



Sgt. Eutiquio Curiel of the 516th Signal Brigade, 311th Theater Signal Command, participates in a navigation exercise in April at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

# NETCOM: Keeping Communication Lines Open for the Army

*By Jonathan (Jay) Koester*

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**W**hen Soldiers need battlefield communications, when commanders need e-mail and when the Army needs any kind of network, the NCOs of the U.S. Army Network Enterprise Technology Command, or NETCOM, are there to help.

The mission at NETCOM includes the “planning, engineering, installing, integration, protection, operation and defense of the Army’s cyberspace,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Gerald Williams, NETCOM’s command sergeant major. The command is based in a large building

at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., but NETCOM’s NCOs can be found doing important work throughout the world.

“This is only our headquarters,” Williams said. “But the meat and potatoes of this organization is in 22 different countries in four different theater commands.”

NETCOM is responsible for the Army’s portion of the Department of Defense network, LandWarNet. To that end, NETCOM employs 16,000 Soldiers, civilians and contractors. It’s an ever-changing mission, as technology and communications continue to evolve, said



Master Sgt. Jeffrey Craig, senior network operations NCO at NETCOM.

“We have to stay on top of our adversaries, because they are constantly trying to find ways to compromise our information,” Craig said. “It’s bad enough on social media out there. We give up so many things when people are uneducated on how to use Facebook, MySpace and all these other social media forums. They put things out there that could potentially harm our service. We have to ensure that we are smart about that and find ways to stay one step ahead of our adversaries.”

The modern U.S. Army is dependent on technol-

the skills Soldiers bring to the information and communications fight, said Master Sgt. Juan Muñoz, a career counselor at NETCOM.

“The skills that the signal Soldiers bring to the Army team make NETCOM important,” Muñoz said. “As we progress in the Army to become more modern, cyber becomes a huge part of it, the network part. The special skills that signal Soldiers bring to make sure we are up to date are important. Signal Soldiers become very relevant when we talk about modernizing, not just at Fort Huachuca or NETCOM, because NETCOM is responsible for all the Army and all the communications.”



Sgt. Tony Noakes of the 516th Signal Brigade, 311th Theater Signal Command, participates in a navigation exercise in April at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

ogy for its ability to communicate, meaning NETCOM is at the forefront of making sure Soldiers and commanders can operate efficiently, said Master Sgt. Steven Zaruba, the operational planning team NCO in charge at NETCOM.

“In every Fortune 500 company they will tell you that their capabilities are matched by their technical capability, by their [information technology],” Zaruba said. “The better your IT works, the faster your IT works, the more capable your IT is, then the more capable your organization is, the more agile. It’s true for the Army just the same as it is for a Fortune 500 company.”

The importance of NETCOM comes directly from

### Who thrives at NETCOM

The NCOs at NETCOM not only need to have learned the specialized skills necessary in the Signal Corps, but also need to be independent. When things go wrong, they will be called upon to make some difficult decisions quickly. For instance, if a virus hits a post’s computers, it could be up to a NETCOM noncommissioned officer to quickly shut down that post’s network before the infection spreads.

“You have to be a free-thinker, an outside-the-box type of guy,” Craig said. “You have to be able to function on your own. It’s not like your line unit, where you are always in a formation, working in a squad or working



down in a motor pool. You need to be able to go out and interact with all the subordinate theater commands, let them know what our intent is, make sure they are following all taskers and orders released by the higher commands. Basically, you need to check on the program to see it through from beginning to end. You need an NCO who can function without a lot of supervision.”

In addition to functioning on their own, NCOs at NETCOM are called upon to put in the extra work to make sure systems are running smoothly, whether all the desired resources are there or not, Zaruba said.

“Successful NCOs here have to be driven,” Zaruba said. “A lot of the assignments you find out there are going to be undermanned. You’re not going to have a lot of resources. You’re not going to have a lot of people. But you’re going to have a lot of mission. Because what does everybody understand about IT? ‘I pick up the phone and it works. I turn on the computer and it works.’ Everything that happens between that computer and wherever the data actually reside is completely unknown to them. To the signaler, all of that has to be known, quantified, checked and maintained constantly. You are going to have more mission than you have time, so you have to be able to drive through it. You can’t just pull an 9-to-5 and clock out.”

” NCOs are also important to NETCOM’s mission because they know what’s important to the Soldiers in the field, Zaruba said.

“We know the force; we come from the force,” Zaruba said. “Before we came here, we were customers, and we know what we wanted NETCOM to provide us. When we leave here, we’re going back out to the force that we helped build. We have a personal investment in making sure that NETCOM is on the right path.”

Being in a leadership role at NETCOM is different than what many NCOs are accustomed to, Muñoz said. An NCO may need to explain the mission more than he or she is used to.

“Before, the Soldiers probably told them, ‘You said charge up that hill. Let’s go,’” Muñoz said. “With signal Soldiers, they are so highly qualified that a lot of them do ask questions. ‘Why do we have to charge up this hill?’ So you have to be an NCO who can help them understand why we’re doing the mission and how to get it done quickly.”

