



Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Prattis, right, a squad leader with B Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, communicates via radio with his platoon sergeant during a three-day joint situational training exercise with South African Defense Forces, part of Exercise Shared Accord 2013. As the regionally aligned force supporting U.S. Army Africa, the 1st Infantry Division participated in the biennial training exercise to promote regional relationships, increase capacity and further cross-training and interoperability. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Tamika Dillard)

USARAF G-6 NCOs demonstrate leadership, planning skills to forces across Africa

By Meghan Portillo

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The NCOs of U.S. Army Africa's G-6 directorate adapt to many challenges as they work alongside African partner nations to provide communication support for operations and exercises in areas with few resources.

As USARAF's only signal asset, the G-6 assumes the regular duties of ensuring USARAF headquarters in Vicenza, Italy, has Internet and phone service and of troubleshooting printers, computers and mobile devices. The approximately 50 personnel are spread thin, however, as they also provide communication support during exercises and other missions on the African continent.

"Fifty-one people trying to support all of the communication assets on the African continent can be very challenging at times," said Sgt. Maj. Anthony Harris

Sr., USARAF's G-6 sergeant major. "There are a lot of exercises and not enough people. I do not have regionally aligned forces to support USARAF fully. So that's why you see [individuals and teams of two] going to different exercises, different operations. Depending on what is going on on the continent, somebody is going to say, 'Hey, I need radio.' 'Hey, I need Internet.'"

More than 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa's 54 nations, and each country regulates its telecommunication differently. This leads to unique challenges when USARAF brings nations together for regional exercises.

"I rely on my NCOs so heavily," Harris said. "They are smart enough to be able to pick up and adapt. They are coming here and learning on the fly, which is a good thing. They are learning two and three different military

occupational specialties. I'm training (25V) combat camera guys to be 25B IT specialists. So if they go down to the continent, they can take pictures, and they can also work on your network.

"These guys are worn out. I know that. I depend on them to go [to Africa] because they are intelligent and they can do the job. When they get down there, they are professional. I trust them."

Bringing nations together

Each year, USARAF coordinates an exercise in each of the four regions of Africa as part of the "Accord" series. The exercises are intended to enhance African forces' abilities to conduct operations on their own, increasing stability and security in each region.

As a G-6 exercise planner, Master Sgt. Christopher Tunison works with the G-3/5/7 operations, plans and training directorate to arrange communication support for each exercise. He is usually deployed a week or two out of every month to attend planning events.

"Each participating country will send representatives to the planning events," Tunison said. "We will figure out what the objectives are for the exercise this year, and the communications planners from each of those countries will sit down [often with a translator] and figure out how we are all going to talk, collectively, at the exercise."

Tunison said the most difficult aspect of the planning process is keeping participating countries from relying too heavily on the U.S. Army for technology and communication support, and instead getting each country to provide as much assistance as they are able to support the exercise.

"For instance, Uganda is quite advanced in regard to communication technology," Tunison said. "But then, countries like Senegal or Malawi are further behind. So, it creates a challenge: How do we get them to work with us without us doing everything? We want them to develop their own capabilities instead of leaning on us."

Sgt. Markus Dickinson, a USARAF information systems technician, said that USARAF's goal of helping African countries build their own network capabilities is difficult when countries see that it is often easier to obtain equipment such as computers, radios and satellite terminals from the United States than to provide it themselves.

"Some countries are very poor and don't have a large budget," Dickinson said. "So when you ask them to bring 15 radios to an exercise, that might be everything that they have available."

Once the planning team has agreed on the contributions from each country, the USARAF G-6 makes arrangements to provide whatever else is needed to support communication during the exercise.

Tunison said they know, however, to always be prepared for changes. If a country should pull out of an ex-

ercise at the last minute, USARAF must fill the gap and compensate for the services or equipment that country would have provided.

"Things on the African continent turn on a dime," Dickinson said. "There are so many different countries, and every region has something that could boil over at any minute. We lost a couple of countries right before the last Eastern Accord exercise – South Sudan wasn't able to participate because of political sensitivities in Kenya, for example. When that happens, you just have to roll with the punches."

