Sgt. Terry Selert of the Pennsylvania National Guard looks to a Lithuanian soldier during a joint live-fire exercise in Adazi, Latvia, in June 2012. The exercise was part of Saber Strike 2012, whose participants included more than 2,000 troops from the United States, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Canada, France and the United Kingdom. (Photo by Air Force Capt. Robert Sperling)

National Guard NCOs Building 'True Partnerships' With Foreign Armies

By Michael L. Lewis

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Nearly every NCO who has deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan knows what it is like to work with soldiers from another country's army. But for almost twice as long as the United States military has had troops in those two countries, National Guard NCOs have been building and maintaining enduring relationships with countries the world over through the State Partnership Program, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

Today, the National Guard of almost every state in the union — plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands — is paired with the military from at least one other country in a strategic partnership designed to provide American combatant commands with forces acutely focused on building security, understanding and cooperation. The bilateral relationships that the SPP helps to forge are invaluable, two combatant commanders told Congress this spring.

"You probably have the co-chairs of the State Partnership Program fan club seated here," Gen. Carter Ham,

commander of U.S. Africa Command, said March 15 before the House Armed Services Committee, speaking for himself and Navy Adm. James Stavridis, then the commander of U.S. European Command.

"It's a very powerful tool. It is unmatched," Stavridis testified. "They are, bang for the buck, one of the best things going. Anything that enhances state partnership is money in the bank for the regional combatant commanders."

The SPP began in the early 1990s as the EUCOM-sponsored Joint Contact Team Program, which was designed to aid the three Baltic countries — Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia — as they emerged as new democracies after decades of Soviet rule. The three nations were formally teamed with the National Guards of Michigan,

quite as threatening at the time. The perception of the Guard was a little different back then."

Now, two decades later, the program has reaped a bounty of benefits for troops on both sides, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Gundrum, the Pennsylvania National Guard's state senior enlisted advisor.

"It's an exceptional program. It allows you to develop relationships, both militarily and culturally, that have longevity to them," Gundrum said. "The Lithuanian NCO corps is very energetic to learn how we do things, because they base a lot of what their NCOs do on how the U.S. military does it since we have such an outstanding NCO Corps and have proved it's the backbone of our Army."

A Lithuanian first lieutenant practices applying a combat applied tourniquet on Sgt. Joel Rice, an instructor with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, in Pabradė, Lithuania, in June 2011. The training was a part of Amber Hope 2011, which included more than 2,000 participants from nine countries. (Photo by Air Force Staff Sgt. Ted Nichols)

Pennsylvania and Maryland, respectively, in 1993, explained Capt. Teresa Ruotolo, the officer in charge of the Pennsylvania National Guard's SPP with Lithuania.

"As these former Soviet nations were breaking away and trying to stand up democracies, the U.S. wanted to have some people in place to assist them," she said. "The idea was, as the Russians were pulling out, sending in active-duty [U.S.] Soldiers would have been seen as a provocation by Russia. So they looked to send some reserve component Soldiers instead, since we weren't viewed as

Imparting the unique roles and responsibilities of American noncommissioned officers has been a long-term process, explained 1st Sgt. Jerry Ressler, the NCO in charge of the Pennsylvania National Guard's pre-mobilization training assistance element. Though Lithuania has been free of Soviet occupation for more than two decades, the Soviet military model has stubbornly persisted in some quarters, he said.

"We know that our NCOs are the backbone of the Army — officers plan, and we execute," Ressler said.

"One thing I observed over there is that they are still trying to implement that. A lot of places, they still have the Soviet model where the officer plans and executes, and the NCO is there mostly as a foot soldier."

"There is still a bit of that Iron Curtain mentality that has carried over into some of their traditions," Gundrum said. "You'd think that would be something they'd want to brush to the side, but they don't because it's what they grew up with. Now, that may blend itself out over the years to come, but it's something you have to know ahead of time."

Feedback for deployments

A large part of the Pennsylvania SPP's mission has been readying Lithuanian soldiers for deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. For Ressler and his team, this doesn't mean evaluating units directly, but rather showing Lithuanian soldiers how the U.S. Army conducts pre-mobilization training so that they can build a model that works for the Lithuanian military.

