



Graduates of Africa's First NCO Academy Become Leaders of Change for Malawi

By Meghan Portillo

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In the African country of Malawi, there is mutual distrust and a large knowledge gap between its officers and noncommissioned officers. Though changing this will not be easy, the country's leadership has recognized that NCOs are the key to a professional military and that a military must invest in its NCOs to set itself up for a successful future. To help make this transformation successful are two NCOs from U.S. Army Africa, based in Vicenza, Italy.

Sgt. Maj. Jerryn McCarroll and Sgt. Maj. Timothy Watts, USARAF's African NCO Education System program managers, were responsible for helping the Malawian Defence Force establish a professional NCO institution in the city of Salima. In addition to developing the curriculum, they were the first instructors for the four-month course.

"We are hoping that this education opens up their minds, and that they are able to earn the confidence of the officers – and that the officers begin to see the advantage of utilizing these NCOs," Watts said.

MDF's commander, Gen. Henry Odillo, approached the U.S. Army for help in starting an NCO academy after one of his soldiers returned from the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas. Students from around the world attend USASMA as part of the International Military Education and Training program. Malawi has become the first country to participate in the new African Military Education and Training program, and is now host to the first NCO academy in Africa.

Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffery Stitzel, the command sergeant major for U.S. Army Africa, addressed the MDF's leadership and the academy's first class of 30 graduates during a ceremony in Salima on April 17.

"Your army has taken the first vital step to recognize and empower senior noncommissioned officers," Stitzel said. "This first step is done through education and training the dedicated soldiers who we see right here. They will become the backbone of your army. NCOs are the glue that keep a successful military together, and without them, an army cannot excel."



Sgt. Aaron Mkandawire and Sgt. Ronda Huwa, both members of the Malawian Defence Force, attend a class at Africa's first NCO academy in Salima, Malawi. (USARAF photo)

Eager for change

In the past, Malawian officers and NCOs had a functional working relationship, McCarroll said. Over time, however, more officers and fewer NCOs were being educated. Officers began doing everything themselves instead of sharing leadership responsibilities with their NCOs, because they didn't trust them to solve problems or to think critically.

"That's how the trust went out the window," McCarroll said.

Adding to the problem is a lack of policy, McCarroll said. The policies that are in place are often unclear, making them difficult to enforce. Women, for example, have not been in the MDF long – the force only began recruiting them in 1999 – and their roles are not well-defined. Without enforceable policies in place, women face challenges in every direction as they try to do their jobs in a male-dominant culture, McCarroll said.

To help address these issues, the two U.S. Army instructors spent a lot of time talking to the group about equal opportunity, ethics and sexual harassment.

"A lot of them hadn't thought too much about it," Watts said. "It's a big problem – a cultural problem. I think making them aware of it puts it out there and, when they go back to their units, they will be able to educate their subordinates, peers and superiors about what should be allowed and what would be considered sexual harassment. This is not only going to help the leaders, but it will help the units, too, to professionalize."

The students were so hungry for knowledge and so eager for change, McCarroll and Watts said they encountered little opposition as they introduced ideas dramatically different from what the students were used to.

"The lesson of sexual harassment, it's new," said MDF Staff Sgt.

Frank Balasani, a recent graduate of the course. "We don't know that we are doing sexual harassment. But through Sgt. Maj. McCarroll and Sgt. Maj. Watts, this has been an eye-opener, and we are going to utilize this chance so that the other soldiers in the Malawian Defense Force can [also benefit from what we have learned]."

McCarroll and Watts said they witnessed their students embrace the new concepts, putting them into practice right away in the classroom.



Students work together as a team during their studies at the Malawian Defence Force's NCO academy. (USARAF photo)



Sgt. Maj. Jerryn McCarroll, one of U.S. Army Africa's African NCO Education System program managers, teaches a class at the NCO academy in Salima, Malawi. (USARAF photo)

Warrant Officer I Linda Chikondi – whose rank is the MDF's equivalent of a U.S. Army sergeant major – was one of six women attending the course and was the top student in the class. McCarroll and Watts said they were proud to see the students show respect for – and willingness to learn from – Chikondi and the other women in the course.

“We would have group discussions, debates, and when she spoke, even the ones who outranked her, they listened,” McCarroll said. “All the students were sharing knowledge, so when she would say something that made sense, they would stop and think, ‘Ah, OK,’ and that was the end of the debate. ... [The students] want that respect.”

McCarroll said the MDF is now recruiting soldiers with higher education and sending them to schools to help further their learning.