Exemplary leadership

Though USARAF NCOs are usually the only enlisted personnel amongst many officers at a planning event, they display leadership skills and teach others how to prepare for an exercise just the same. The high-ranking officers of partner nations who join them at the table sometimes lack planning skills common to American NCOs and often do not have the authority to make decisions or approve their country's provision of resources or equipment, Tunison said.

"The biggest difficulty we notice when we go to these planning events is their lack of planning ability," Tunison said. "So, we are trying to help them expand on that capability. Granted, they are very senior-level officers, but ... we try to teach them how to plan efficiently, how to develop their own standard operating procedures, how to run their S-6, and how to take different MOSs, balance them and leverage them against specific equipment"

"When these officers see our NCOs go to the continent and actually show them — on an NCO level and not an officer level — how to plan, it is amazing to them," Harris said. "In the past, they were taught that officers are at the top and NCOs are the worker bees. Not in this case; not in today's Army. In today's Army, we have qualified, educated NCOs who can perform at any level."

Because the end goal is for African nations to take over the planning, execution and expense of these exercises, Tunison said he always appoints an officer from another country to take the lead. Teaching others to lead while guiding from the sidelines is a fine art every NCO needs to work on, he said.

"That can be a challenge even in a roomful of U.S. Soldiers," he said. "Here, we are a sergeant first class in a roomful of majors and lieutenant colonels, and we have to use a lot of etiquette to [accomplish our objectives]. We are dealing with varying countries, and they all have different views as far as protocol and the relationship between NCOs and officers."

It is encouraging to see relationships build and observe the progress being made, said Sgt. 1st Class Jesus Ramirez, a G-6 exercise planner.

"For right now, we are hoping some of these countries will start taking the lead in the planning events, and

we have started to see a little bit of that,” Ramirez said. “Some of these countries are surprising us. By the second planning event, you can see some of the guys starting to take the lead, and that’s what we want to see.”

Adapting to change with limited resources

Once an exercise is underway, Dickinson and others supporting the operation face their own challenges. Dickinson explained that, in addition to fixing computers and making sure everyone at the exercise is able to print, it is his responsibility to set up and maintain the portable system that converts a country’s available commercial Internet into the secure connections commanders need to do their jobs.

“We put a lot of people on these networks and try to squeeze a lot of systems onto these little mobile units,” Dickinson said. “They are not as fast as what the U.S. Soldiers are used to. But we just have to adjust; get used to it. There are a lot of people trying to squeeze onto this one little satellite dish.”

Sgt. 1st Class Jesus Ramirez, a G-6 exercise planner, explained that most African forces operate on high-frequency radio networks, and satellite access is usually not available for an exercise unless it is provided by the United States.

“Even the [American] regionally aligned forces often have this mentality that, when they go down to

Africa, it’s going to be like Afghanistan or Iraq again, and that those same [high-speed] resources will be available to them,” Ramirez said. “They’re surprised when they come here, and we are operating 20 to 30 people off [one access point] – a portable satellite that fits on about half a pallet and is meant to support about half of what we put on it.”

But learning to do more with less has made them better NCOs, Ramirez said. They have had to become better planners and be more adaptable to change. When they are faced with stumbling blocks, they must be creative to find a solution, he said.

“You have to stay diverse,” Tunison said. “I mean, it’s the biggest key to being a noncommissioned officer in today’s Army. If you are not diverse, if you are not adapting, we have no need for you in the Army today.”

Dickinson agreed, adding that NCOs should never be afraid of taking on a role that is outside of their comfort zone.

“The [communication] system I went to support, I had never even heard of it before. I had to look it up,” Dickinson said. “They say, ‘You are going to support that.’ I say, ‘Roger.’ It’s not, ‘Oh, there is someone else that may be better for this.’ You say, ‘OK, tell me where I need to go. I’ll figure it out, and I’ll be ready when the time comes.’” ■



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