



A WHCA NCO monitors sound equipment during an event. WHCA Visual Information Command personnel are responsible for all video and sound during events featuring the president, vice president and first lady. (Photo courtesy of WHCA)

# NCOs Integral To Enabling The President To Communicate Anytime, Anywhere

*By Michael L. Lewis — NCO Journal*

**C**lad in smart suits, they blend into the bevy of staff members, reporters and security personnel who surround the president of the United States during his day-to-day activities. Yet it is this unique uniform that camouflages the service members working in the White House Communications Agency, whose no-fail mission is to enable the nation's top leader to communicate with the government, military and world, whether that be in the Oval Office or on the other side of the globe.

The Soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines of WHCA, a joint unit headquartered at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, D.C., are tasked with providing everything the president, vice president and first lady need to

deliver their message anywhere at any time — whether it be the lectern, lighting, TelePrompTer and sound needed for a Rose Garden news conference; live video for the world's press from Air Force One while flying over the Pacific; or the operators who answer calls from citizens and foreign leaders alike in the White House.

Integral to WHCA's mission are its noncommissioned officers and petty officers, all of whom have responsibilities that exceed those of their peers elsewhere in the military, said Command Sgt. Maj. Nathaniel Jett, the agency's command sergeant major.

"When someone asks what NCOs do in this organization, I only have to use one example," he said. "Whenever you see the vice president of the United States on the road,

every support person — with the exception of his military aide — they are all enlisted personnel who are setting him up for success out there. This is what our noncommissioned officer Soldiers, sailors and airmen are doing for the No. 2 guy in the free world. His presidential communications, all his audio and visual support, the lectern you see him stand behind, that's all the work of enlisted behind the scenes making that happen.”

“NCOs, as we know, are the backbone of the Army, and they're definitely the backbone of this agency,” said Staff Sgt. Andrew Lewis, a personnel security NCO in the agency's J-2 security directorate. “NCOs run the vice presidential communications program in its entirety, but NCOs in every corner of this agency are making the mission happen, and that impact is monumental.

The president can't communicate to the world without the agency providing him the means to do that, and noncommissioned officers at WHCA make that happen. Nowhere else in your career are you able to say the stakes are this high. It takes a lot of responsibility, but that's something you already carry with you as an NCO.”

### The 'Voice Of The President'

As their motto states, personnel at WHCA collectively serve as the “voice of the president.” But the agency's name is somewhat misleading, said Jett, who like all of his predecessors spent his career in the Signal Corps.



President Barack Obama talks on the phone in the Oval Office on Feb. 5. The mission of the White House Communications Agency is to provide the president with the same ability to communicate as in the Oval Office no matter where he travels. (White House photo by Pete Souza)

“People see ‘White House Communications’ in our name, but it's not just [signal] people,” he said. “I have transporters, logisticians, carpenters, sheet metal workers, multimedia specialists, and military intelligence and finance leaders, in addition to my signal leaders. We may be a ‘communications’ agency, but we do so much more.”

The startling diversity is a necessity for an organization that must do almost everything in-house for both security and quality reasons, Jett explained. Service members at WHCA build every presidential podium, outfit and man every motorcade communication vehicle, operate the president's TelePrompTer, and transport the necessary equipment wherever its needed worldwide.

“Every location the president goes to — even if it's here in D.C. — we have to provide the same communication capabilities as in the White House. That's our job,” Jett said. “Wherever the boss goes, it's our job to make sure that whatever he can do in downtown Washington, D.C., he can do in Siberia, if he goes there.”

As a result, the majority of WHCA's personnel are assigned as needed to ad hoc travel teams that are deployed whenever one of the three principals — the president, vice president or first lady — is at an event away from the White House. The teams are responsible for determining everything that is required — phone, fax, Internet and



A WHCA NCO checks a camera during a White House-sponsored event. (Photo courtesy of WHCA)





A WHCA NCO, center, carries camera equipment during an event at the White House. (Photo courtesy of WHCA)

satellite links; computers, printers and copiers; cameras, microphones, lights and transmission equipment; and the iconic presidential podiums — then transporting it to the site, setting everything up, executing during the event, taking everything down, then resetting for the next trip. It makes for a constant rhythm of travel, often with little to no advance notice, and with the expectation of nothing less than perfection.

“That we can support the leader of the greatest nation in the world with no-mistake, no-fail missions anywhere, any time, that says a lot about our corps of noncommissioned officers,” said Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Bray, the senior enlisted advisor of WHCA’s Visual Information Command, which is responsible for teams’ audio, visual and multimedia support. “The tempo here is not like in other units where you deploy, you come back and you reset. The tempo here is fast-paced. At any time, I can get a phone call that says, ‘I need you to go to such-and-such place,’ and you might not even get a day’s notice. During campaign season, we’re traveling constantly. It’s a lot of hard work and 16-hour days.”

But it’s not the glamorous life some see it as, Jett said.

“This job is not the designer-suit, caviar-eating, five-star-hotel life everybody thinks it is,” Jett said.

“Forget the five-star hotel; you may not even see the hotel,” Bray said. “We’re in the business of customer service, and our customer is the president of the United States.

We’re not going to stop working until we’re at that presidential level of quality.”

### Training For Perfection

Though WHCA recruits the cream of the military crop, once service members arrive, they must enter the agency’s internal academy to learn from square one how to do their specific job, no matter their rank.

“We’re going to train you to do those things, and we’re going to train you to do them well,” Lewis said. “It’s a world-class faculty. They’ve been traveling for years with the president and vice president. Many of them can draw from their years in the (President Bill) Clinton administration (1993-2001), so they have been around for a while and have been doing a good job for a long time.”

The academy integrates protocol instruction with multidisciplinary technical instruction, Bray said.

