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Rotational units help keep U.S. Army ready for battle in South Korea

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Soldiers from 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, conduct counter weapons of mass destruction training during exercise Warrior Strike 7 on May 5 at the Rodriguez Live Fire Complex in Pochoen, South Korea. (Photo by Capt. Jonathan Camire, 1st ABCT Public Affairs)

Rotational units — Army units that rotate in for nine months before returning to their headquarters — have become a large part of the “Fight Tonight” mission in South Korea.¹

Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Merritt, the Eighth Army command sergeant major, said rotational units have become key to keeping the peace on the Korean peninsula. The Eighth Army is the commanding formation of all U.S. Army forces in Korea.²

"My most-ready unit in Korea, ready to 'Fight Tonight,' is my rotational brigade," Merritt said "They do a nine-month rotation. They come as a whole brigade, so they were together in the United States. They do training together, like at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. Then they all come here together. They don't have 10 percent leaving every month."

Training together before their nine-month deployment allows those units to be ready when they land in Korea. And the nine months in Korea only improve their skills, Merritt said.³

"When they get here, we continue to train them," he said. "They don't have the distractions they have in the United States. They don't go home to their family at night. We give them a lot of resources and 'train, train, train' to keep them ready. By the time they leave here, I would bet they are the most-ready unit in the world, not only in the Army or what I have in Korea."

Training to improve

The 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, was one of the units that recently completed a rotation in Korea after training at their home station of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The rotation allowed the team to hit the ground running, said Staff Sgt. Brandon Sutton, a 15S helicopter repairer with C Troop, 1st Squadron.⁴

“With all my guys, I knew exactly where they excelled and what their capabilities were,” Sutton said. “Our team was together about six months before we left Fort Bragg. So we’re familiar with each other, and we’re a tight-knit group. [A rotation] is beneficial in that manner. You come out here on a rotation and you know exactly what your mission is. You’ve all performed together before.”

The shorter, nine-month rotation is a good way to give Soldiers a taste of deployment, with lots of opportunities to train, said Sgt. Johnray Velasquez, crew chief of C Troop, 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment.⁵



Soldiers from 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, prepare to enter and clear a building on the Rodriguez Live Fire Complex during exercise Warrior Strike 7 on May 3 in Pocheon, South Korea. The combined exercise with the South Korean military had Soldiers conduct air assaults from multiple locations into the target areas before securing and searching for simulated weapons of mass destruction. (Photo by Sgt. Dasol Choi, 1st ABCT Public Affairs)

"Some of these guys have only been in-garrison," he said. "So they get the experience of being away from their families, preparing things back home. We get to work with the ground guys directly out

here. A lot of them haven't had that opportunity to see what their work does in the big picture. I've been deployed, so I've seen my helicopters go out there and support the ground guys directly. You get a good feeling, a feeling that what you are doing every day is worth something. Some of these guys hadn't had a chance to see that because they've just been at Fort Bragg. But them coming out here as a rotational unit and working with the ground guys in joint training exercises, they get to see their hard work be worth something. I think that's good for them."

The 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, is on a rotation to Korea after training at their home station of Fort Riley, Kansas. Command Sgt. Maj. Dale Sump, the command sergeant major of the 1st ABCT, said he told his Soldiers and NCOs that, if they took advantage of it, a rotation to Korea offered many opportunities for professional development.⁶

"When we first came over here, our point to everybody was, 'Leave here better than you came here,'" Sump said. "Whether that be more physically fit because of the PT that you're getting in, spiritually fit, education. We challenged everybody to go down to the education center and take some classes. We're going to take part in the Basic Leader Course offered here on the peninsula for our junior enlisted, our specialists, so they can achieve the rank of sergeant while they're over here."

The rotation offers not only the opportunity to become proficient and qualified with your weapons but to stay qualified; Sump said.⁷

"We came over here 100 percent weapons trained on everything," he said. "We will be able to maintain that proficiency throughout the rotation. Unlike a traditional Army unit that rotates about 2 percent to 10 percent of the force every month, this unit will stay together for the nine-month rotation. It's a force multiplier because once we get back to Kansas from this rotation, we're still going to hit the ground qualified on all of our platforms."

