Sgt. Maj. Fredrick Blackburn, U.S. Army Africa's Military Intelligence Training NCOIC, instructs an all – female class during a basic intelligence course in Senegal, Africa. (USARAF photo)

USARAF Military Intelligence NCOs Help Empower African Partner Nations

By Meghan Portillo

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The military intelligence NCOs of U.S. Army Africa play a key role in the intelligence training of the armies of African partner nations.

Political unrest and economic instability in some regions of Africa have led many nations to request training from the United States. Military intelligence training, in particular, is needed for these countries to strengthen their central governments, said Samuel Bruser, chief of USARAF's Intelligence Security Cooperation. By helping to build armies' intelligence capabilities at the operational and tactical levels, USARAF military intelligence instructors support the command's mission: to protect and defend the security interests of the United States, strengthen African partner nations, defeat violent extremist organizations, and create a secure environment in Africa.

The conditions in many African regions make the missions of USARAF intelligence instructors unique. Traveling in teams of two – usually an NCO and a contractor or an NCO and an officer – they cater lessons to the needs of the country they are visiting, sometimes conducting classes under the shade of a tree and drawing diagrams in the dirt to convey information. Through seminars or small group classes, they demonstrate tools and share tactics, techniques and procedures. They teach African soldiers – both NCOs

Sgt. Maj. Fredrick Blackburn, U.S. Army Africa's Military Intelligence Training NCOIC, instructs an all – female class during a basic intelligence course in Senegal, Africa. (USARAF photo)

and officers – how to use radios, read and interpret maps and photographs, and gather information from individuals. More importantly, African counterparts are taught how to make use of the information once they have it.

Sgt. Maj. Mari Sidwell, USARAF's G-2 sergeant major, explained that even if an army is efficient in collecting data, they need to have policies and procedures in place to use that information to see the big picture.

"If you want to find bad guys by looking at a map and knowing where they live, this is how we look at that map," she said. "This is how we get extra imagery of that area and this is how we determine that the bad guy really is there, is not there or when he will be there so we can go get him. We don't want to try to go get him when he's not at home, then he runs away and you can't find him again. That's tactic, technique and procedure. If you just do little bits and pieces, you still have to know how to pull it together to say, 'OK, the bad guys are here, this is what they are talking about, this is what they are planning to do and go get them here.'"

Integrating NCOs into the world of military intelligence

The operational and tactical level of intelligence is where many partner nations need help the most, and it is an area of specialty for the U.S. Army, Bruser said.

"That's really where the Army's sweet spot is," he said. "Now, who reigns supreme at that tactical level? Well, an officer or two, but mainly it is your enlisted Soldiers and NCOs. And whether or not it is a direct part of our training objectives or engagement objectives to encourage the intel NCOs [in these foreign militaries] to take responsibility, it's something we try to convey at every level of engagement."

USARAF NCOs are almost always included in the two-person instructor teams because they have the expertise and knowledge required and serve as an example. Their presence demonstrates one of the main reasons the U.S. military has seen so much success, Bruser explained.

"Without even overtly saying it, we are encouraging the use and empowerment and delegation of authority and decision-making to NCOs [in other countries], whether they have it innately within their militaries or not," Bruser said.

In most cases, African militaries do not utilize NCOs in the way the U.S. military does, nor do they have intelligence corps or soldiers with an intelligence military occupational specialty. Usually, just before a deployment, a commander will simply designate a random soldier as the intelligence officer for the battalion, Bruser said.

Sometimes, neither this chosen intelligence officer nor any other soldier in the military has received intelligence training before the arrival of USARAF instructors. Because of this, they don't understand how intelligence should feed the military decision-making process, Bruser said.

Sidwell agreed, adding that, in her experience, every African soldier she has encountered is eager, not only for that knowledge, but also for the leadership skills demonstrated by the USARAF NCOs they see in positions of authority.

"When I was in Chad, I saw that they wanted to know, 'How can we use NCOs in our army? How do you make NCOs?' Really I was there teaching them the basic principles of intel, but I [also] showed them, OK, here's how you have to develop and grow a noncommissioned officer corps," Sidwell said. "They were very interested in that because it was something foreign to them that they didn't have. [Officers] themselves are doing those things that NCOs [in the United States] would do, or those officers aren't doing things that NCOs could help them do."

Maj. Devin Deck, one of USARAF's primary intelligence trainers for Africa, witnessed this on a recent mission in Rwanda as well. He had just returned from a 10-week African Contingency Operations Training Assistance event, where he focused on staff training and developing the Rwandan NCO corps. Two groups were training in preparation for United Nations support missions in Darfur, Sudan; one group contained nine NCOs, and the other eight. Training concentrated on integrating these NCOs into S-3 (plans and operations) and S-2 (security) sections.

This integration was a challenge for the USARAF instructors, as some of the Rwandan battalions were completely dependent on a commander for all intelligence concerns, Deck said. This was complicated by the cultural dynamic between the NCOs and officers.

"When you go up and ask [Rwandan NCOs] to do something, they are very afraid of the officers," Deck said. "When U.S. NCOs are put in charge, they take charge. But there, they are very scared to do anything. They are mainly used as a private would be used in the American Army – a go-getter: 'Hey, I need you to draw this chart for us to use.'

"We tried to get away from that. We tried to show those staff officers how to use those NCOs, those sergeants major, as they would use another staff officer. You don't need to have them drawing stuff. You can have a private do that. They need to be doing the supportive thinking and helping out the operation, and I think they are starting to get that idea. It is a very slow process, but I think eventually they will get there."

