



NCOS Take Over THAAD Instruction At New Fort Sill Facility

By Clifford Kyle Jones — NCO Journal

The \$27 million Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Instructional Facility includes almost 100,000 square feet of learning and training space, state-of-the-art classroom equipment, revolutionary and highly classified lab systems, and of course working examples of one of the most advanced missile defense systems in the world. But it's the facility's NCOs who make the instruction work.

The Lt. Gen. C.J. LeVan THAAD Instructional Facility opened in January at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. It took about two years to build, and cadre worked on the instructional elements for months in advance of the opening. Before the schoolhouse began enrolling students, THAAD training was conducted largely by civilian contractors or on the job with a THAAD battery.

"I learned a lot from the civilians. Don't get me wrong," said Sgt. 1st Class Benson Gatchalian, the NCO in charge at the facility. "But the teaching style we have, that's the difference."

Now, NCOs and civilians share instructional duties, and Gatchalian and the other members of his cadre take pride in their implementation of the Army Learning Model 2015, which is intended to develop adaptive Soldiers.

Sgt. 1st Class Penieli Vaisagote says the ALM15 methods that he and the facility's other instructors use make lessons more student-centric and consist of regular exposure to operational environments rather than just one-way, teacher-to-student classroom instruction.

"It's more students teaching themselves, and we're here as instructors to facilitate that process," Vaisagote said. "We're training critical thinkers here, not just Soldiers."

THAAD operators are taken from the Patriot Air and Missile Defense System military occupational specialties under air defense artillery and are given a skill identifier once their training is completed. The Army has five THAAD batteries, and two more have been approved by the Army and the Missile Defense Agency, which coordinates the nation's missile defenses. Compare that with the Army's more than 15 Patriot battalions, each made up of six to eight batteries, and it begins to make sense that the THAAD operators call themselves "the THAAD elite."

"ADA is a small piece of the pie as far as the Army goes," Gatchalian said. "And then you have people taken from [the Patriot MOS's] who are getting cut into



A THAAD interceptor is launched during the system's first operational test Oct. 5, 2011, at the Pacific Missile Range Facility, in Kauai, Hawaii. The THAAD system engaged and simultaneously intercepted two ballistic missile targets. (Photo courtesy of the Missile Defense Agency.)

the nature of how we deploy and how we employ. So having great NCOs? You can't do it without them."

A THAAD battery has been deployed to Guam since April 2013 after North Korea issued threats against the island, which is an unincorporated area of the United States. That assignment was made permanent this summer.

Eventually, the THAAD Instructional Facility is expected to train an equal number of recent graduates from Advanced Individual Training and more experienced Soldiers pulled from the operational Army. In its first year, however, the vast majority, about 80 percent, of the facility's students have been Soldiers transitioning right out of AIT, Fallin and Gatchalian estimate. That makes the use of NCOs in the instructing ranks even more important.

Fallin says many of the THAAD students' only experience with NCOs is as "the guy who yells at me" at Basic Combat Training or AIT.

"Well, here, it gives us an opportunity to say, 'No, those are the people who counsel you, who mentor you, who can share their experiences to give you different ways to think,'" he said. "That, I think, is one of the key things that we're able to do by having NCOs as part of our instruction: Take that next step. Instead of just rote learning, it's understanding why."

THAAD. So we're the 1 percent of the 1 percent."

THAAD batteries are a small, but increasingly important, piece of the Army and MDA's overall defense strategy, said Chief Warrant Officer 4 John Fallin, who leads the THAAD Instructional Facility. And "THAAD elite" is more than a slogan, he said. It's a requirement.

"You need the talent, because the way we're organized and the missions we're called upon to do are less forgiving than in a normal Patriot unit," he said.

A Patriot battalion, with its at least four batteries plus a Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, will have Soldiers who are cross-trained and can help one another out.

"Whereas these (THAAD) batteries are going to go out alone and unafraid, as they are in Guam, and you have to have a different type of character," Fallin said. "A more mature, a more independent, critical-thinking type Soldier than you need in a Patriot unit, just because of



Sgt. 1st Class Benson Gatchalian raises the launcher of a THAAD unit outside the THAAD Instructional Facility as Sgt. 1st Class Penieli Vaisagote monitors. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Staff Sgt. Megan Mascio recently joined the THAAD Instructional Facility after being part of a THAAD battery based at Fort Bliss, Texas, the former home of ADA before it moved to Fort Sill and still the home station of all the existing THAAD batteries.

She said, “Having the green-suiters in the schoolhouse — teaching, mentoring — it’s setting the line units up for success, because they’re getting molded Soldiers.”

Mascio said the THAAD training taking place at the facility is “way better” than the training she initially received on the THAAD. When she talks about her training on the THAAD, she describes a one-way teaching model and limited training opportunities.

“We would sit there and stare at the screen all day,” she said. The relatively few number of training stations meant only two or three crews could participate at a time, so there was a lot of downtime.

