



Staff Sgt. Robert Hogeland (center), the clinical operations NCO in charge at U.S. Army South's medical directorate, demonstrates various ways to stabilize a fractured ankle to members of the Uruguayan military during a tactical Combat Lifesaver Course subject-matter expert exchange in September 2014 outside of Montevideo, Uruguay. (Photo by Robert Ramon)

NCOs help build true partnerships in Central, South America and Caribbean

By Michael L. Lewis — NCO Journal

The geography and people within the area of responsibility of U.S. Army South are wholly different than what most U.S. NCOs have experienced in their careers. Similarly different are the ways the command makes use of NCOs' core skills of leading, caring, training and maintaining while promoting the command's motto, "*Juntos Podemos! — Together We Can!*"

"The opportunity for the NCOs of Army South is that we get to help our partner nations develop their NCO corps," said Command Sgt. Maj. Dennis Zavodsky, the command sergeant major of U.S. Army South. "That falls in line with the [Army chief of staff's] priority of being a globally responsive and regionally

engaged Army. The good news is there's a lot of work to be done, so there's a lot of opportunity."

Building bridges

U.S. Army South, headquartered at Joint Base San Antonio–Fort Sam Houston, Texas, is the Army service component command of U.S. Southern Command. It encompasses everything from Cuba and Guatemala to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of Argentina and Chile — 31 countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Though many NCOs have developed working relationships and strong bonds with soldiers from



other countries they have fought alongside in Iraq or Afghanistan, Army South's main work of international bridge-building is more nuanced, Zavodsky said.

"We try to leverage the regional influencers," he said. "For example, some ask why we work so closely with Colombia. It's because Colombia brings other nations to its schools. With Colombia, we're almost at the point where we are with the United Kingdom. We have so many shared interests and institutional familiarity, it's truly two partners working together.

"The opposite side of the spectrum would be some of the Central American armies that really need — from A to Z — institutions established," Zavodsky said. "They need to gain authorities, they need pay reform — everything you can think of an NCO corps possibly needing, they need."

Much of what Army South does is smaller and more localized. A good example are the components of "Beyond the Horizon," ARSOUTH's signature exercise, said Sgt. 1st Class John Gurisko, the humanitarian and civic assistance NCO in charge of the command's G-3 exercises directorate.

"We begin planning for them about 15 months out," he said. "For each exercise, it usually consists of four engineer projects that help build either a clinic or a school, and four medical exercises, where National Guard units from different states go down there and help provide medical aid, which can include optometry and general health checkups."

Staff Sgt. Jesus Rivera-Garcia (far right), a worksite safety noncommissioned officer with the 284th Engineer Company, 961st Engineer Battalion, 420th Engineer Brigade, U.S. Army Reserve, inspects a forklift load as members of the unit begin the process of unloading supplies to build a bathroom for a school during the U.S. Army South-organized Beyond the Horizon exercise in April 2013 at Achote, Panama. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Walter van Ochten)

Though the entire exercise may last two months, Guard and Reserve units rotate in for two-week stretches, which fulfill their annual training requirement and make use of their civilian job skills, Gurisko said.

"We plan everything, including how they're getting down there and making sure they have the required training and certifications," he said.

NCOs are also integral to the planning process for the engineering projects, said Sgt. Maj. Byron Ross, the sergeant major of the Army South Assistant Chief of Staff Engineer Directorate.

"Whatever construction is agreed upon, our directorate's construction operations sergeants will look at the feasibility," he said. "They are the people who actually manage the planning and construction for whatever National Guard unit is identified [to actually construct the project]. They are the quality control, and the planning aspect of it is actually bigger than the actual execution."

Such a project management role is not common for engineer NCOs in regular units, Ross said. So, engineer construction operation NCOs at Army South are being

trained to become project management professionals, a civilian certification that is rare among NCOs serving in vertical construction units throughout the Army.