“This academy is the way forward to help the NCOs increase their knowledge,” he said. “It won't be overnight. It will take a while – at least a generation of soldiers – but the commanding general is really invested in seeing it happen. That is his vision, his goal. It's why he wanted this academy.”

The course: Phases 1 and 2

In addition to equal opportunity, ethics and sexual harassment, McCarroll and Watts gave lessons on topics ranging from basic computer skills to logistics, combat-ives and risk management.

“It has been a long journey, and the course has given us a lot of things, a lot of stuff,” Balasani said. “Myself, I have

learned a lot, mainly in the leadership aspect of lessons. We have been doing leadership courses sometime back, but this kind of leadership that Sgts. Maj. Watts and McCarroll have taught us is different from what we know.”

McCarroll and Watts utilized lessons from the U.S. Army's Warrior Leader Course and Advanced Leader Course to begin the curriculum, then moved on to lessons based on the Sergeants Major Course. The entire curriculum emphasized leadership and ethics, McCarroll said. The first half focused on basic leadership, while the second half progressed to lessons on the military decision-making process, critical thinking and mission command.

“The first phase was not easy, but the second phase was harder than the first phase,” Chikondi said. “And those classes of standing up and presenting – we are not used to that. Now we are empowered that we can stand, facing our commanders, and say, ‘I think we can do this, this and that.’ They (McCarroll and Watts) were making each one of us to feel special and each one of us feel that we were important in the class, that we can impart, we can contribute to the change of our MDF. That has been so encouraging. They have been so, so helpful, so patient, and always there for us.”

Inspirational instruction

The course came to fruition through a joint effort between MDF, U.S. Army Africa and the U.S. embassy in Malawi. Odillo and the academy's commandant, MDF

Maj. Gen. Rodrick Chimowa, in addition to occasional guest instructors from U.S. Army Africa, were involved in making the course a success. But McCarroll and Watts were the primary instructors who remained onsite, working with the students each day.

“It wasn’t easy – sleepless nights, a lot of reading, and it required a lot of participation and working as a team,” Chikondi said. “Most of the participants, the knowledge wasn’t that good. We didn’t have much knowledge about PowerPoint, computers and the like. . . . But the first thing they had was patience. They were so patient with us.”

The instructors would stop often to address questions, causing a 2-hour class to often turn into a 3- or 4-hour class, McCarroll said.

“We would rather stop and address the questions to make sure they understood instead of just going on with the class,” he said. “The second portion, when we implemented the content from the Sergeants Major Course, that’s when we had more questions, which we expected. But they were valid questions – questions about mission command, for example, or about warfighting functions, how they work, the design process, how that works. We had to break it all down. For most of them, it took awhile. But before we would move on, we would ask,

‘Does everybody understand?’ If one student would say no, then we would keep going until they got it. That was our goal. We would not proceed to the next lesson until we knew everyone understood.”

“It made for some long days and weekends,” Watts said.

Though differences in accents and in vocabulary added to the challenges for both instructors and students, the main hurdle was a cultural one, McCarroll said. The Malawian NCOs were being asked to change their behavior, their mindset and their group dynamics. Nonetheless, the students expressed their gratitude to their American instructors for understanding those difficulties, and instead of pushing them into these new ways, inspiring them to want it for themselves.

“They noted that . . . in our culture, [it is hard for us to stand] out in a group, because we have been looked down upon as NCOs – that we cannot contribute anything,” Chikondi said. “So with that culture, we are looking down on ourselves. But another thing they have done to us – that we can speak up and contribute in class – was to tell us that *you* can do it. *You* can contribute. There are no stupid questions, and you need to speak out.

“They were there as more than instructors,” Chikondi continued. “They were doing more than they were



Sgt. Maj. Timothy Watts, one of U.S. Army Africa’s African NCO Education System program managers, works with MDF Master Sgt. Larry Mtimaukanena at the NCO academy in Salima, Malawi. Mtimaukanena is now a student of class 65 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas. (USARAF photo)



Seven students were selected from the class by McCarroll and Watts to take the lead as instructors for the next course, which is tentatively set for August or September. From left are Staff Sgt. Frank Balasani, Staff Sgt. Ethel Banda, Warrant Officer I Linda Chikondi and Sgt. Aaron Mkandawire. Also chosen as instructors but not pictured are Warrant Officer II Limbani Chirwa, Staff Sgt. Landirani Jeka and Staff Sgt. Charles Mbewe. (USARAF photo)

expected to do, like understanding each and every one of us, knowing our weaknesses and strengths. Even changing us around in class, putting the right person in the right seat next to the right person so that we could be working as a team, helping each other and pulling each other up. ... They were making sure those classes were hard to inspire us, to give us that enthusiasm, that we could look forward for the next classes. It was hard, but we are elated to go – like, ‘No, we will face it’ – because of their encouragement.”

