

NCO Forges Valuable Partnerships with Veterans at Natick

By Martha C. Koester - NCO Journal

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1st Sgt. Miguel A. Martinez Jr., 1st sergeant of the Headquarters Research and Development Detachment at the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center, works with Sarah Ross, human research volunteer test coordinator, at the Doriot Climatic Chambers in Natick, Massachusetts. (Photo by Martha C. Koester / NCO Journal)

When he first arrived at Natick Soldier Systems Center for duty as 1st sergeant of the Headquarters Research and Development Detachment at the Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center, 1st Sgt. Miguel A. Martinez Jr. had heard the assignment in Massachusetts wouldn't be a typical one.

"My response was the first sergeant position is the same regardless of where you are and what you're doing because your first and foremost priority is the health and welfare of the Soldier and then to try to advance the organization," Martinez said.

He made sure all Soldiers were taken care of and that they were meeting all standard Army requirements. Then, Martinez set out to meet every director or team leader at the small military

installation.



Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division's 1st Brigade test female body armor. In a collaborative effort, the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center worked with Program Executive Office Soldier on an improved outer tactical vest designed specifically for women. The innovation was named one of Time Magazine's "Best Inventions" in 2012. (Photo courtesy of Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center / U.S. Army)

"I told each one, 'My intent is to have an NCO from this organization help every single team here at some point,'" Martinez said. "Before, [what I was suggesting] was pretty much nonexistent. We didn't have any of our NCOs help any of our directorates. I wanted to change that because I was previously at the U.S. Army Armament Research, Development and Engineering Center [at Picatinny Arsenal, New Jersey], and I saw how those Soldiers

interacted. That's what I wanted to bring here.

"A lot of people think the NCO's main job here is to manage the human research volunteer program," he said. "That's only partly true. We are here to make sure HRVs are being trained properly and also to help all of the studies. I asked the HRDD commander, Capt. Enrique Curiel, about my recommendations and told him what I wanted to do. Together, we started making little changes."

'Different animal'

Located in Massachusetts, the birthplace of the U.S. Army, the Soldier Systems Center employs about 160 active-duty Soldiers and 1,800 civilians. Roughly a platoon of the Soldiers at Natick serve as human research volunteers for scientific studies at NSRDEC, while NCOs fill roles that run the gamut from parachute riggers in the parachute shop or noncommissioned officers in charge at the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine.

"I started teaming up my NCOs to work with other teams [at Natick]," Martinez said. "I told my guys we need to start getting embedded [in projects]. The more the scientists see us, the more they are going to remember the NCOs and the more relevant we are. We want to be seen. We want to be in the front of their minds, so when they have a new project or are starting a new job, I want them to think about talking to NCOs."

Martinez views working with the scientists, engineers and other civilian employees at Natick as a mutual partnership.





A scientist from the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center tests uniforms for burn injury protection at the Doriot Climatic Chambers in Natick, Mass. (Photo courtesy of Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center / U.S. Army)

“One of the biggest things I noticed that was shocking to me is that when I met with some people, they told me they were under the impression that the NCO chain of command here switched out every 90 days like the HRVs,” he said. “That only solidified my desire to meet everybody here because I need to change that way of thinking. I told them we are here for three years. We don’t switch out every 90 days; those are the HRVs. The NCOs and officers are here for three years, and we want to be able to work with you guys.

“I can open those doors for them [in the military], and they will not have to be slowed down by trying to get the right people in the right place to talk to them,” he said.

Work often brings Sarah Ross, human research volunteer test coordinator, and Martinez together at Natick’s Doriot Climatic Chambers. As a veteran noncommissioned officer, Ross has a history there. Her last duty assignment was as NCO in charge of the facility, and she was also a medic assigned to USARIEM when she a Soldier.

The chambers are a unique facility that can mimic environmental conditions from any location around the globe. Temperature, humidity, wind, rain and solar radiation can be simulated for testing on HRVs or military equipment.

Ross’s military experience often comes in handy when trying to bridge communication between scientists, engineers and Soldiers.

“1st Sgt. Martinez is the Soldier component that HRVs have 24 hours a day, because although they are human subjects they are Soldiers 24 hours a day,” Ross said. “It’s important that we work really well together. [Natick] is a different animal, and as a veteran, I understand that. I know from my own experiences, it is a completely different ballgame.