"We brought them in and showed them what our [checkpoints] are that we have to get through, whether that involves individual training or collective training," Ressler said. "They saw how we tracked our Soldiers, and that was something they were very interested in. When they are performing their tasks for prepping, theirs is more of a broad evaluation of the commander himself and getting feedback from the commander. When we do an event, we get feedback from the individual Soldiers. They saw that and liked that a lot. That's one of the things they tried to build into their pre-mobilization scenarios, to get the feedback from not just the commander, but their soldiers also."

Pennsylvania National Guard members, on the other hand, learned that the Lithuanians' training can be startlingly more lifelike than what U.S. troops are used to, Ressler said.

"Their taskings are more general, but their training was more realistic in some of their scenarios," he said. "Where we would use compressed air and powder (to simulate an explosion), they would use small blocks of C-4.

"They did a lot of civil disturbance training, and they would bring out water cannons," Ressler said. "Where we would simulate our protective defensive wall when we'd go into a civil disturbance, they had guys running, jumping and kicking the shields back, and they would have guys with batons hitting back."

The intensity of the role-players — members of the Lithuania active reserve force — impressed the Pennsylvania Guard's Soldiers, said Air Force Master Sgt. Ronda Fawber, the NCO in charge of Pennsylvania's SPP.

"They had people actually injured," she said. "So they'd go over to the medical tents, get patched back up, and then you'd see them back there in the afternoon again as actors."

"They knew what the mission was, and they were all motivated to do it," Ressler added.

The only two American troops in Ghar province

The realistic training helped prepare the Lithuanians for their role leading an international provincial reconstruction team in Ghar province, Afghanistan. There, amid the 140 Lithuanian troops and the dozens from other countries, were two Pennsylvania National Guard Soldiers embedded to assist with logistics. It was a unique assignment, said 1st Sgt. Ann Shambaugh of A Company, 128th Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania National Guard. She and her chief were the only two American Soldiers in the entire province.

"It was quite challenging, because it wasn't a training scenario," Shambaugh said. "We were on a very small [forward operating base] with seven countries, mostly Lithuanians. And besides the Lithuanian sergeant major, I was the only other NCO in that building.

"Class I food was big; rations and water, had to have it," she said. "MREs, they were like, 'We don't need these inspected.' Yes you do; they expire. Medical was a big thing, too, because they ran a small clinic and they supported the local community there. When kids got sick, they would come into the hospital. So they needed blood on-site and had to learn the proper procedures. But I think they learned and grasped quite a bit about coordinating logistics, not just with food, but with fuel and blood."

Though they were not her troops, Shambaugh said she showed the same care and concern for their welfare as any NCO would.

"The infantry guys were pretty good. They really did have a good concept of the security of their vehicles and what they personally needed to pack," she said. "But I would constantly check the guys: 'You have extra socks? You have MREs? Let me see what's in your bag.' They do so appreciate our NCOs' concern for their safety and their well-being. That meant so much to them."

Despite their tiny number, the two Pennsylvania Soldiers had an outsized impact, Fawber said.

"At one point, the [U.S.] DoD wanted to pull them out of there, even though there were only two," Fawber said. "But the Lithuanian minister of defense spoke directly to our secretary of defense and said, if Pennsylvania leaves, we leave. They depended so heavily on [the two Americans'] assistance to navigate the supply system."

"They used us, and that's what we were there for," Shambaugh said. "And toward the end, we could tell when they got it — 'We don't need you as much.' And that was OK."

Pennsylvania Army and Air National Guard troops were also deployed as part of a police operations mentor

and liaison team, or POMLET, sent to help stand up the Afghan National Police.

"It was one of the first truly joint, multinational and 'blue' teams out there to deploy," Ruotolo said.

"But significantly, we fell under the command of the Lithuanians," Fawber added. "It was one of the first times we had American troops under a foreign commander like that at that level."

Making the partnership enduring

Part of what allowed Pennsylvania National Guard members to work so well under the command of Lithuanians was the mutual trust that has developed during the course of the 20-year partnership, Gundrum said. And having National Guard members as the American stewards of that partnership provides greater stability than using the active component could, he said.

"It's not like going on a deployment to a foreign country and working with someone from another country

major change, we still have maintained that relationship throughout the years."

"You have these officers and NCOs grow up together, and they participate in these events, exercises and deployments together, and come up through the ranks together during a 20-year career," said Ruotolo, whose father-in-law helped set up Pennsylvania's SPP in the early 1990s. "You don't get that kind of access anywhere else. It's because we have that enduring relationship."

