of RAF is to provide forces that are “specifically trained” and “culturally attuned” to the needs of geographic combatant commanders.<sup>6</sup> For brigades and below, this ideally means special training in language, history, and cultural awareness in addition to their core mission essential tasks. However, more important with regard to sustainable readiness is that a unit's likely mission within the aligned region determines the minimum level of qualification and certification acceptable for commanders. For example, a brigade combat team aligned with U.S. Central Command and deployed to Kuwait as a theater reserve might need to maintain live-fire qualifications at the battalion level in order to accomplish its assigned missions. However, another commander with a different alignment and mission could determine that only certified platoons are necessary. In either case, if the unit falls below that point, higher headquarters must provide the necessary training resources, personnel, or equipment to bring it back above the acceptable level.

As noted, ARFORGEN largely consolidated the management of readiness at the highest levels, but sustainable readiness returns this responsibility to battalion- and company-level commanders. Lieutenant colonels and captains, supported by engaged subordinate leadership within platoons, must effectively project shortfalls and then take proactive measures to smooth over the “peaks and valleys” of readiness. But, since this



(Graphic courtesy of Lt. Col. Chad R. Foster, U.S. Army)

**Figure 1. Squadron Leader Development Guidance**

is the case, the most important question remains: How can these leaders accomplish this responsibility?

## The Decisive Operation: Leader Development

*Leaders at all levels face the reality of force and budget reductions, increasing operational requirements, and an ever-changing global situation. Although challenging, this environment provides the ideal conditions to develop the leaders of tomorrow.*<sup>7</sup>

—Gen. Robert B. Abrams

The guidance from the highest levels of the Army is clear: commanders must effectively manage personnel turnover, training proficiency, and equipment maintenance in order to remain ready for contingencies. Because there is no way to predict exactly what our forces will be required to do, sustaining the ability to conduct a wide range of military operations at any

time is critical.<sup>8</sup> No single solution exists to uniformly guide our battalion and company commanders in this effort, but that fact does not remove the responsibility from their shoulders. The top-down driven readiness cycles of the last decade hampered the professional development of our junior- and mid-level leaders. Under ARFORGEN, young officers and NCOs found themselves as merely the executors of directed training plans. Now these same leaders have ascended to more senior positions of responsibility but are now without the luxury of being told exactly how to prepare their units for deployment.

The challenges of balancing short-term mission requirements with long-term training readiness remain though the formative experiences of the last decade did not fully prepare our company- and battalion-level leaders to do so. Luckily, the absence of a standardized process for balancing RAF missions with sustainable readiness demands that the Army develop leaders who



can tailor their approaches to meet the unique needs of their formations in accordance with the broad intent established by higher headquarters. In short, sustainable readiness is a chance to infuse initiative and adaptability throughout the Army's organizational culture. According to Army Doctrine Publication 6-22,

"big picture," to adjust actions to fit changing circumstances, and to get the most out of every training opportunity. Additionally, there was an emphasis on building an understanding of the technical systems, processes, and policies that are at the leader's disposal to manage unit readiness.