“1st Sgt. Martinez and I work together really well to make sure that the Soldiers get opportunities to participate in things, and that they are always ready as Soldiers because that’s the number one priority – making sure that HRVs are always safe when they are volunteering in these studies,” she said.

Teamwork

One of the projects Martinez and Ross worked on together was to revise the physical restrictions document concerning the participation of HRVs in studies

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“Some of the things I wanted to change were due to risk aversion,” Martinez said. “Principal investigators don’t want to get in trouble or do anything wrong. They don’t want to hurt the HRVs, or tarnish the name of the detachment, program or installation.”

Principal investigators were limiting the activity of some HRVs to an extreme, sometimes resulting in Soldiers who were going back to the Army after their 90-day HRV stint at Natick unable to fulfill the physical requirements of being Soldiers.

“We want to make sure these Soldiers are healthy,” Ross said. “We want to make sure they have appropriate recovery time, and sometimes these principal investigators err on the side of caution. ... The principle investigator is thinking, ‘I want to make sure my subject is protected, and that they are not doing something outside the realm of the study.’ And HRDD is thinking, ‘I want to make sure my Soldiers are ready to be able to do the PT necessary and additionally anything physical they have to do as Soldiers.’”

Because Soldiers’ careers were being affected, Martinez saw he needed to get involved.

“The PIs actually started explaining, ‘This is what I will be doing, this is what I want,’ and Capt. Curiel, and I will make sense of it,” Martinez said. “We will agree, or we will debate. Eventually, we come to a good middle ground, and everybody is happy.

“We told the civilians, ‘We can help you; we can do all these things to help your project and not be in conflict with your study,’” he said.

For Martinez, it helps to have someone such as Ross, with her military experience, serving in her position.

“If there are any questions I might have that are study-related, she is my go-to person,” Martinez said.

Ross couldn’t be happier that she ended up in a job she loves. Despite separating from the Army, she still works with Soldiers every day.

“Although I have been here eight years, I am still learning,” Ross said. “I have to make sure I am aware and updated, and that I am familiar with [federal regulations on human subjects and how Soldiers should be treated] so I can be the best facilitator with the program. At the same time, I love these Soldiers. I have the best job in the Army. I still get to serve without wearing the uniform ... and I get to meet 30 new selfless Soldiers every 90 days. I meet 120 new Soldiers every year, which is so cool.”

Ross is part of a growing population of veterans who found work at Natick after leaving the military.

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The veteran population is pretty strong," Ross said. "It's nice to see veterans who work at the installation. I think in this environment [being a veteran] is instrumental to [Natick's] success."

Despite its size, the work done at Natick extends far beyond its small confines. Valuable Soldiers' feedback goes a long way toward building projects and contributing to the readiness of the big Army.

"Here, it doesn't matter what your rank is," Ross said. "It doesn't matter how long you have been in the Army. What matters is that you give us your opinion and that we are going to take that under consideration. That is one thing that I love. I don't know where else that happens."

The experience has proven invaluable to NCOs such as Martinez, who says there are still many tasks he wants to work on to better the detachment.

"When I leave here and I continue my service, I will always keep Natick on the phone," Martinez said. "Now that I have worked here, I want to continue to work and would like to tell Natick they have an open door with me."

As a veteran, Ross is particularly grateful for the opportunity to work with Soldiers. It's not unusual for Natick to have about 20 studies running at the same time.

"This place is incredible," Ross said. "The things that we do for the Soldier in this small installation blow my mind. At the same time I am talking to you, there is a Soldier down at the biomechanics lab doing a VO2 max ride test, at the same time they are blistering Soldiers in this front room, at the same time another scientist is doing a thermal test and burning a uniform, at the same time there's a change of command over here, at the same time there is a glove dexterity test happening and at the same time there are Soldiers at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, testing a uniform in an obstacle course."

The Soldiers, scientists, engineers and civilians form a powerful team at Natick, with a common goal, she said.

"We have all of these facilities, and we are all just working toward giving the best equipment and making sure Soldiers can function to the best of their abilities," Ross said. "You could argue that Soldiers/warfighters are the best athletes in the world, and we have to make sure a team of 100 people goes out with every Soldier [on the field]. They might not be present with Soldiers, but they are there."

"They are there in the uniform that Soldiers are wearing," she said. "They are there in the boots Soldiers are wearing. They are there in that Kevlar. They are there in that weapon. They are there with Soldiers without actually being physically present, and that's incredible to me."