



A student works recovery on her weapon during a Warrior Leader Course lesson taught by Sgt. 1st Class Anna Shurley, small group leader, in April at NCO Academy Hawaii, Schofield Barracks. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

U.S. Army Makes Focus Felt In the Pacific

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

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“As we end today’s wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia-Pacific a top priority. ... Our enduring interests in the region demand our enduring presence in the region. The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay.”

— President Barack Obama, November 2011

In ways both overt and behind the scenes, the U.S. Army continues to turn its focus back to the Pacific. Though bellicose threats from North Korea often get the headlines, the quiet work of building relationships with

our partner nations is what most of the NCOs serving in the Asia-Pacific region see as their most important job.

The Pacific theater extends more than 9,000 miles east-to-west and includes seven of the world’s 10 largest armies. Headquartered at Fort Shafter, Hawaii, U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC) totals more than 150,000 Soldiers working and training in terrain as varied as the frigid tundra of Alaska and the steamy jungles of the Philippines.

With 36 countries spread over an area that covers nearly half the planet, the threats are as varied as the terrain. They include growing militaries, territorial and



Sgt. 1st Class Kindu Delaleu, noncommissioned officer in charge for the Asia-Pacific Counter-Improvised Explosive Device Center, points out some of the IED devices Soldiers can be forced to deal with in the Asia-Pacific area. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

resource disputes, nuclear developments, violent extremism, illicit trafficking, and natural disasters.

Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Woodring, command sergeant major of the 8th Military Police Brigade at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, said the threats are important for NCOs to understand when they are sent to USARPAC.

“There are more flashpoints and trigger points in the Pacific right now than anywhere else,” Woodring said. “There is no one in Europe that deals with what we deal with; there’s no one in [the continental United States], whether it’s a natural disaster or a political incident. You can look at North Korea, the problems they are posing right now; the problems we’ve seen between China and Japan over resources. One little thing could go wrong, and we could get drawn into it very quickly. That’s what I always tell the NCOs and the Soldiers here: When you come in here, not only do you need to be ready to go, but you need to be educated about what’s out there and what you could potentially be getting into.”

Those threats, along with importance of the area to the security of the United States, have led the Army to “rebalance” toward the Pacific. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come to an end, the Army wants to let its partners in the Pacific know they haven’t been forgotten. Two important signals of the rebalancing effort are slowing the deployment of Soldiers away from the

Pacific and, soon, elevating USARPAC to a four-star command, said Lt. Gen Francis J. Wiercinski, commanding general of USARPAC.

“I can tell you today that the [U.S. Pacific Command] commander now has his Army back,” Wiercinski said at the Land Power in the Pacific Symposium and Exposition in April in Honolulu. “The Washington [state]-based I Corps and the Hawaii-based 25th Infantry Division have been removed from worldwide service rotation in the Middle East and are now permanently assigned to the PACOM commander. Additionally, this July, USARPAC will elevate to a four-star command. This is not only indicative of our rebalance toward the Pacific, but it is also filling a need that was established long, long ago. The importance of an Army land forces four-star headquarters in the region cannot be overstated.”

These steps will help partner nations in the Pacific understand that the United States’ focus on the region is neither new nor short-lived, Wiercinski said.

“It is an important part of the rebalance to Asia to signal, in a very transparent and clear manner, that the United States has never forgotten the importance of the region and the constructive role we play within it,” he said. “Just as we have long contributed to the security of the region through our network of alliances and through our engagement with the wide variety of other partners,

we are now prepared to reinforce that investment. This policy recognizes as fact that the future prosperity of the United States will be defined largely by the events in this region. From personal experience, I fully recognize the wisdom of that rebalancing. In my view, rebalance confirms the future.”

Sgt. Maj. Theodore Hawkins, USARPAC’s G-7 (Information Operations) sergeant major, said that beyond the talk, he has noticed changes on the ground.

“I can see the focus shifting,” Hawkins said. “The number of higher-ranking personnel coming out to visit has increased; more people want to participate in exercises. Whereas we would look to our own USARPAC forces to do a lot of the exercises, now we’ve got units like the 18th Airborne Corps that say, ‘Hey, we want to come and play in this.’ I can see units looking out that way, based on the president’s and the DoD’s guidance that we are going to do this pivot, they’re turning. They’re looking and saying, ‘OK, this is where our focus is going to be,’ and they want to be involved.”

Partnerships

What does this rebalance and refocus mean to Army NCOs? For one, the opportunities increase to travel to other countries and help train foreign armies.

Partnering with friendly nations in the region is an important part of USARPAC’s mission, and NCOs lead the way in those partnerships.

The U.S. Army’s NCO Corps is the envy of the world, Hawkins said, and USARPAC’s noncommissioned officers spend a lot of time working with partner nations, trying to teach them the tangibles and intangibles of creating a strong NCO corps.

“We focus a lot on capacity-building; we’re focused on developing the NCO corps in some of these countries,” Hawkins said. “I don’t think it’s anything that other commands don’t do. But I can tell you there’s a lot more emphasis in our command on that than I’ve seen anywhere except for in-theater [operations].”

It’s a focus pushed from the top of the chain of command. Command Sgt. Maj. Frank Leota, command sergeant major of USARPAC, lets new NCOs know right away how important partnerships are to help the stability of the Pacific.

