

PEO Soldier's NCOs Put Soldier Safety First?

By Martha C. Koester - NCO Journal

May 3, 2016



An advanced marksmanship instructor with PEO Soldier instructs a paratrooper on using a thermal imaging scope at night in January 2013 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Noncommissioned officers who serve as subject matter experts attend fieldings where Soldiers are trained on equipment. NCOs gather feedback and report back to PEO Soldier. (Photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod / U.S. Army)

Making sure Soldiers come home to their families is paramount at Program Executive Office Soldier. That's why it's so important to the noncommissioned officers who work there to ensure that Soldiers are given the best, most up-to-date protective equipment in the world.

Upon arrival, NCOs quickly learn that everything at PEO Soldier revolves around the Soldier.





Soldiers train on an M2A1 .50 Caliber Machine Gun mounted on an M205 Lightweight Tripod in May 2014 at Fort Bliss, Texas. PEO Soldier's NCOs are assigned to gather feedback from Soldiers who train on new equipment. (U.S. Army photo)

“Everyone is here because they want to be here to help the Soldier,” said Master Sgt. Corey M. Ingram, senior enlisted advisor to Project Manager Soldier Protection and Individual Equipment, or PM SPIE, which is part of PEO Soldier at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. “Everyone is here to do what they can to protect the Soldier in combat to make sure they come back to their family.”

Tasks vary for each noncommissioned officer who works at PEO Soldier’s four Program Management Offices, which are responsible for managing the life cycles of what Soldiers wear or carry. The one constant, though, is their job description. NCOs serve as subject matter experts and are typically tasked with soliciting feedback on equipment fieldings or trials. NCOs are there to speak for the Soldier.

“I get firsthand feedback on the products that we are issuing to the Soldiers in the field, to get a better understanding on what their acceptance is,” said Master Sgt. Robert Campbell, senior enlisted advisor to Project Manager Soldier Warrior, or PM SWAR. “I bring that feedback to our engineers and discuss it with them because Joe in the field is not going to talk to a civilian or give their correct answer to an officer. ... We get to the nuts and bolts of, ‘How do we fix this and get the right equipment for the Soldier.’”

“It helps to have the NCO here to be that middleman or to be the good-idea policeman,” Campbell said. “There are a lot of good ideas out there, but are they really conducive for the mission? That’s what we are here for.”





A Soldier aims an XM-25 weapon system during training at Aberdeen Test Center, Maryland. PEO Soldier's NCO seek Soldiers' feedback during equipment fieldings. (U.S. Army photo)

'Life and death' decisions

To provide the very best in military equipment, NCOs take their roles seriously as senior enlisted advisors in the four Program Management Offices of PEO Soldier – PM Soldier Protection and Individual Equipment, PM Soldier Sensors and Lasers, PM Soldier Warrior and PM Soldier Weapons.

“A split-second decision can mean the difference between life and death, so that’s why it’s very crucial to get the Soldiers’ feedback as well as mine,” said Master Sgt. Reiko Carter, senior enlisted advisor to Project Manager Soldiers Sensors and Lasers, or PM SSL.

“Something as simple as saying that this button doesn’t work or this button isn’t good, that can make the difference in lives being saved. It’s crucial for our organization not only to get the Soldiers’ feedback but to get my feedback as well.”

“I have been the Soldier on the battlefield,” Campbell said. “I have been the squad leader, a platoon leader and a first sergeant, so I have had experiences in different levels of authority to understand that some of this equipment that the Army is developing may or may not be something I want to use on the battlefield. I give the engineers the firsthand knowledge of experience of what the Soldiers will actually use or what they actually want.”

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Getting a new piece of equipment in Soldiers' hands requires a lot of evaluation and collaboration. Equipment fieldings are necessary, where Soldiers extensively train on new equipment and are asked to offer an assessment.

"We reach out to Soldiers by going to the fieldings and getting their feedback," Campbell said. "Anybody can sit and do a survey after their training. But then if Soldiers want to go home, they may scribble on that survey real quick and give us the firsthand response versus after they get back to their unit and they start using this equipment. Then, their minds change."

The feedback wouldn't end there, though. PEO Soldier's NCOs often reach out again, the NCOs said.

"We take pride in the equipment we issue to the Soldiers, and we make sure we get feedback from them even a year later," Campbell said. "We go back to them and say, 'What do you think of it? Is it still working for you? What needs to be fixed? What can we do to make it better?'"

Some NCOs, such as Carter, prefer to undergo training on the new equipment right alongside Soldiers. It further develops a rapport with Soldiers, which helps during feedback, he said.

"That way, I can experience what they experience," Carter said. "I can see it from their perspective. It's my opportunity to get that real-time feedback. When you're out on the range with the Soldiers and they see you going through it, they understand that we're actually trying to make sure we are giving them the right capability."

Although technology may be improving every day, PEO Soldier is committed to lightening the load Soldiers carry.