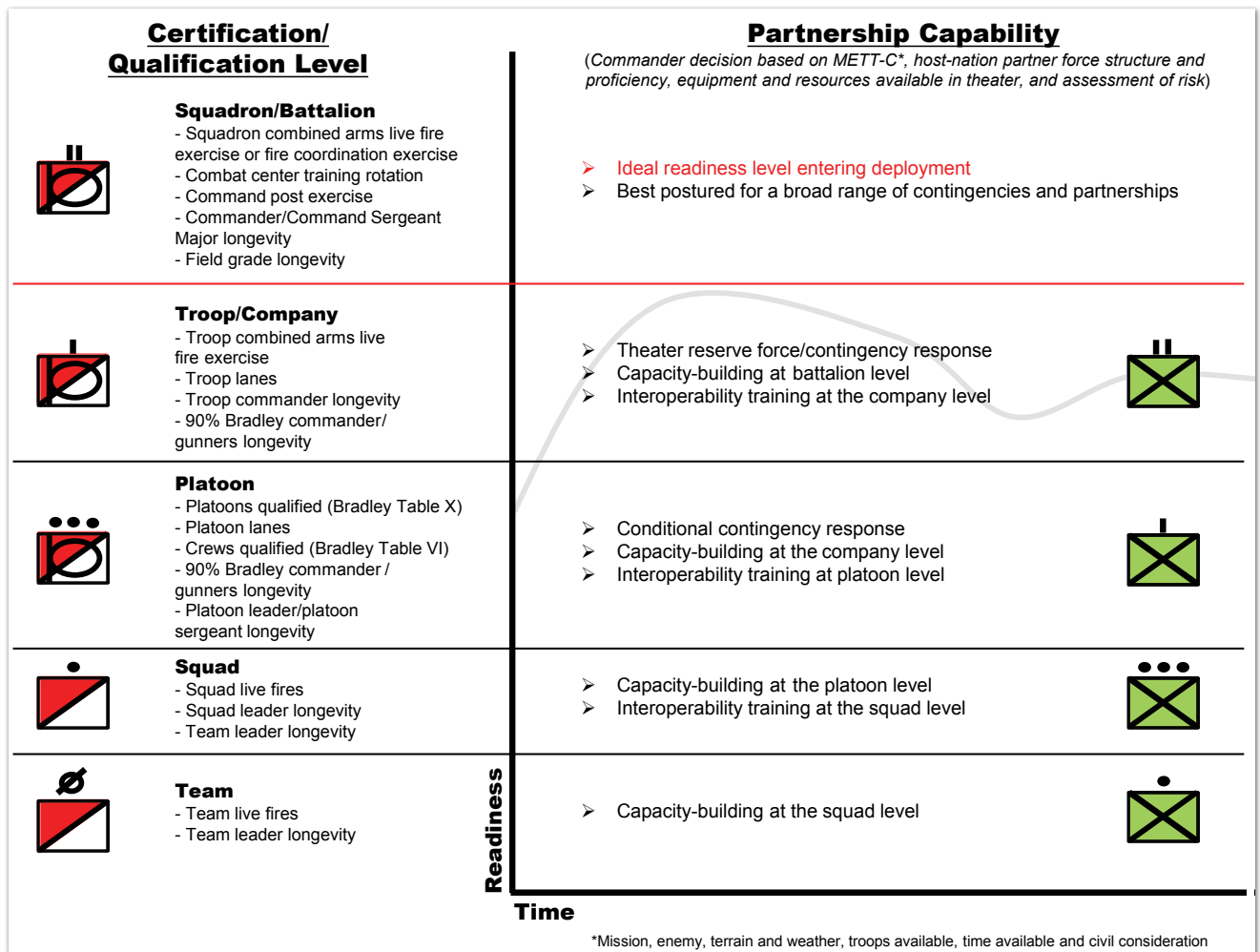
(Photo by Pfc. Craig Philbrick, U.S. Army Africa)

Spanish legionnaires and soldiers from the 4th battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division discuss tactical movements 8 June 2015 in Almeria, Spain, during African Readiness Training 15.

*Army Leadership*, "difficult and complex situations are the proving grounds of leaders."<sup>9</sup> If that is so, sustaining unit readiness within the current environment of global instability, strategic transition, and budgetary constraints is exactly what our leaders at the battalion level and below need.

Figure 1 summarizes one cavalry squadron's guidance for leader development. This guidance specified the desired outcomes for both officers and NCOs that were developed collaboratively by the troop and squadron command teams with the assistance of key staff. The outcomes circled are those that most directly contributed to the unit's (and the Army's) long-term sustainable readiness. Among the common themes were developing the ability to think ahead, to see the

In order to implement a more holistic leader development program, the squadron sought to go beyond merely scheduling events on the training calendar. The unit integrated leader development into every aspect of organizational activity. In addition to periodic leader professional development sessions, plans for each training event (regardless of echelon) included those outcomes from figure 1 that the event would address, as well as how the trainers expected to observe and assess the results of their efforts. Outside of specific training events, the squadron chain of command had to discipline itself to provide effective, minimal guidance for missions in order to allow troop commanders and subordinate leaders the maximum latitude to exercise initiative and to leverage creative thinking at the lowest levels possible.