Though it may take years, or even generations, to implement such a cultural change, USARAF intelligence instructors have witnessed the beginnings of successful NCO integration in several African nations. One of these success stories has been in Botswana, Sidwell said.

A four-year training program to begin a basic tactical intelligence course was concluded last year in

Sgt. Maj. Frederick Blackburn and 1st Lt. Diego Herreno pose with participants in a recent Intelligence Support to Operations seminar in Malawi, Africa. (USARAF photo)

Botswana. In the beginning, NCOs and officers were training together in the same room, and USARAF instructors saw how reluctant the NCOs were to provide input or lead group exercises. Sidwell suspects this was due to both a lack of knowledge and a fear of contributing the knowledge they have. One is a product of the other, she said.

"It's a cultural difference. It's just the way that they operate, and [NCOs] become under-utilized because of that culture," Sidwell said. "But over the course of four years, we saw a very large shift within the Botswana Defense Force's MI ranks. We saw NCOs take over as the instructors, playing a larger role and even training some of the new officers within the intel corps."

The training event ended last year, and now the Botswana Defense Force is continuing the training program on its own. It is an outcome Sidwell says they hope to see repeated with other partner nations.

"We adapted the curriculum to meet their needs, their doctrine … and slowly handed it off," Sidwell said. "We empowered their NCOs to take a much larger role in the training of their own MI officers and enlisted. I would say that is one of our biggest success stories in Africa."

Focusing on *their* army

Sidwell said she asks all of her Soldiers in Africa to keep an open mind in regard to each partner nation's military. USARAF instructors should not be trying to make any military a mirror image of the United States', she said. Rather, they should be teaching methods to help a country manage intelligence based on the structure of that army.

"We have to say, "How does your army do things? How do you employ the intelligence processes within your army?"" Sidwell said. "Whatever country it is that has asked us to come there and teach, we focus on them, how they are structured, how they currently do their intelligence training, their intelligence process – how they collect it and put it together, how they use it. And then we show them how to make it better or how to incorporate some of our methods to make it more efficient."

USARAF instructors said they've often found that a particular army's intelligence process is as basic as one person finding information and telling his boss, who then tells the president. No one else knows. Other times, the information spreads by casual word of mouth until it reaches the right soldiers who can take action.

Because most individuals in these training events have never had contact with someone from the United States, the attitudes and personal conduct of the USARAF instructors has an enormous impact on the effectiveness of the training, Sidwell said. These instructors give soldiers their first impression of the United States. They have it within their power to either reinforce suspicion or develop the building blocks of trust that will foster a positive relationship with that country for decades to come.

"The NCOs and officers who go down there to teach intel are acting as ambassadors – not just for the uniform that we wear, but for the whole United States. And that sets a tone," Sidwell said.

A regional approach

African nations' military intelligence capacities have historically been used for regime protection, Sidwell said.

"A lot of the countries, they look at what the president tells them to look at," she said. "'I want to know what is going on in the north side of the country, the south side. Who is out to assassinate me? Who is spreading rumors?' Things like that. They are focused within their borders."

Problems with this approach arise because violent extremist organizations recognize no borders, Sidwell said. Issues in one country can cause a power vacuum, for example, creating severe instability in surrounding nations.

"Many of these countries see what is happening next door and recognize they don't want to go down that road," Sidwell said. "'How do we get better?'"

Countries have begun showing more interest in regional security peacekeeping, and more militaries are learning to work together, Sidwell said.

"What we are teaching them is how intelligence informs operations, particularly when they are in the deployed United Nations and African Union peacekeeping environment," Bruser said. "In Chad last year, Sgt. Maj. Sidwell did a basic intel preparation of the battlefield [course]. It was a basic intelligence event that focused on the enlisted intel professionals within the Chadian military, because we are seeing increasing violent extremism in Chad. Chad is now going beyond their borders, deploying into Mali and taking a regional view of countering terrorism and violent extremism."

Some countries are taking this new regional approach to an even higher level, Bruser said. He explained that Deck is preparing for a visit to the military intelligence school in Kenya, where they are working to build the East African Center of Excellence for Military Intelligence.

"All of the countries in East Africa will be able to go to this center for training, just like everybody who goes through intelligence training in our Army goes through Fort Huachuca, Ariz. – officers, NCOs, all of us," Sidwell said. "That is what is being developed in Kenya for East Africa."

Most of the countries in East Africa can't afford their own military intelligence training. For the soldiers who are able to attend training sessions with USARAF instructors, it is the chance of a lifetime. A regional center of excellence would create huge opportunities for the nations who need it the most, Bruser said. It would be

a leap toward accomplishing the USARAF mission of helping Africans to solve African problems.

USARAF is now engaging in Africa at a level unprecedented in U.S. military history, Sidwell said. Military intelligence instructors deployed to 74 training events in fiscal year 2014, up from 46 in the previous year. More than ever before, USARAF NCOs are able to pass on their knowledge – not only to young Soldiers, but to entire armies – as they work to establish a secure environment in Africa, Sidwell said.

"If you like to travel and you want to see Africa, this is the duty assignment to have," she said. "You will engage with many different peoples, many different cultures. They are ready for that knowledge – not so much the western knowledge but the knowledge that you have, the leadership skills, the experience. How do you problem solve? How would you solve this situation? How would you go about doing this? Noncommissioned officers are known for getting missions accomplished with limited resources. These partner armies all live with limited resources. So how do you go about helping them figure out how to solve their problems? Come over here, go down on the continent and teach what you know to an army that is thirsty for it." ■

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