“We are building strategic noncommissioned officers, strategic sergeants, to go out there with his or her team,” Leota said. “They do two things for us: They represent the noncommissioned officers, and they are automatically ambassadors for the United States of America. They take that to heart when they are out in these countries.”



U.S. Army Pacific’s major installations and units. (NCO Journal graphic by Michael L. Lewis)

Some countries, accustomed to their own officer-centric militaries, are leery at first of being trained by NCOs, Leota said. But it doesn't take much interaction with the U.S. Army's NCOs to change their minds.

"These countries have accepted to have their officers trained by a noncommissioned officer from the United States Army," Leota said. "At first they were a little hesitant — 'Wait a minute, these guys are lieutenants, captains and majors; you're having a sergeant do what?' Now they're like, 'Yes, these are your trainers; these are the guys who continue to move the Army forward, who teach, culture, mentor and develop your Army.'"

Exchanges

The experiences NCOs can have in these foreign countries while stationed in the Pacific region can be a powerful driver of their lives and careers, Leota said. USARPAC participates in many large-scale exercises with countries in the region. NCOs also work on developing partner capacity and engagements with countries that aren't a part of the large exercises. The exercises and engagements work on disaster relief skills, as well as military efforts to combat al-Qaeda affiliates in the Philippines and throughout southeast Asia.

"The young noncommissioned officers who come here are going to get the opportunity, just based on all the exercises, to gain a different experience, in a different country, with a different culture, in a different language," he said. "There are some Soldiers who get the opportunity to go to four or five countries during the 36 months they are stationed in the Pacific."

Working with partner nations, and their high-level officials, means that NCOs get a completely different experience than they've had in the past, said Sgt. Maj. Matthew Hill, USARPAC's G-9 (Civil-Military Operations) sergeant major.

"One thing that is unique to operating in this theater for NCOs, compared to Afghanistan and Iraq, usually there you are operating at a tactical level," Hill said. "Here at USARPAC, you're operating at an operational/strategic level. So you have NCOs who aren't doing the day-to-day of running squads or running troops. But they're coordinating with high-level dignitaries from the host nations and the high levels of our own government, with the embassies and the high-level commands. So I think it says a lot for the development of the NCOs. It's great that we have the officers who push the education not just to the officer corps but to the NCOs as well, so that we're on the same level across the board."

With all the talk of sequestration and military cut-backs, the rebalance to the Pacific offers a bit of good news to high-speed NCOs looking to go where the action is, said Command Sgt. Maj. Nathan J. Hunt III, command sergeant major of the 8th Theater Sustainment Command at Fort Shafter.



Staff Sgt. Christopher Stotts talks about the capabilities of the 8th Theater Support Command's Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team in April at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

"There's a whole lot of angst out there," Hunt said. "There's a lot going on with downsizing of the military, and that means reduction in forces and those types of things. The rebalancing here is a good news story. This is the priority, so a lot of the younger, smart, adventurous-type of leaders, they want to get here. They want to be a part of what's up-and-coming, and this is an up-and-coming theater."

One thing being said by NCOs everywhere is also true in the Pacific: The drawdown is giving NCOs and Soldiers a chance to hone their core responsibilities. Hunt said it's allowing Soldiers to do what they were trained to do.

"With the focus being in the Pacific now, all the capabilities that reside here are really being exercised," Hunt said. "During the Global War on Terrorism, a lot of Soldiers were working outside of their specialties; they were doing what was required. There were cooks manning guns and that type of stuff. Right now, here, we need you to do what the Army trained you to do. Like for instance, our engineers, they are in Guam right now, doing what they do."

Part of returning to basic Army skills is remembering what it is like in different terrain. After 12 years of desert deployments, it's important to retrain in other areas, finding out what equipment works or doesn't work in jungle and other environments, Leota said.

"We had 40 noncommissioned officers attend the Jungle Leaders Course in Australia recently," Leota said. "We learned about our equipment, how it handles the jungle, how that IBA [Interceptor Body Armor] can really drain you. We learned that GPS doesn't work deep in the jungle, so you have to know map, compass and protractor, and you really work on your land navigation skills. Those are the kind of things that we're re-learning. Nothing new for us, just based on the persistent conflict we've had for the past 12 years, we lost some skills in some areas. Now we're going back and gaining that experience and skills again."

USARPAC offers lots of opportunities for success for both junior and senior NCOs willing to jump in and get to work, Leota said.

"One thing I tell all my sergeants major: I would rather show up and have to pull the reins on you than have to spur you," Leota said. "If I have to spur you, I'm going to get rid of you. We need active sergeants major



Sgt. Felipe Melendez talks about the capabilities of the 8th Theater Support Command's Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team in April at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

out here doing what we're supposed to be doing with our partner countries, helping develop their noncommissioned officer corps and develop whatever training they would like tailored to them."

NCOs who want to work with high-level people from foreign militaries have always seen the Pacific as a desirable location. With the rebalance, USARPAC is becoming even more important to the careers of NCOs.

"[USARPAC is] rewarding, challenging; there is a lot of opportunity out here," Leota said. "You know that old saying, 'I'm joining the Army; I'm going to see the world.' If you come out to the Pacific, you're going to see the world, or at least a whole lot of it." ■