(Graphic courtesy of Lt. Col. Chad R. Foster, U.S. Army)

**Figure 2. Training Readiness Levels for Regionally Aligned Forces Partnership**

A telling example of this principle in application was one troop commander's efforts to improve the unit's partnership with a host-nation border guard force (BGF) and further build the capacity of those forces. When the troop arrived in the summer of 2015, the BGF training program consisted of a well-established basic course of instruction for new recruits. Operating within the squadron commander's guidance to provide (within unit capabilities) what the host-nation forces assessed as their most important training needs, the troop commander sought out key host-nation leaders and established a series of functional training courses that addressed the most urgent needs identified by the BGF unit commanders in the field. These included an Advanced Training Course for company-level officers, long-range

marksmanship instruction for unit snipers, and mortar training. With only a broad set of guidance and few specific directives, the troop commander and his team met the squadron commander's intent perfectly, and, in the process, provided a unique professional development experience for himself and the young officers and NCOs under his command.

## Leader Development and the Sustainable Readiness Model

Effective leader development is decisive to implementation of sustainable readiness and, therefore, to RAF. Adaptive and empowered leaders will figure out a way to meet their commander's intent regardless of changing conditions or new missions. As anyone who has deployed recently to any of the aligned theaters





(Photo by Staff Sgt. Gregory Brook, U.S. Air Force)

Scout sniper team marksmen from the Reconnaissance Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, 53rd Brigade Combat Team, Florida Army National Guard, work with their spotters to zero their rifles prior to beginning a live-fire long-range marksmanship training and qualification course at the Arta training range in Arta, Djibouti, 14 October 2015.

can likely attest, there is a wide range of contingencies that can arise as each region contains many countries with different languages, cultures, and environmental conditions within which U.S. forces must be prepared to operate. Only through effective leader development can units ensure that they are postured for success regardless of where they land and what they are ordered to do.

### **Maximizing Opportunities: Partnered Training for RAF and Sustainable Readiness**

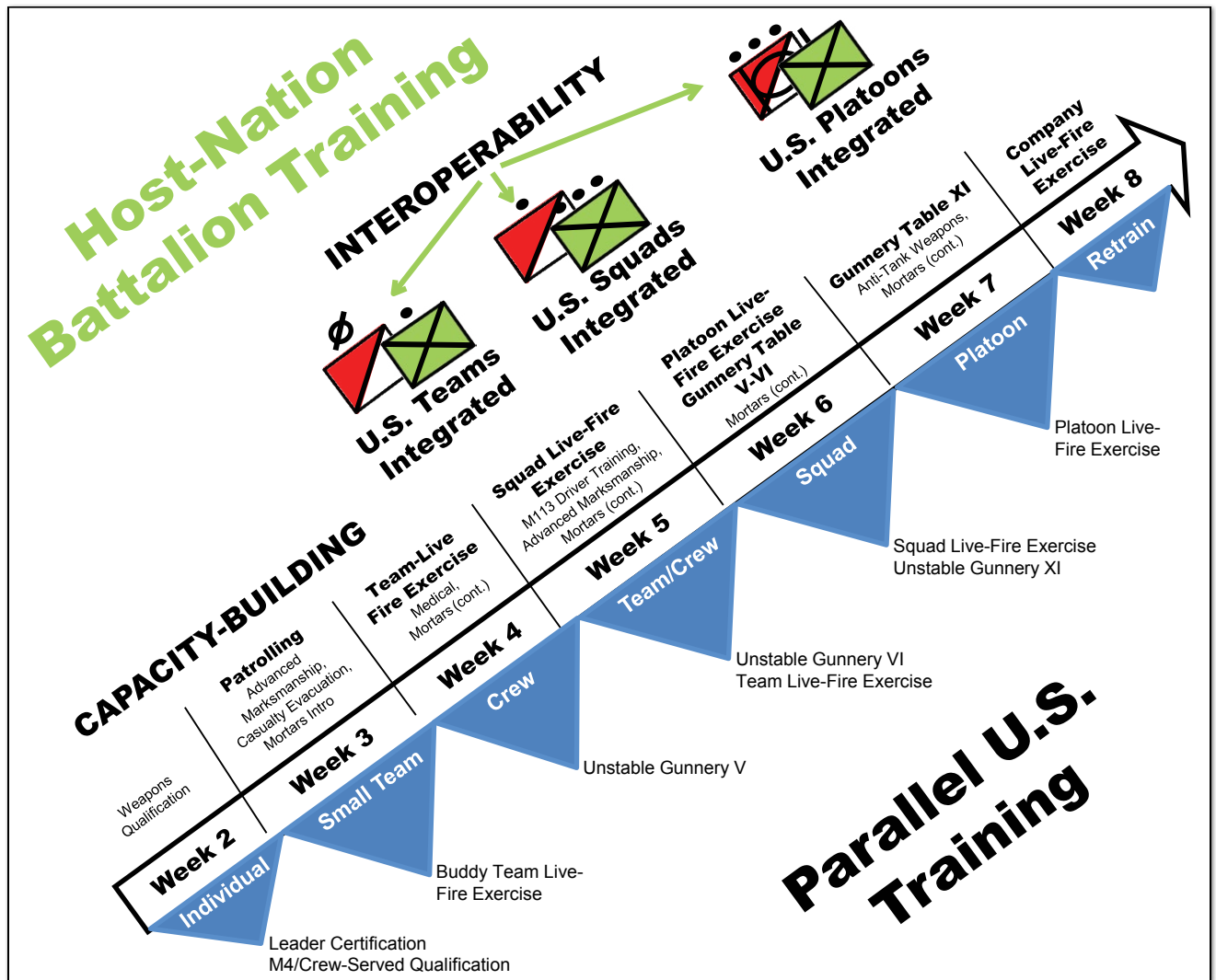
*Where the U.S. Army has striven to build partnership capacity among partner armies in complex operating environments, the need to promote professional NCO development has been one of many key lessons.<sup>10</sup>*