McCarroll and Watts said their own encouragement came from seeing the marked improvement in each student. Though 85 percent of the students had never used a computer, Watts said, by the end of the course, all of them were able to type essays, create PowerPoint presentations and deliver those presentations to the class with confidence. Seeing their progress was inspiring, Watts said, because he knows the skills they were practicing in class will enable them to brief their superiors and share what they have learned in the course with the rest of the MDF.

“We had one NCO who would not talk,” Watts said. He had had a low education, had never touched a computer before. The first test, he failed both times. But when we put him with the top student, we noticed that he started breaking out and even leading conversations. You could see how he was doing in his courses and see his improvements. He was giving his own PowerPoint presentations. ... When we left, you could see a difference in his confidence and his ability to communicate. As an NCO and a teacher, that was a proud moment. We taught him this and enabled him to share that knowledge.”

Watts said his experience teaching in Malawi emphasized the need for education of enlisted Soldiers in the U.S. Army as well.

“A more educated soldier is definitely better,” he said. “This project in Malawi has allowed us to see the difference – how the more educated soldiers are able to better perform, and how they are able to create solutions for anything that comes up – quickly and more efficiently.”

Chikondi said the confidence the instructors had in the students gave the students confidence in themselves. They learned not only from the lessons given, she said,

but from the way McCarroll and Watts handled the class and the way they conducted themselves.

“They were leading by example, doing what they say,” Chikondi said. “That is so motivating. We have learned a lot from them. We have gained the knowledge that we can go and do what they have done to us – share the knowledge, so we can change and build MDF”

A graduation surprise

The MDF’s promotion policy is among the challenges Malawian NCOs are facing. Many individuals are promoted based on reasons not related to their work, while NCOs who are deploying on peacekeeping operations and leading soldiers are often overlooked. The situation has contributed to the NCO corps’ lack of motivation, Watts said. Why should they invest in their own education and prove themselves worthy of officers’ trust if it will not help them advance in their career? Though students questioned the general commander about the issue when Odillo visited the academy, none of them were prepared for the surprise he delivered during the graduation ceremony.

Odillo asked one of his captains for the names of the top two students – Chikondi and Balasani. McCarroll recalled assuming Odillo was going to merely recognize their efforts.

Odillo called out, “Warrant Officer II Linda Chikondi!”
“Here, sir!”

“Promoted! Warrant Officer II!”

Everyone in the audience jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering.

“It was a really emotional moment for her,” McCarroll said. “But it was a heartfelt moment for me, too, because I knew she had been through a lot of struggles. It meant a lot to her, but it also meant a lot for the other students to see this is the way forward. They are moving forward.”

Watts agreed that the promotions set a precedent that will change the priorities of the MDF’s NCO corps. In that one move, Watts said, Odillo raised the standard for promotions and gave soldiers a reason to want to attend the course. It was a signal to all present – both officers and enlisted – that change is ahead.

What’s next?

Seven students were selected from the class by McCarroll and Watts to take the lead as instructors for the next course, which is tentatively set for August or September. From now on, U.S. Army Africa NCOs will only oversee the course and lend a hand if needed. Once the MDF instructors have successfully taken charge of the academy, Watts said, the plan is for it to then become a regional institution, the place for surrounding nations to send their own NCOs.

Much is expected of these seven, McCarroll and Watts said. Odillo has requested that these chosen students not only take charge of instruction and development of the curriculum at the academy, but that they help write MDF policies – for everything from uniforms to ethics. It is a lot of responsibility, but McCarroll said he knows they now have the knowledge they need and are fully capable of writing the policies for the entire Malawi Army.

Balasani and Chikondi said they and their classmates are excited to share their new knowledge with others. They know this knowledge is the key to the future for the MDF, and are ready to show what they can do, to prove to their officers that they can handle more responsibility.

“I am so excited that I have gained a lot – a lot of knowledge that I am going to use the rest of my life in the MDF, and that I can be able to help others also to impart the knowledge,” Chikondi said. “And I am going to make sure that I make use of each and every thing” ■

Sgt. Maj. Montigo White, U.S. Army Africa Public Affairs, contributed to this story.



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