The partnership thrives because of the mutual respect both sides have for each other, Gundrum said.

"I think the biggest thing is once you meet your counterpart, if he's a sergeant and you're a sergeant, you've got to treat each other as peers," he said. "You can't look at him as any less an NCO than you are, because you hold the same rank. Now, maybe the duties and responsibilities are a little different — maybe he has more, maybe he has less — but it doesn't matter. You have to treat each other as peers, because if you don't start at that level,

Staff Sgt. Joe Rusnak of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard's Eastern Army Aviation Training Site instructs Lithuanian troops on manual carries — getting injured troops to safety for medical treatment. The training, in June 2011, was part of Amber Hope 2011 in Pabradė, Lithuania. (Photo by Air Force Staff Sgt. Ted Nichols)

for 6 to 8 months, then you leave," he said. "This is a long-term commitment. Even though we swap positions stateside, there's a lot of continuity between NCOs because we tend to be around in positions a lot longer than our active-duty counterparts. So when we meet somebody from Lithuania, there's a good chance that six or seven years later, we're still around doing something similar. Even though ministers of defense change, presidents change, adjutants general change, sergeants

you're never going to have a good relationship."

"When we talk about going forward, you can see us moving away from a mentoring-and-modeling role and into a true partnering role, co-training," Fawber said. This means treating each other even more like equals, which Ressler said hasn't been that hard to do. Indeed, he said his team quickly became impressed with the Lithuanian NCOs' aptitude.

"Our NCOs understood that these guys are not at the

lower end of the intelligence scale," Ressler said. "They speak four or five languages, and our guys speak only one. They're highly intelligent, they're motivated and they're proactive. I worked with another country's army in the '80s, and they just sat back and watched. These guys didn't. They were looking to make sure things were right. They were looking for that next step."

The result is a cooperative bond that enriches both sides, but especially the Soldiers from his state, Gundrum said.

"This partnership positively impacts the Pennsylvania National Guard in that you learn to be a better force when it comes to truly joint and international deployments, such as we've had in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "It makes it a whole lot easier for us to understand how to communicate with a foreign country, how different military networks and NCO corps work. It expands the knowledge of the Guard; it gives our Soldiers a bigger view of worldwide operations versus our own little niche in the military."

"It exposes the Pennsylvania Soldiers to a better understanding of what it truly means to develop a force with few resources, a true understanding of what it means to start from scratch," Fawber said. "They've only been independent from the Soviet Union since 1991; it was 1993 when the last Soviets left. So all of the senior NCOs grew up in a Soviet regime. That's very enlightening for our Soldiers to learn the struggles their Lithuanian peers have had to endure to get to the same place we are."

As the partnership enters its third decade, Ruotolo echoed the combatant commanders' view that SPPs like Pennsylvania's are both valuable and cost-effective.

"The State Partnership Program is really one of those low-budget, low-footprint, high-impact things. We can really do a lot, and we don't cost a lot," she said. "We used to have 300,000 Soldiers in Europe, and now we're going to have 2,500. When you draw down that significantly,

the question is, how do you maintain that level of access to all these different countries? The answer really is the State Partnership Program."

The next step may be to turn the bilateral program into a trilateral one, Ruotolo said. Dozens of other countries have expressed their interest in being added as SPP partners, she said.

"As one of the first partners, we're looking to pick up a second country, perhaps in Africa," she said. "The idea would be helping the Lithuanians by taking them with us to this new country and doing a trilateral exercise, where Lithuania can share their experience of working with us and what they went through."

"In the long run, I think it's a great thing for the world in general because it promotes a bit of harmony," Gundrum said. "You get to watch a country grow — something we did a hundred years ago, now you have the opportunity to help someone else to grow. It makes you feel good that you're able to help somebody, even though that's what NCOs do in the Guard all the time. But now, you're not just helping your own troops, you're helping the troops of another country get to that level."

Sgt. 1st Class Jim Greenhill of the Army National Guard contributed to this report.

At a glance

The U.S. and foreign partners participating in the National Guard State Partnership Program:

Note: Figures are approximate as of March 2012.

* These bilateral relationships are maintained outside of the State Partnership Program.

** The Regional Security System includes the island nations of Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in the Eastern Caribbean.

