



Armed Forces of Liberia 1st Sgt. Debbie Cooper proved to her male soldiers that she can lead. Now, she oversees a headquarters company at Edward Binyah Kesselly barracks near Monrovia, Liberia. (IMCOM photo by Rick Scavetta)

# Mentoring in Liberia Leads to Respect for Female NCOs

*By Rick Scavetta*

Installation Management Command

**M**ONROVIA, Liberia — When Sgt. 1st Class Shawnte Reynolds first walked down the dusty lanes at Edward Binyah Kesselly barracks, Liberian soldiers offered only stares and double-takes.

Amid a four-month tour mentoring the Armed Forces of Liberia, Reynolds, 39, of Flint, Mich., has returned to soldiering basics, with hopes of having male AFL troops understand her role as senior noncommissioned officer — and more importantly, have them respect women serving among their own ranks.

An administration NCO from U.S. Africa Command, Reynolds is the first female Soldier to take part in the Liberia Security Sector Reform program, a U.S. State Department-led effort to help build leadership capacity within Liberia's military — a force recently reestablished after years of civil war.

“My being here shows the men in the AFL that females are senior NCOs and how I understand leadership,” Reynolds said. “They now see that I have a wealth of knowledge to share.”

Sometimes Reynolds shares advice for routine challenges any army might face; accountability, pay issues, family problems and the need for equipment and food.

“This is just the beginning,” Reynolds said, during an interview in late-April. “But every small step means something.”

Still, male soldiers among Liberia's ranks are slowly adjusting to women in leadership roles. Only a handful of Liberian women serve in the AFL. Most of the women work in administration, while others are mechanics or musicians. So far, only two Liberian women serve as NCOs.



Sgt. 1st Class Shawnte Reynolds helps soldiers from the Armed Forces of Liberia to understand women holding leadership roles in the military during a break in training recently at Edward Binyah Kesselly barrack near Monrovia, Liberia. (IMCOM photo by Rick Scavetta)

Part of the problem, Reynolds found, was that new female soldiers lacked discipline and pride. Reynolds worked with female AFL soldiers to make sure the women kept their appearance and uniforms neat. She stressed the importance for them to adhere to military schedules and complete their assigned tasks.

“The females now understand that they have to pull their own weight,” Reynolds said. “By keeping their end of the bargain, they gain the respect they deserve.”

Another part of the problem was cultural, Reynolds said. The men in the Army are not accustomed to women being in charge. To help, Reynolds spends time with them, sharing ideas from her nearly two decades of experience in the U.S. military.

“Now, it doesn’t matter that I’m female. They know I bring experience to the table and how I can help,” Reynolds said. “Now, I walk down the road and they see me as an NCO.” ■

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