Each of the THAAD Instructional Facility’s eight labs are designed to open like clamshells, so dozens of students can each participate and listen to instruction at the same time. It also ensures every student’s experience is the same. Mascio says she and her classmates often felt as if they were missing something when they weren’t part of the crew participating in lab activities.

Staff Sgt. Bethany Ryno, another recent addition to the instructing staff at the facility, said the operational and recent military experience that NCOs bring to the classrooms and labs make them invaluable to effective Soldier training.

Operational experience, in particular, has “brought a lot of good advice of what’s going on down on the line units, compared with what they’re teaching” outside the facility.



THAAD Instructional Facility instructor Staff Sgt. Megan Mascio leads Pvt. 1st Class Bryan Sullivan through an exercise of powering up and powering down. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)



THAAD Instruction

For instance, she said, in previous training, when Soldiers were learning to power-up and power-down in the Radar Training Lab, they weren’t being instructed to turn off every circuit breaker.

Ryno said, “Now with operational experience being here, knowing that I’ve been on a line and I’ve done it by the TC (training circular), ... we do it a specific way and we actually shut off every circuit breaker.”

She also noted that previous instructors had trained as if an individual Soldier would conduct the power-up and power-down procedures by himself or herself.

“But on the line, they all work together,” Ryno said. There are three pieces of equipment that are powered up and down simultaneously. “You would never do it all by yourself. Six people, two on each of three pieces of equipment. Never by yourself.”

Ryno’s first exposure to THAAD training was on the job. She was assigned to a THAAD battery when it was in the field in Guam, and as a sergeant, she had to follow her Soldiers’ leads. She tried to follow the TC, but she found that the Soldiers and NCOs had put pencil marks everywhere, indicating different methods and procedures. The THAAD has been in operation since 2008, but compared to the Patriot system, it’s “brand new,” Ryno said, so operations are less established.

“I got on-the-job training, and the best on-the-job training I got was from my Soldiers,” Ryno said. Still, “it was rough coming up without prior experience.”

She said she’s excited that future Soldiers won’t have to endure the same challenges.

The training at the facility is built around the “crawl, walk, run” model. The “crawl” stage happens in the classrooms, where students can familiarize themselves with the systems and ask any questions about operations before they use the equipment. The “walk” stage happens in the labs, where Soldiers can perform on simulations



The Lt. Gen. C.J. LeVan THAAD Instructional Facility opened in January, and with the facility's opening, the Army began including noncommissioned officers in its instruction on the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

without the high stakes of the actual equipment (each THAAD unit costs more than \$750 million, and the high voltage systems can be life-threatening if handled incorrectly). The “run” happens with the actual equipment outside or in the bays, but by then Soldiers are thoroughly familiar with the equipment and its operation.

The students are happy for that incremental approach, as well.

Spc. Camden Ash, who attended the facility this summer, said, “Instead of working on the real system, where there’s a lot more potential for expensive damage, you can practice it on a computer. It also makes it a lot easier and faster, so you can just hop right in there and start training, instead of having to do a whole emplacement just to run a simulated air battle. You just hop on the computer, and you’re ready to go.”

His classmate Pvt. 1st Class Bryan Sullivan noted that sometimes training was limited by necessity, too, so the extensive facilities and scenarios rounded out the educational experience well.

“Like fighting an air battle, you can’t always just hop into one of these and do it,” Sullivan said. “Sometimes you need something simulated, and it helps with the visuals and the experience.”

In addition to his NCOIC role, Gatchalian also serves as the branch chief for the Patriot Launching Station Enhanced Operators/Maintainers (14T) who work at the facility and who go through its courses. Sgt. 1st Class Roberto Mendez-Perez serves in that role for the Patriot Fire Control Enhanced Operators/Maintainers (14E).

Together, they are in charge of managing the NCO instructors but they work hand in hand with the civilian instructors, as well. They both served as instructors, but are beginning the transition out of the classroom so they can focus on their branch chief duties.

Mendez-Perez knows the importance of having NCOs in the classroom, especially with younger Soldiers.

“The biggest thing is the fact that we can relate to Soldiers; we act as their platoon sergeant/instructor/squad leader. We’re all of the above,” he said. “We have a relationship with the Soldiers where they can come to us with an issue, and it’ll help them focus better in class.”

That change of instruction methods is already paying dividends for the Army, Mendez-Perez said.

The Soldiers leave the THAAD facility better prepared to handle their duties, whether they are assigned to a THAAD battery or a Patriot battalion. And the THAAD batteries are able to provide immediate feedback to the facility to make the process better.

“From the very first class that we sent overseas to the forward base mode in Japan, we got a lot of good feedback from them. It’s been helpful,” Mendez-Perez said.

Even though he’s making his way out of the classroom, Mendez-Perez relishes the opportunity to continue to train the next generation of THAAD operators.

“It’s a very rewarding job, just to be an instructor, period,” Mendez-Perez said. “You get to teach the Soldiers your job. They go from learning basic soldiering skills to now this is your job, so it’s a very important part of their careers. You get to start them off right.” ■

NCO JOURNAL

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