NCO Journal graphic by Michael L. Lewis
Sources: National Guard Bureau, International Institute for Strategic Studies

NATIONAL GUARD	NUMBER OF TROOPS	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ACTIVE TROOPS	PARTNERS SINCE
Alabama	11,000	Romania	73,900	1993
Alaska	1,900	Mongolia	10,000	2003
Arizona	5,200	Kazakhstan	49,000	1993
Arkansas	7,400	Guatemala	15,200	2002
California	16,500	Nigeria	80,000	2006
California	16,500	Ukraine	129,900	1993
Colorado	4,000	Jordan	100,500	2004
Colorado	4,000	Slovenia	7,600	1993
Connecticut	3,600	Uruguay	24,600	2000
Delaware	1,600	Trinidad & Tobago	4,100	2004
District of Columbia	1,300	Jamaica	2,800	1999
Florida	9,900	Guyana	1,100	2003
Florida	9,900	Venezuela	115,000	1998
Florida, Virgin Islands	10,600	Eastern Caribbean**	1,000	2006
Georgia	11,100	Georgia	20,700	1994
Guam & Hawaii	4,200	Philippines	125,000	2000
Hawaii	3,000	Indonesia	302,000	2006
Idaho	3,500	Cambodia	124,300	2009
Illinois	10,000	Poland	100,000	1993
Indiana	12,500	Slovakia	15,800	1994
Iowa	7,500	Kosovo	2,800	2011
Iowa	7,500	Russia*	956,000	

NATIONAL GUARD	NUMBER OF TROOPS	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ACTIVE TROOPS	PARTNERS SINCE
Kansas	5,100	Armenia	48,800	2003
Kentucky	7,200	Ecuador	58,500	1996
Louisiana	9,600	Belize	1,100	1996
Louisiana	9,600	Haiti	0	2011
Maine	2,000	Montenegro	3,000	2006
Maryland	4,900	Bosnia & Herzegovina	10,600	2003
Maryland	4,900	Estonia	5,800	1993
Massachusetts	6,300	Paraguay	10,700	2001
Michigan	8,800	Latvia	4,600	1993
Michigan	8,800	Liberia	2,100	2009
Minnesota	11,300	Norway*	24,500	1974
Mississippi	9,700	Bolivia	46,100	1999
Mississippi	9,700	Uzbekistan	67,000	2012
Missouri	9,000	Panama	12,000	1996
Montana	2,800	Kyrgyzstan	10,900	1996
National Guard Bureau	359,000	Israel*	176,500	
Nebraska & Texas	23,100	Czech Republic	25,400	1993
New Hampshire	1,800	El Salvador	15,500	2000
New Jersey	6,100	Albania	14,200	1993
New Mexico	3,000	Costa Rica	9,800	2006
New York	10,700	South Africa	62,100	2003

NATIONAL GUARD	NUMBER OF TROOPS	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ACTIVE TROOPS	PARTNERS SINCE
North Carolina	10,300	Botswana	9,000	2008
North Carolina	10,300	Moldova	5,400	1996
North Dakota	3,300	Ghana	15,500	2004
Ohio	11,400	Hungary	22,600	1993
Ohio	11,400	Serbia	28,200	2005
Oklahoma	7,400	Azerbaijan	66,900	2002
Oregon	6,600	Bangladesh	157,100	2008
Oregon	6,600	Vietnam	482,000	2012
Pennsylvania	15,300	Lithuania	10,600	1993
Puerto Rico	7,200	Dominican Republic	24,500	2003
Puerto Rico	7,200	Honduras	12,000	1998
Rhode Island	2,200	Bahamas	900	2005
South Carolina	9,500	Colombia	283,000	2012
South Dakota	3,300	Suriname	1,800	2006
Tennessee	10,600	Bulgaria	31,300	1993
Texas	19,200	Chile	59,100	2008
Texas & Nebraska	23,100	Czech Republic	25,400	1993
Utah	5,600	Morocco	195,800	2003
Vermont	2,800	Macedonia	8,000	1993
Vermont	2,800	Senegal	13,600	2008
Virgin Islands & Florida	10,600	Eastern Caribbean**	1,000	2006

NATIONAL GUARD	NUMBER OF TROOPS	COUNTRY	NUMBER OF ACTIVE TROOPS	PARTNERS SINCE
Virginia	7,700	Tajikistan	8,800	2003
Washington	6,000	Thailand	305,900	2002
West Virginia	4,100	Peru	115,000	1996
Wisconsin	7,500	Nicaragua	12,000	2003
Wyoming	1,700	Tunisia	35,800	2004