“This higher level of project management certification gives them the skills and knowledge of professional licensed construction managers, so that NCOs can be more effective in managing at a high rate of efficiency and manage more projects,” Ross said. “In combat heavy vertical construction units, NCOs are only required to know project management based on the Army’s military doctrine, which is not as robust as professionally licensed construction managers. Becoming a project management professional takes it far beyond basic project management skills, so NCOs have the skills to manage more effectively and provide quality control and quality assurance of several schools, hospital clinics, latrines and other facilities. Project management professional skills amplify and focus on the effectiveness of the NCO as the manager, the skill or proficiency of the constructors and stakeholder’s interest. In a combat heavy vertical construction unit, NCOs usually don’t get into the stakeholder’s interest or project funding and programming, because that process is not normally at the NCO level. But here, we bring NCOs to that next level.”

Doing a lot with little

Aside from Beyond the Horizon, ARSOUTH’s bread-and-butter work involves facilitating small teams of soldiers as they train partner nation troops, Zavodsky said.

“We can do a lot with a little,” he said. “Our deployments might be from three to seven people. We’re not sending battalions to do operations somewhere.”

Staff Sgt. Robert Hogeland, the clinical operations NCOIC in Army South’s medical directorate, was part of a small team sent to Uruguay in September.

“We went down there to conduct a [Combat Life Saver] class for their medics and their infantrymen, so they will have more advanced knowledge of how to take care of casualties,” he said. “We share a lot of the techniques we’ve learned from being in war over the years. Some of it doesn’t apply exactly, because they’re not at war, they’re dealing with cartels. But the training is good, and it’s relevant.”

Yet, not just any U.S. NCO is ready to train partner nations’ soldiers, Zavodsky said.

“For a U.S. NCO to be successful here, first of all, you have to be competent in your own field,” he said. “Before you can show anybody

what right looks like, you first of all have to be right. There’s a big difference between being able to execute a task and having the confidence level needed to be able to teach a task. That’s a higher level of competence where you understand it clearly enough that you can communicate it, tell people reasons why, give pros and cons, and reach into your bag of [tasks, techniques and procedures] and say, “These are ways I’ve done this, and this is what may work for you.”

Many U.S. NCOs may not realize the disparities in motivations for being an NCO and education levels, Zavodsky said.

Hogeland said such challenges have made him a better trainer.

“I’m really good at hands-on [training]. All I have to do is show them,” he said. “What I’ve noticed is that when I’d get frustrated, I’d want to yell at them. But since I don’t speak Spanish, I learned to just be patient, and just show them over and over again; I take my time. Trust me, if I could speak Spanish, I’d probably be yelling at some of them. But I’ve learned to just be calm, and the teaching comes much better. They become confident, because they’re not afraid to mess up in the class. You have to mess up to learn what the right thing is.”

U.S. NCOs are more than just trainers, Zavodsky said. They act as ambassadors for both the United States and a professional noncommissioned officer corps.

“They ask for us because of our credentials and our capabilities, but we also recognize that we are partners,” he said.

Army South NCOs have to be able to act independently with far less supervision than is the norm, Zavodsky said.



Sgt. Maj. Jorge Lopez (right), the sergeant major of U.S. Army South’s medical directorate, conducts a presentation to members of the Uruguayan military during a subject-matter expert exchange in September 2014 in Uruguay. (Photo by Robert Ramon)

“We may need two NCOs to go down to Peru, and you might be there for six months,” he said. “You’re going to be at this school, and you’ll be checked on once in a while by the embassy staff. But other than that, you’ll be on your own. And most of our NCOs love it, because they say it gives them the chance to prove that they can really do it. But you have to enter with a certain level of maturity to understand that you’re representing so much more than yourself at that point.”

Yet if they remain open, adaptive and receptive, U.S.

NCOs can benefit greatly from the fruits of a true partnership relationship, Hogeland said.

“We learn from them, too,” he said. “A lot of their environment is jungle, and we haven’t dealt with a lot of jungle since Vietnam. So, we pull a lot of information from them about jungle medicine and how they improvise, because they improvise everything; they don’t have as advanced equipment as we do. It’s very interesting to see what they’ve come up with. They have some very good ideas that are very innovative. And that’s the exchange we get.” ■



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