—Joseph Rank and Bill Saba

The immediate mission requirements of RAF and the long-term demands of sustainable readiness are

often in conflict, and commanders and subordinate leaders are faced with the challenge of finding an effective balance between the two. Prior to a deployment, units prepare for the most difficult mission that they could be asked to do while still training for any theater-specific requirements associated with the projected mission. Especially at the battalion level and below, units work hard to gain the highest level of collective proficiency in live-fire and combined-arms maneuver, both as a prudent preparatory measure and as a hedge against the natural decline in individual and collective proficiency that could occur during deployments.

While overseas, many factors such as unavailability of combat vehicles and other resource limitations can constrain training plans. Live-fire qualifications can grow out of tolerance, and significant time can pass between opportunities for a unit to practice critical collective tasks. This natural atrophy in training readiness is a problem that commanders engaged in a



### Figure 3. Host-Nation and U.S. Training in Parallel

RAF deployment must manage for both the mission at hand and the unit's sustainable readiness.

Figure 2 (page 120) shows a way of looking at the problem from the squadron/battalion perspective. This chart defines the qualification and certification levels that a commander could designate as the minimum necessary for various corresponding levels of partnership with host-nation forces. These minimum training-readiness levels are the product of different factors, to include analysis of the mission and the commander's assessment of both his own formation's capabilities and those of the host-nation partner. This sliding scale fits the intent of the Army's Sustainable Readiness Model by establishing a flexible framework that allows commanders room to maneuver in managing the specific challenges of their deployment mission.

At the strategic level, RAF deployments seek to “build trust and confidence between the United States and the host nation through understanding facilitated by enduring engagements.”<sup>11</sup> At the tactical level, this translates to U.S. forces training with counterparts to build capacity and interoperability based on guidance from the country team and the specifics of the agreement between the two governments. In these cases, interoperability training can serve as an effective vehicle to both enhance partner capacity and increase a unit’s sustainable readiness.

An example of this technique would be a U.S. company integrating squads into a host-nation platoon situational-training exercise supervised overall by U.S. trainers. In this way, the U.S. company commander is able achieve his own training objectives at the squad

level while his forces simultaneously build capacity with their partners.

Figure 3 illustrates an approach utilized by one cavalry troop to progress to platoon live-fire certification in parallel with their capacity-building efforts with a host-nation partner. Along with separate U.S.-only training and leader certification, the troop commander chose to integrate his units into training with partnered forces, usually at one echelon below that of the host-nation unit. These U.S. elements fired and maneuvered alongside their partners, setting a strong example and learning how to operate effectively with a foreign ally. This practice allowed the commander to meet his own sustainable readiness objectives while simultaneously accomplishing his RAF mission. In this way, the training became a truly developmental experience, adding an additional level of complexity to the exercises and further contributing to the interpersonal-relationship building that is so vital to RAF partnerships.

