

CSM Tells New Sergeants Major Importance of Leadership, Reserves

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As the senior enlisted advisor of the Army Reserve component, Command Sgt. Maj. Luther Thomas Jr. has seen first-hand how important Reserve Soldiers are to the total Army's operations and how reservists' diverse skills benefit the service.

Soon, Thomas will take a new position as the senior enlisted adviser to the assistant secretary of defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs. It's a position that will influence not only the Army Reserve component, but also the rest of the Army and other services.

Going into that position, though, Thomas will keep in mind the impact of Reserve Soldiers.



“When I travel, I get the opportunity to meet Army Reserve Soldiers, and these Soldiers are doing some phenomenal things,” Thomas said in an interview with the NCO Journal. “And their commanders are always saying we can’t do what we do without the support of the Army Reserve.”

Thomas mentioned that on a recent visit to Alaska, for instance, he met a first sergeant who is a medical doctor in his civilian role and a specialist who works as a commercial pilot. That civilian experience can bring new perspective to Army problems, Thomas said.

“A lot of times when [Reservists] see a problem, they look at it from a multitude of ways from their civilian skill set,” he said. “The active folks who have only been Soldiers may not have that same background to look at a problem from a different angle and come up with a different solution.”

Thomas visited the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, at Fort Bliss, Texas, last month and

spoke to the graduating Class 1-16 of the Nonresidents Sergeants Major Course. He also spoke to members of Class 66 of the residential Sergeants Major Course.

He had separate but related messages for each of them.

He spoke to members of the Nonresidents Course about the importance of leadership and being able to lead through change.

“Leadership is important, regardless of the organization you belong to,” Thomas said after his speeches. “In the Army Reserve, it’s especially important, because we are for the most part, an organization where the overwhelming majority of our folks are on duty for two days a month and about two weeks out of the year for a grand total of 39 days. But as leaders in the Army Reserve, they work far more than just 39 days a year. ... It’s a full-time job as a leader in the Army Reserve. If the leader is not tracking what’s going on, there’s no way the unit can be successful.”

Thomas told the graduates of the Nonresidents Course, “There is no doubt that we have the best manned, best trained and best led army on the planet. If we are to fight and win — and we will win — in a complex world, our overwhelming advantage is leadership.”

He described several telltale signs of a great leader — seeking out people who are more talented than themselves; taking responsibility rather than blaming subordinates or circumstances; performing under pressure and having the grit to overcome obstacles; striking a balance between being optimistic enough to be inspirational but not so optimistic as to be overconfident or unrealistic; having empathy for others; keeping open lines of communication between subordinates, peers and superiors; and being able to turn plans into action.

However, Thomas spent the most time telling the soon-to-be-minted sergeants major about one of the most important traits of a good leader: integrity.

“Soldiers look for integrity in a leader,” Thomas said. “This means confidence that a person will do the right thing with the best interest of the group in mind, even though it might not be in the leader’s own best interest.”

As leaders, Thomas also prepared the members of the nonresidents course for what would be one of their most difficult and most frequent challenges — leading change.

Noting that change is a constant, especially in the Army, Thomas said that to take their Soldiers successfully through transitions, the new sergeants major have to be effective listeners, develop their planning skills and be able to anticipate outcomes, obstacles and objections.

“As leaders, we must be able to use disruption as an opportunity to grow as an organization and guide our teams through the process to make changes as smooth as possible,” he said.

When Thomas spoke to the largely active-duty members of the Class of 66, his message shifted from inspirational to educational.

Thomas told Class 66 that his intent was “to get you to understand why the Army Reserve is not only important to the total force, but also why it’s important to you as future sergeants major that you understand what the Army Reserve’s mission is so that you can better understand how the Army Reserve can assist you.”

Thomas noted that many services the Army requires are provided by members of the Reserve component, including the majority of medical services, legal counseling, chaplain services, civil affairs, quartermasters, engineering support and military policing.

“There’s a whole lot of stuff that the active Army can’t do without the Army Reserve,” Thomas said.



The Army Reserve plays an outsized role among the services, as well. It’s larger than the Marine, Air Force and Navy Reserve components combined. And it’s larger than the entire Marine Corps. In addition to explaining the role of the Reserve component, Thomas wanted to remind these future sergeants major to remind their Soldiers about it as they transition out of active duty.

“We’re going to always have a place for good Soldiers, and we’re going to always need good Soldiers,” Thomas said.

Two of those good Soldiers accompanied Thomas to his address at the academy. Staff Sgt. Mark Mercer of Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, was recently named the 2015 Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year, and Staff Sgt. Andrew Fink, a Reservist from Madison, Wisconsin,

won the 2015 NCO of the Year competition.

Mercer and Fink talked about the role the Reserves had played in their successes, and their backstories outline two of the primary routes Soldiers take to the Reserves.

Mercer joined the Reserves to help pay for college. Just out of high school, he wanted to enlist as an 11B infantryman. However, his father insisted he choose a military occupational specialty that he could use in a professional capacity in the civilian world. He became an X-ray technician. After 67 weeks of Advanced Individual Training, he started his part-time Reserve duties and attended the University of Oklahoma.

“Now in hindsight, being 31 years old, my dad was right,” Mercer said. “That’s what I needed to do. It provides for my family. I ended up graduating from OU with a bachelor’s, which I don’t use, because X-ray tech pays more than what I got my degree in.”

He attended drill sergeant school in 2009, and after working in that role for a few years, decided to compete in the Drill Sergeant of the Year competition at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

“My goal was to not only be the Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year, but to make it so close, even though they don’t compete against each other, that the active-duty component would not be able to tell the difference,” he said. “Because I’m not a Reserve Soldier. I am a Soldier.”

Fink took the other route. He was an active-duty combat medic and a member of the 75th Ranger Regiment before joining the Reserve component when he left active-duty to get his bachelor’s degree.

“I had lost something when I left active duty, and the Army Reserve enabled me to regain a sense of purpose and pride that civilian life alone could not do,” he said.

He used tools from both his time in the active-duty and Reserve components to excel at the NCO of the Year competition. The attention to detail enforced during his AIT and Ranger training ensured that he had mastered the basic skills tested during the competition, and the responsibility and leadership traits he has developed as a Reservist helped him persevere during some of the more rigorous and sometimes ambiguous events.

Fink said that at first, because of some lingering stigma, he was hesitant about joining the Reserve component.

“I certainly had no intentions of staying in the Reserves, but I would not be standing here before you today if it were not for the Army Reserve,” he said. “Great leaders exist in the Army Reserve, just like they do in the Ranger Regiment, just like they do in all Army units, regardless of their component.”