

Rotation to Korea brings home importance of NCOs to counter-fire mission

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Staff Sgt. John Hartley, left, and a Soldier go through a preparation checklist for their Multiple Launch Rocket System launch vehicle in December 2016 at Camp Casey, South Korea. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

The 2nd Battalion, 18th Field Artillery Regiment, headquartered at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, is on a nine-month rotation to South Korea. The Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) unit has an important

counter-fire mission and spends its time training to perform quick reaction exercises that counter possible North Korean threats.¹

"Noncommissioned officers are of particular importance to the MLRS mission because there are usually only three soldiers who move out to a firing point and decide when to take action," said Staff Sgt. John Hartley, MLRS section chief in B Company, 2nd Batt, 18th FA REG.³

"MLRS is really unique that way," Hartley said. "Typically, when you look at your infantry units or even some of your other artillery units, you have a much larger section moving out to forward operating points in larger groups. Whereas, with us, it's three individuals: one or two NCOs and a soldier in a track [vehicle] moving out to our firing point. So the pressure is on [the NCOs] to maintain training and standards. That's what we're doing on this rotation in Korea, enhancing all those skills and all those abilities so that when the time comes, and we move out to our firing points for a real-life mission, we're able to perform, execute our mission and make it back."

Because a quick reaction [time] is needed, the decision to fire an MLRS is made by one of those two NCOs in the launcher, said Command Sgt. Maj. George Bunn of 2nd Batt, 18th FA REG.⁴

"Hands-on training is crucial," Bunn said. "Teaching those individual skills and MOS skills is essential. Usually, in a launcher, it's one or two NCOs and a Soldier, and because of the lower number of sergeants, you often have a staff sergeant and two E4s. The NCO is responsible for firing that trigger, and there is no other safety check in there besides him. When a mission comes down, he is the final say on whether to fire or not."

Taking part in a rotation to Korea also allows NCOs and soldiers to train on things like ammunition loading, that they don't get a chance to train on back in the United States. The 2-18 recently participated in a Loading Exercise (LOADEX) that gave them unique training opportunities.⁵

"During the LOADEX, we got to go in the Ammunition Holding Area (AHA) and handle the live pods and take them out of the AHA and load up all the rounds and put them on the vehicle," Bunn said.

"That would never happen at Fort Sill. We can't even go inside the AHA and pick up the pods at Fort Sill. The civilians have to do that. The civilians give it to us at the AHA, but they won't let us go in and pull it out."

Hartley said the realistic training the unit takes part in while in Korea can make a difference in a soldier's development.⁶

"My soldier had never been in an AHA before," Hartley said. "Now, he got to walk into an AHA, do a live ammunition reload and see what the differences are between training pods and live pods. Because the weight difference is significant, the launcher behaves differently."

The experience of serving as part of a rotation to Korea offers NCOs and soldiers an amazing chance to develop professionally, while also gaining a [culturally] broadening experience that comes from learning more about the world, Hartley said.⁷



Exhaust from Multiple Launch Rocket System launch vehicles fills the air as Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 18th Field Artillery prepare for training in December 2016 at Camp Casey, South Korea (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

“Korea is one of the greatest places for a 13M (MLRS crew member) to be because it’s just so widely different than anywhere else we’ve ever been,” Hartley said. “So that adds that much more edge to the training. Not to mention, we are in a land that has such a rich history and culture. We went to the Korean War History Museum, and I saw the involvement America has had, and the camaraderie that American and Korean forces share, the gravity of the situation really hit me.”

All NCOs need to do is step up and take advantage of the opportunities, Hartley said.⁸

"There's so much to learn and so much to do," Hartley said. "I pity those who stay in their rooms the entire time and then get back and say Korea wasn't everything they wanted it to be. There is the world outside that gate. It is vast, and it is interesting. It's breathtaking, honestly."

Working with members of a foreign army also aids NCOs’ professional development while in Korea, Hartley said.⁹

"Our standards are higher because we are a rotational unit, but we're also getting that aspect of being able to experience the culture and history of the nation we're serving in," Hartley said. "I think that adds a different dimension. On my deployment to Afghanistan, sure you could meet some local nationals, but you weren't as immersed as you are here. It's a truly cooperative experience."

This rotation is Hartley’s second time serving in Korea. During his first time, the Korean experience changed his Army career, Hartley said.¹⁰

“I was a completely different person before I came to Korea the first time,” Hartley said. “Korea is where I became an NCO. It’s where I really committed myself to the Army, and where I really committed myself to the NCO Corps and leading Soldiers. Now, I take my experiences, and I want all my Soldiers to be able to mimic that. I want them to be able to separate their careers into two pieces: Before they went to Korea with 2-18, and afterward. I want that afterward to be leaps and bounds ahead of prior-to. We are well on our way. We have Soldiers who are shining and stepping out. It’s where they are starting to dedicate themselves.”

The experience of serving in Korea is a fantastic opportunity for an NCO to develop his or her soldiers into all they can be, Hartley said.¹¹

"These soldiers are going to be able to take this home and say, 'We trained with the Republic of Korea army. We trained on real-world counter-fire missions on different terrain, climate, and atmosphere,'" Hartley said. "There are so many variables here that are helping to enhance our soldiers' training and our leadership abilities."

References

- 1) Command Sgt. Maj. George Bunn in discussion with the author, December 2016.
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- 3) Staff Sgt. John Hartley in discussion with the author, December 2016
- 4) Bunn, George, December 2016.
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