Although situations differ from country to country, a common shortcoming among potential RAF partners is a lack of an empowered and professional NCO corps. Strong NCOs are a prerequisite for small-unit operations, and many partners greatly desire assistance in developing noncommissioned leaders. There are often many cultural and administrative obstacles to overcome in this area, making the task seem daunting. However, no other initiative by a deployed U.S. unit will have a longer-lasting impact than an effective NCO development effort.

Yet again, partnered training offers many opportunities to address this strategically important need. Setting the example through our own NCOs is the first step in overcoming existing host-nation obstacles. Whenever possible, U.S. NCOs should be the “face” of training as they strive to build partner capacity. During interoperability exercises, the on-the-ground leadership of our young sergeants provides host-nation partners with a model to emulate. Unfortunately, this is normally insufficient to get past the highly centralized and officer-centric traditions and force structures within many host-nation armies. In order to make a significant impact, U.S. forces must find a way to build the immediate credibility of host-nation NCOs with their soldiers and officers. Doing so requires a determined and continuous effort.

One of the most effective ways to assist in the development of both proficiency and credibility among the host-nation unit’s NCOs is to arm them with the requisite knowledge and skills through a deliberate certification process. This technique is merely the application of standard U.S. Army training doctrine to an RAF mission. At a predetermined interval prior to the conduct of major training events, U.S. trainers can lead classes, receive back briefs, and conduct rehearsals with partnered-unit NCOs in order to enable them to lead their own soldiers through training with minimal U.S. assistance on the day of execution. A simple example of this is U.S. trainers conducting classes and a walk-through rehearsal of range operations with host-nation NCOs a few days prior to that unit’s execution of weapons qualification. More advanced tasks might require multiple preparatory sessions, but the payoff of these training-and-certification efforts will be significant: host-nation enlisted leaders will earn the confidence of their subordinates and superiors. This is the most important legacy that a unit can leave behind from a RAF deployment.

## Conclusion: Challenges and Opportunities

*Our fundamental task is like no other—it is to win in the unforgiving crucible of ground combat. Readiness for ground combat is—and will remain—the U.S. Army’s #1 priority.<sup>12</sup>*

—Gen. Mark A. Milley

The chief of staff of the Army has declared unequivocally that maintaining readiness for ground combat is our top priority. While this declaration is not something new, the obstacles to sustaining such readiness are many. Some argue that a scarcity of time brought on by a consistently high operational tempo is the biggest challenge. Others see budgetary constraints resulting from sequestration and global economic turbulence as the primary concern. While there is no doubt that these are significant issues, the most severe problem across the entire Army may well be a shortage of trained and certified leaders due to more than a decade of dictated training-and-resourcing cycles. The ARFORGEN model stunted the growth of those NCOs and officers who today hold many of the key leadership and staff positions at the company, battalion, and brigade levels. Because of the top-down training



plans prevalent under ARFORGEN, these individuals did not always have the important formative experiences that their predecessors enjoyed in developing, executing, and assessing training plans at the lower levels. Despite this harsh reality, the responsibility to sustain unit readiness remains on the shoulders of these leaders.

The imperative to remain ready to fight is as urgent as ever. Sustainable readiness is not just a model to support RAF; it is a crucible through which the Army can produce the type of resourceful, adaptive, and empowered leaders that it needs to carry us into the

future. For every obstacle, there are also opportunities. The specific observations offered above are only possible approaches to taking advantage of these opportunities. No single panacea or prescriptive step-by-step procedure exists to overcome the challenges that accompany the Sustainable Readiness Model and concept. Our officers and NCOs must find a way to meet the chief of staff of the Army's intent, even in the face of continued deployments and constrained resources at home station. Regardless of what the future holds or what our forces are asked to do, the U.S. Army must be ready. ■

## Biography

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## Notes

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ATP 3-90.90

Army Tactical Standard Operating Procedures

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# MR We Recommend

**F**OR THOSE STRUGGLING TO WRITE STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES. The task of developing unit-level standard operating procedures (SOPs) incorporates complex operational processes as well as aspects of authoring, instructing, and using collaborative technology. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-90.90, *Army Tactical Standard Operating Procedures*, brings together practical guidance for all these features of SOP development. It includes resources such as a tailored writing process soldiers can use to develop efficient procedures and effective instructions for their use. This doctrine may be found at: [https://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR\\_pubs/dr\\_a/pdf/atp3\\_90x90.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/atp3_90x90.pdf).