The Army is Serious about Cyber Operations

By Command Sgt. Maj. Rodney D. Harris

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The Army, having recently graduated the first two groups of cyber defense NCOs at Fort Gordon, Ga., is well on its way to benefiting from the investment it is making in its cyber mission force. Having had the opportunity to spend time with these elite cyber-skilled NCOs, I'm excited about the future of our cyber mission force and the quality of NCOs who are signing up to be part of the U.S. Army Cyber Command team.

Today, we are working through tough challenges associated with using these Soldiers in a heavily contested environment while simultaneously working through Army processes to establish this new capability. The task is to define this unique skill and the special considerations that must be made to recruit, train, manage and retain the talent necessary to be successful.

I would like to share some points regarding Army Cyber Command, our status as the Army's newest operational command and some of the topics we are addressing as we find common solutions to the challenges we face today as seen from our senior enlisted leaders.

My first lesson learned at Army Cyber Command has been that the application of leadership principles in highly technical fields requires a different approach to connect with the Soldiers we lead. Though the fundamental elements of leadership are shared across most aspects of military operations, I have found that to have a credible place on the team in a cyber organization, leaders must spend the time necessary to truly understand what our operators are doing in their specific roles on the team.

Often, we tend to rely on our training systems to ensure the proper certifications are in place. Our goal is to ensure these Soldiers have the legal authority to sit behind their workstations while relying on technical experts to get the mission accomplished. But if we expect to know our Soldiers and relate to the challenges associated with the unique aspects of these tasks, then we must spend time learning the technical details of their jobs.

Since assuming the responsibilities as the U.S. Army Cyber Command's sergeant major, I've spent a great deal of time engaged with our cyber teams across the force and have gained a good understanding of what it takes to be a cyber professional. I've spent time with our operators throughout the Army.

Having been asked the question why I spend so much time with them my response is shaped by my time as a Bradley master gunner. My experience has been that, once I was no longer working on guns and planning ranges and training qualifications, if I wanted to stay connected to our Soldiers and understand what their concerns and challenges were, I had to go to the motor pool and "break track" with them. I now see our cyber operation centers as my motor pool. Cyber leaders must spend the time with our operators to understand what they do — even when we are well out-paced intellectually in their domain.

I've also spent time visiting with senior leaders across the Army discussing cyber operations. I'm certain that we have a significant challenge associated with educating our force about our mission and the important role our teams will play on the future battlefield as we fully integrate into full-spectrum operations across all domains of warfare.

Many senior leaders are cyber illiterate about basic processes that we might think are commonly understood. Ask the question what happens when a Soldier clicks on a link in a phishing e-mail, and the reply is usually something like it will destroy his computer and, "that's what he deserves."

Many haven't recognized that we are all interconnected and that one action by one Soldier can impact our weapon systems, our navigational systems, our mission command capabilities and more.

The very definition of "cyberspace" is complex and is debated throughout the Department of Defense. However, most people do understand what their network is, that it is connected to the worldwide Internet and that other networks across the globe are also connected to the Internet.

They also understand that their computers, Blue Force Tracker, precision-guided munitions, unmanned aerial vehicles, etc., and even our basic rifleman in today's modern battlefield are all connected to that network.

When we begin to understand that the cyber battlefields are the pathways and connections between those devices, then we begin to understand the importance of what our cyber units do. Once we realize that cyberspace is a domain that can be navigated just like the streets of Fallujah, then it becomes real and relevant to leaders in the Army.

Unlike in the theaters on land, at sea, in air, and in space, cyber operations don't come with the uniforms of an occupying army, nor flags stamped on a predator drone. The reality is that their digital footprint can disappear in seconds. Not only is it difficult to determine who might have been responsible for an attack, the lines between acts of war, terrorism, espionage, crime, protest and more are frequently blurred. It's not always easy to separate the good from the bad in cyberspace.

That's why it is so important that we get serious about cyberspace and invest now in the Soldiers and NCOs who have the ability to apply their skills toward this difficult mission.

We are in the forming stage of developing our capabilities within the various types of units and teams that make up U.S. Army Cyber Command, and that doesn't happen without input and participation from NCOs in the process. As we build capacity and begin operating, we will rapidly generate requirements. Very soon, we will not have the forces available to work the volume of requirements once commanders realize the value these organizations bring to their force and warfighting capability.

As we move toward the establishment of a Cyber Center of Excellence at Fort Gordon, we will refine our understanding of doctrine and how we fight and will employ these teams and their capability. We will work through the difficult questions such as, "What authorities are required? What operational platforms will we need? Will we need to deploy teams to work close-access to the key terrain they operate in or can their tasks be accomplished remotely?"

Many key decisions will have to be made about how to manage the talent these Soldiers represent. How do we acknowledge their skills and compensate them accordingly? How do we develop a career model that best employs these Soldiers across the total force, enables them to have the ability to move to the enlisted grade of E-8 and E-9 while maintaining their skills, and ensures they remain current on the latest technology and techniques required to accomplish these unique tasks?

To be sure, these are significant challenges that will require significant effort and investment to address. But our nation has already recognized the seriousness of the threat. Our Army has recognized the importance of employing Soldiers in this critical role and will make the right decisions required to ensure we not only maintain their skills, but also enhance and grow them as we move to meet evolving threats.

I have an *enormous* amount of respect for our cyber-skilled NCOs and the amount of pride they take in accomplishing their mission. Most often they do so quietly, unnoticed and with little recognition for their critical role in our national defense.

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