Like anywhere, the biggest value NCOs bring to NETCOM is in training Soldiers, said Command Sgt. Maj. Allen Braswell, the command sergeant major of the 516th Signal Brigade, 311th Theater Signal Command, at Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

“NCOs are critical to all of what we do because we are the ones who foster the environment for learning,” Braswell said. “It’s a different challenge because Soldiers are coming out of the very technical AIT training environment with advanced technical ability. So the

challenge for NCOs is not necessarily to have the expert power and know more than the Soldier. The challenge for the NCO is to conduct and plan training properly so Soldiers can get the most out of it. It’s one thing to be able to install a system, but it’s something totally different to be able to train an entire organization to be able to install, operate and maintain all the assemblages that the organization is responsible for. That comes with



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proper planning and proper training.

“We train for Soldiers to be able to get equipment to work in the worst conditions so that it becomes second nature,” Braswell said. “Most of the training we do is in the calm environment of the classroom, with nobody shooting at us or bombs going off all around us. What we strive for is the second-nature effect, so that in the worst of conditions, the Soldier can still get the equipment to work with the greatest of accuracy. And this is what our NCOs do for us.”

### **Working with civilians**

When NCOs are sent to NETCOM headquarters, one of the first things they’ll notice is a large civilian and contractor workforce. Working with so many civilians can require an adjustment for some, Zaruba said.

“We have a number of NCOs who have never worked

with contractors or government civilians,” Zaruba said. “So coming here, not only are they bringing in their past training and experiences, they are also learning how to operate with the civilian side of the house. The change for some is a little rough because they don’t understand cooperation, instead of a direct and linear chain of command. Just because you’re working with somebody doesn’t mean that you have any authority over them.

“Soldiers have teamwork by their nature. However, the interpersonal skills that come with working with civilians, that is a challenge for some, especially when they are used to the past 10 years of clear, delineated chain,” Zaruba said.

Many of NETCOM’s civilian employees have prior service and possess a vast knowledge base, which is important for NCOs to take advantage of, Craig said.

“If you’re smart, you pick their brains,” Craig said. “You realize, ‘Hey, they have been doing this for how long? And I’m just getting into it? I need to learn from them.’”

Master Sgt. James Roberts, the G-4 sergeant major at NETCOM, agreed that the system can work well when NCOs let it.

“You’ll have civilians who are really in charge of you; they’re your first-line supervisor,” Roberts said. “That is why I say you need an open mind, because it’s not your typical type of unit. Your civilian counterparts know just as much or probably more than you do — especially about NETCOM — because they’ve been here for a while and understand the workings of it. It can be challenge, but everybody here makes it work.”

In the office environment of NETCOM, NCOs need the internal drive to remember their Soldier duties, said Sgt. Oliver Mathews, battle captain at the CONUS Theater Network Operations Security Center at NETCOM.

“There may not be regulated [physical training], but we still follow all the military regulations. So if you get fat and fail the PT test, it’s on your shoulders at that point,” Mathews said. “Some people aren’t cut out for that; they need that 6 o’clock every morning — show up, run, go home — type deal. You need to have independence here. You cannot require someone looking over your shoulder at all times. Because we do a lot of shift work, it’s really hard to have unit PT, so you have to be able to motivate yourself to maintain your Soldier aspect.”

### **Consolidating the future**

Consolidating the future

One of the main focuses for NETCOM right now is

consolidating and standardizing IT services Armywide. In the past, many units purchased and developed their own systems. But the Army is trying to get away from maintaining so many different ones, Zaruba said.

“In the past several years, NETCOM has had a major push to bring everybody on to the same requirement — to have a set standard; be understandable; have known pricing; have known quality, quantity and availability; and be able to get it out to the forces,” he said. “So they know what they are getting, they’ll know how much it’s going to cost, they’ll know what the maintainability of it is, they’ll know what the utility of it is. Everything is a known quantity, and you’ll get [the same equipment] no matter if you’re in Europe or if you’re in Seoul, Korea. You’re getting the same thing.”

With financial concerns near the top of the Army’s worries right now, consolidation also promises monetary returns, especially if there are efforts to include the other military services, Zaruba said.

“What people don’t see behind the scenes is our perimeter security,” Zaruba said. “Like you put out force protection, and you put out an organization to surround your perimeter, inside of IT, we also have perimeter security. If I have to build perimeter security for Army and then, on the same post, for Navy and then, on the same post, for higher-level DoD and joint organizations, that’s a lot of replication of effort, management and funding. If we’re able to do that through a single joint venture, that reduces that cost. Plus if you’re on the Air Force side of the house and I’m on the Army side of the house, we’re still under the same roof and able to communicate.”

Making sure the funding follows the consolidation plan is the next step, said Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Cornell, the enterprise initiatives NCO at NETCOM.

“The leadership above us has to look at NETCOM as the IT provider,” Cornell said. “The Army has to really look at NETCOM and say, ‘Hey, you are the IT provider for the Army. All IT services go through you. The funding has to follow. If we’re saying one standard, but yet they’re still funding you somewhere else to do your own thing, it doesn’t do us any good. But if you’re getting your funding from us, and we’re saying this is the way you’re going to do business because this is the Army standard, then you are going to be more likely to endorse and be on board with what we’re trying to do.” ■

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**4**

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