



New Jersey National Guard NCOs and Albanian soldiers carry a casualty on a litter during a medical evacuation training exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, May 29, 2011. (Photo by Pfc. Stephen Solomon)

# SPP: Being the Backbone Where NCOs Aren't Treated As Such

*By Michael L. Lewis*

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As one of the original participants in the State Partnership Program, the New Jersey National Guard has built a solid and valuable relationship with Albania during the past 20 years. But at the core of the partnership lies a discrepancy that is common to many SPP pairings: American NCOs often have far more responsibilities and authority than their counterparts in other nations' armies. Consequently, as they support the bilateral SPP missions directed by combatant commands, U.S. Army NCOs have the additional job of imparting what being the

"backbone of the Army" means as they help their fellow noncommissioned officers develop professional NCO corps in their own countries.

Albania's top NCO said he is grateful for the help in raising the profile of NCOs in his country, whose armed forces are celebrating the "Year of the NCO" this year.

"Albanian NCOs have not been used very much in the past," said Command Sgt. Maj. Proletar Panxha, the sergeant major of the Albanian armed forces. "But now, we have been trying to build a good NCO corps with the





New Jersey National Guard NCOs Albanian soldiers depart from a helicopter during a medical evacuation training exercise at in Hohenfels on May 29, 2011. (Photo by Pfc. Stephen Solomon)

support of the United States, especially through training and education.

“Our NCOs have learned a lot,” Panxha said. “There are a lot of NCOs who benefit from this, not just me. First of all, we have made a good friend. Second, we have learned how the United States’ and the New Jersey National Guard’s NCOs do business and cooperate with officers.”

Old ways of thinking still dominate Albanian officers’ attitudes toward enlisted soldiers, said Staff Sgt. Toby Tirrito, a plans and operations NCO with the New Jersey National Guard.

“Three years ago, we were shipping surplus bulletproof vests over there, and I remember specifically speaking with one of the Albanian NCOs. Then an officer came over and stood in front of him and said, ‘No, you’re going to talk to me.’ It’s a totally different climate over there. An officer is way up here, and NCOs are really just soldiers who just do what their told.”

Nonetheless, Albania’s armed forces are gradually understanding the vital role of professional NCOs, said Maj. Richard Karcher, the state partnership coordinator for the New Jersey National Guard.

“It wasn’t that long ago that they got rid of conscription. So they are still in that mind frame — if you’re

not an officer, you’re a worker bee,” he said. “But slowly they are getting there. In my one-year deployment [with Albanian forces], I could see the change start to happen. Once they saw our NCOs leading convoys, being convoy commanders and doing convoy briefs, and me giving them responsibilities, they were just astonished.”

“We do still have some officers with the old mentality,” said Sgt. Maj. Ilmi Popshini, the Albanian armed forces’ J-1 sergeant major. “It is not so easy for them to change. But for our young generation of officers, they have had good cooperation with the NCOs. They accept the NCOs to be close to them, and that is very important. For sure, we cannot say we’re at 100 percent. But that mentality has been changed a lot.”

### **Leading and learning by example**

Learning the differences between the U.S. Army NCO Corps and that of a foreign army helps New Jersey National Guard NCOs appreciate what they have, said Master Sgt. Brian Holderness, a senior intelligence analyst with the New Jersey National Guard.

“I think we take a lot for granted as NCOs in the U.S. Army,” Holderness said. “But when you deal with some of these countries that come from different systems that are much more class-oriented, you see that, as an NCO, you’ve been developed and trained to take on more

responsibility, to have more decision-making power, to be able to be in charge and lead troops. You see that is not always the case in these other cultures, Albania being one example. But they are coming along with that. They benefit tremendously by interacting with us and seeing what we're capable of doing without always seeking continuous guidance and direction and permission for everything. That benefits them certainly, but it also allows us to reflect on the kind of training and the kind of benefits that we enjoy here."

Exceeding expectations is the best way to showcase the professionalism of American NCOs, said Sgt. 1st Class Richard St. Pierre, an administration operations NCO with the New Jersey National Guard.

"Over there, the officers are more controlling than we are here," St. Pierre said. "Here, the officer tells the NCO what to do and knows it's going to get done. That's in the Creed: Officers 'will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine.' There, I think the mentality is, 'The NCO's not going to do it, so I'll have to do it.'"

NCOs can engender the most respect just by leading by example, Holderness said.

"In any new situation, there's a lot of judgment going on," he said. "Their NCOs are watching their officers, and their officers are watching you. It's all your interactions, your mannerisms, your social interaction. So you have to present yourself as a professional. You gain their respect, and you go from there."

Once mutual respect is attained, a true partnership develops that is based on genuine cooperation, Holderness said. He saw it happen first-hand during his own deployment with Albanian troops to Afghanistan. He was one of 12 U.S. troops on a small military advisor team led by an Albanian commander and sergeant major.

"It was challenging for me and for the team at first, because you're thrown together," he said. "It took a while for the two parts of us, the two halves of us, to mesh and get that single focus, and I think both sides had to compromise. You can't go into this with the expectation that we're going to make the Albanians work with our system. That's not going to happen, and it shouldn't happen. You have to find some kind of compromise, and that comes through different ways — talking together, eating together, socializing together, as well as performing the mission together."

## Bringing it back home

Being able to interact with fellow NCOs as true peers means a lot to Albanian NCOs, Panxha said.

"We had two NCOs go to the NCO academy [in New Jersey], and when they got back, they were very excited. They learned a lot from your NCOs, even how to exchange information and exchange experiences NCO-to-NCO. Whether officially or socially off-duty, they felt equal; they discussed things seriously.

"This is new for us," Panxha continued. "For you, it may not look so special. But for us, that was very special. When you see them speak of their experiences there, they are very excited. And they spread it among their friends and the NCO corps here through their jobs as instructors at our NCO academy."

But Albanian NCOs aren't the only ones developing as professionals, Holderness said. New Jersey Guard members have improved as leaders and trainers through their work with the partnership too.

"As NCOs, we're sometimes charged with training foreign troops and communicating with foreign troops, even just getting along with foreign troops," he said. "This partnership really helps that. Our ability to get along with them, to communicate with them and to familiarize ourselves with them, I think, makes us better NCOs when it comes to some of these other missions we have."

Missions such as training troops stateside, Karcher said.

"When you are sitting in front of a bunch of Albanians or a bunch of Afghans, you are teaching all the way down to the lowest level," he said. "So you really have to think about every step of that process as far as what you're trying to train them. You have to look at your slides, you have to watch your acronyms, you have to watch your speech. So I think [working with partner nations] hones our NCOs' skills to train junior Soldiers when they get back and are sitting in front of a squad of folks who just got out of [Advanced Individual Training]."

## Holderness agreed.

"I think this program makes all of us more effective NCOs," he said. "We're more effective in our jobs, whether that's training foreign troops or preparing for our next deployment and dealing with another culture, or training within our own corps. It's having that flexibility and that sensitivity, that ability to adapt." ■



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