"Throughout these past 13 to 14 years of conflict, ounces turn into pounds and pounds turn into pain for Soldiers," said Master Sgt. Jason Barton, who recently brought his tactical skills to PM Soldier Weapons as senior enlisted advisor. "So how do we make our inventory lighter for the Soldier? How do we make it more ergonomic, but still safe? I have been in the Army about 25 years, and I have back problems. Most of my peers do, to some extent, as well. But how do we keep our Soldiers as safe as we can and not injure them in the process when they are in all of those different types of environments?"

"It's imperative to have this type of a position for an NCO at PEO Soldier," Campbell said. "It gives us the capability to get the right equipment in the Soldiers' hands versus turning them into Christmas trees, just making up all this new equipment and saying, 'Here, use this.' Not everything we build is the right thing. Not everything we build is what we need. So we've got to work hand in hand with [many organizations and people, including] the materiel developers to discuss where our gaps are. It all has to go together before we can actually get something into the Soldiers' hands."

Different side of the Army

NCOs more accustomed to working among large Soldier populations may experience culture shock when first arriving at PEO Soldier. Though they are no longer directly in charge of Soldiers, they soon find that they play an equally important role in keeping Soldiers safe on the battlefield while containing costs. The NCOs also bring a fresh perspective and expertise to the organization.

“I have the responsibility of making sure that [civilians, scientists and engineers] are doing the right thing for the Soldier,” Campbell said. “PEO Soldier needs that NCO-experience level mainly because the Soldiers don’t have a voice when it comes to all this equipment. Squad leaders, team leaders and platoon sergeants at fieldings are going to talk to me and give me the true answer versus when they see my colonel and tell him, ‘Everything is going great, sir. No problem.’ When the Soldier sees the first sergeant or platoon sergeant, he or she is going to say, ‘This is messed up. We need to fix this. This isn’t working for us.’ So that’s where I come in.”

Because the NCOs work closely with civilians, scientists and engineers, they get to see the latest in military protective equipment and often collaborate on projects, offering their input from a Soldier’s perspective. The opportunity gives them a chance to glimpse all of the options available to Soldiers on the battlefield.

“The equipment and the innovative technology we have today is really an enhancement to the Soldiers on the battlefield,” Campbell said. “We want to give them that capability, but at the same time the Soldiers can’t forget the fundamentals — the linear map, compass and other basics. We stress that, too, as part of our training. We let Soldiers know that even though they are getting this equipment and technology has taken off, we still need to make sure we keep the fundamentals.”

Once they have learned what PEO Soldier can do for the average Soldier, the organization’s NCOs are eager to spread the word about it.

“I want to relay to Soldiers that there are civilians and Soldier retirees who are working for our team,” Barton said. “Soldiers are their focus and purpose. I think if you know you have the support behind you, it changes your outlook. Fellow Americans are working to take Soldiers into the future, to make them more dominant on the battlefield.”

“I get to touch every Soldier, [in every location], every day,” said Ingram, who frequently participates in ceremonies to reunite Soldiers with the equipment that saved their lives in combat. “The stuff that I do here really makes a difference in a Soldier’s life. ... I didn’t know what this place was when I got here. Soldiers need to know that there’s an organization here that is specifically designed for them and their protection.”

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PEO Soldier's NCOs are well aware of the broadening opportunities their roles as senior enlisted advisors afford them. They are immersed in another side of the Army that Soldiers don't usually get to see. These NCOs know the professional skills they have gained will benefit them long after they have left the Army.

"When I first arrived, I had a conversation with a former program manager who put me in the mindset of making sure I understood that everything I do here at PEO Soldier has a strategic impact," Carter said. "Here, I have the opportunity to make a change strategically to the whole Army while I am alive. Just realizing that helps me appreciate what I do and be mindful of the impact I want to leave, knowing that I did something that will make a change and a difference in the way the Army operates."

"I never knew this place existed being down in a unit," Campbell said. "I never knew about PEO Soldier until I got to this level. That young Soldier needs to know that we exist. Once we get the word to them and let them know what we are here for, that gives young Soldiers a better understanding of the Army as a whole. This equipment is coming to you, but how does it get to you, where does it come from, who builds it, who makes it? They don't know all that, and if Joe learned a little bit more about what PEO Soldier does for each of them, that opens up their minds and opens up avenues that they can look at to broaden their horizons."

Contact PEO Soldier

PEO Soldier encourages Soldiers to communicate their questions and ideas, said Debi Dawson, PEO Soldier Strategic Communications. "Ask the PEO NCOs" is a website that Soldiers may use to email questions about uniforms and equipment. Soldiers may find it at www.peosoldier.army.mil/feedback/contactForm.asp?type=csm (<http://www.peosoldier.army.mil/feedback/contactForm.asp?type=csm>). Soldiers are also urged to reach out through the Soldier Enhancement Program at www.peosoldier.army.mil/sep/index.asp where Soldiers may propose a technology or equipment item.