“In the Visual Information Command, we have videographers, photographers and audio-visual technicians working hand-in-hand with each principal, making sure they’re looking good, they’re sounding good, and that everything is presidential quality,” Bray said. “Our training academy teaches you how to do that. So even if you have no knowledge of audio-visual things, they teach you the basics all the way to advanced audio, advanced lighting techniques.



A WHCA NCO monitors communication equipment during a presidential event. WHCA personnel wear business attire as their uniform when traveling. (Photo courtesy of WHCA)



President Obama concludes an address in Cairo, Egypt, in June 2009. No matter the locale, WHCA personnel are in charge of lights, podiums, TelePrompTers, videography and sound at all presidential events. (White House photo by Chuck Kennedy)

“At the apprentice level, you’re learning how we conduct business, the basic policies and procedures. You’ve got to know the policies and procedures before you go out there and do an event,” Bray said. “At the technician level, that’s when you start focusing more on the rule of thirds, how many foot-candles (of light) will look good with this type of camera. Once you’ve perfected that, you’re ready to lead your own site, in terms of audio and visual. That means that person has knowledge of every key element that is supporting the president, whether that is video, photo, audio or providing feeds to the press.”

The WHCA academy’s training programs are so comprehensive, a service member from any military occupational specialty may volunteer to become an affiliate in an unrelated specialty. That allows great flexibility in filling slots for travel teams, Jett said.

“You may start in a fixed (Washington-based) mission, like in the J-1 (personnel directorate). But you might be trained so that you can go set up an airport site or assist with the hotel operation,” Jett said. “Then, when campaign season rolls around again and we are running thin on people, we’ll ask the J-1 if they can spare anybody, and we’ll send them out on the road to help with communications.”

Because leadership within each team is dependent on technical expertise learned in the academy and on-the-

job, often an experienced junior NCO will be directing newer senior NCOs at an event site, Lewis said.

“For example, I jumped in on a trip in Iowa as an E-6, and I had an E-4 managing me, because he knew the mission and had been traveling quite a bit; he knew the technology,” Lewis said. “Despite me being an E-6 and him being an E-4, I still fell in line and he told me what he needed me to do.”

“But even if we’re not in charge, we senior enlisted are still there coaching and mentoring to ensure not just their technical proficiency, but also that they are reaching their military goals,” Bray said. “It’s not like an E-6 is telling an E-8 to run around or do push-ups.”

### **Recruiting The Best, And Getting Them Vetted**

Because of their mission, every WHCA service member works with people at the highest levels of government every day. And sometimes, that means working with the president, Jett said.

“Case in point, a week before last year’s State of the Union address, before the president spoke in front of Congress, one of my young E-5s was downtown at the White House with the president looking over his shoulder,” Jett said. “The E-5 had the president’s speech on his laptop because he was going to be controlling the Tele-



Prompter at the State of the Union. The president was asking him to make last-minute changes to the text here and there, and this is an E-5 doing this. That's the level of maturity you have to have to join this organization."

Presidential quality equates to near perfection, Lewis said, and potential candidates have to be able to handle that demanding responsibility.

"When you come here to work, you are being depended on. Everyone's role here is extremely significant," he said. "Without each person doing their job well and doing it to the fullest extent they are able to, the organization won't function well. That's why we put such scrutiny on our applicants.

"We don't have the option of failure," Lewis said. "You can never use the excuse that, 'Oh, it just didn't work out,' or that you were waiting on somebody else, or that there's no way to do it. None of those are options. We've got to get done what we're asked to do, and we can't fail when doing it. Any failures on the part of our agency would have major implications on the office of the president, and we don't need that to happen at all."

"It's a very thorough vetting process," Lewis said. "But the same things that would make you a solid NCO in the regular Army will make you meet our security requirements. The common pitfalls: You get disqualified outright for a lot of personnel issues — height and weight failures, PT failures, bad or even average evaluations. Other than personnel issues, bad credit is probably our No. 1 disqualifier. We want to make sure that you are able to meet your financial obligations — that you're not living paycheck-to-paycheck — that you're trustworthy."

"You'd be amazed at how many young people have no clue that they have bad credit until we go digging," Jett said. "But that's not to say that if you have bad credit now, you can't come back and reapply after taking the steps needed to clean it up."

Why would bad finances preclude a job at WHCA? Jett said it speaks to applicants' overall management skills.

"Do you know how to manage your finances properly? We don't have time to take the risk and assume that you'll figure it out. We just don't have that luxury," he said. "I don't need somebody here out on the road — potentially controlling the TelePrompter of the president of the United States — who is worrying about all the bills they have. I can't have you distracted like that. I need you to be focused on what's in front of you."

But Lewis cautioned that coming to work at WHCA is not as hard as some imagine.

"People tend to think it's impossible to get an assignment here. But that's just a complete misconception," he said. "Normal military folks apply and get jobs here. Don't disqualify yourself. Apply. We recruit aggressively. If you've done decent work for the military, have kept in line, are meeting your financial obligations and aren't a security threat, we'll get you cleared."

The benefits of working at WHCA persist long after one's assignment there is complete, Lewis said.

"I think working here helps you develop the ability to operate professionally within an environment where the stakes are very high and there's a lot expected of you," he said. "Doing your job well here enables the president of the United States, the leader of the free world, to communicate with the world and, thereby, allows the executive branch of our federal government to function.

Knowing your actions allow that to happen, I think, really sets you up to be professional, and you'll carry that for the rest of your military career.

"It shapes you, really, into a more mature and more experienced NCO, and you gain this breadth of knowledge not only of how you operate and do your job, but also the whole strategic picture, the big picture, and how you fit into it," Lewis said. "You'll see how the executive branch works. You'll see how the Department of Defense fits into that, how the Army fits within that and how you fit within the Army." ■



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