Being on a nine-month rotation, without the distractions of life at home, offers opportunities for NCOs to demonstrate engaged leadership, said Command Sgt. Maj. Kevin Miller, command sergeant major of the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT.⁸

"Out here in Korea, NCOs get a chance to get back to basics," Miller said. "You'll see sergeants going through the barracks every day as they used to when I was young, waking up Soldiers at 0550, making sure they're out for PT at 0600. Stateside you don't see that too often because everyone is on their own time. ... Everyone always talks about engaged leadership, but what does that mean? Down to the lowest level, our sergeants know what our Soldiers are doing."

Sgt. 1st Class Martin Santoro, a tank platoon sergeant in the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT, said he enjoyed learning about Korean culture during his rotation and also learning a lot about his job.⁹

"It's a lot of fun, preparing for and participating in training," Santoro said. "The tempo is a lot higher than it normally is, but that's a good thing. We're getting some good training out here."

Sgt. Donald Sooga, Fire Support NCO in C Company, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT, said that, although he's not necessarily training on new things while in Korea, the opportunity to focus on his job has paid dividends for his professional development.¹⁰

"I like it because we have all this field time," Sooga said "We can train on our job, be proficient, efficient, and support whoever we're attached to."

Sharing culture

Another special opportunity for those serving in Korea is working closely with Korean Augmentation to the United States Army (KATUSA) soldiers and learning Korean culture through them. KATUSA soldiers are Korean enlistees who serve in the U.S. Army for about 21 months.¹¹

"That was a first for me," Velasquez said. "We had two KATUSAs assigned to us. It was a very cool experience for us to work with another country's soldiers. They caught on very quickly. They performed maintenance on our aircraft just like we do. And they didn't go through Advanced Individual Training (AIT), they learned as they went with us. They got pretty comfortable with it, and I felt comfortable working with them.

"We had also had an opportunity to learn from them," he said. "They taught us their language and culture, and let them know about our culture. It's been a learning experience for the junior enlisted and the NCOs. It was one of my best experiences. I got to talk to somebody from another country, and he could explain to me in English their ways of life and ways of doing things. I learned a lot about Korea because of that.

"Korea is going to be a big focus for the military, so I could see myself coming back out here during my career," he said. "So having that opportunity to get my feet wet as part of a rotational unit instead of being stationed out here, I think it's good for me and some of these guys."

First Sgt. Joseph Anthony Aiello of B Company, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT, said working with KATUSAs helps broaden soldiers' perspectives.¹²

"Having the KATUSAs with us plays a big role in sharing culture," Aiello said. "We take them out with us when we go out so we don't have any language barriers and we can order the food off the menu. It widens the aspect of a lot of the young Soldiers. They're just so used to Americans working with Americans. Now when you start bringing other cultures in with us and working hand-in-hand, it broadens them a little bit."

For his part, Sgt. Kim Young Jin, the senior KATUSA with A Company, 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT, said his two years working alongside U.S. Soldiers had been a great experience that he would cherish. Young Jin had worked with several different U.S. units during his time as a KATUSA.¹³

"So far, it's been an amazing experience," Young Jin said. "This unit [A Company] has a different personality than the unit I was in before. They show a lot of passion. They keep us motivated to step out of our comfort zone and keep going. They show by example. I will be out in a couple of months, but I know for a fact that I am going to miss this part of the Army. Working as an ambassador has been a great experience."

Fight Tonight

Because of the threat posed by North Korea's military and its bellicose leader Kim Jong-un, the first thing every U.S. soldier hears about upon arriving in South Korea is the urgent need to be ready to "Fight Tonight." It is Eighth Army's slogan and colors everything that the Army does on the peninsula. North Korea's capabilities catch soldiers' attention immediately.¹⁴

"I've been in for 16 years now, and we've lost the art of chemical warfare," Aiello said. "As soon as you get the word that you're coming over to Korea, you start thinking about that stuff real quick. You start learning about gas chambers, decontamination sites, all that stuff to try to get back into the groove. You didn't have to worry too much about that in Iraq or Afghanistan, but we know that is a threat over here."

Staff Sgt. Wesley Dobbs, a Bradley master gunner in 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment, 1st ABCT, said a rotation to Korea might be the first time some young Soldiers realize the seriousness of their mission.¹⁵

"The experience of Korea itself, over here operating under a Fight Tonight mentality — with that being what you're thinking about when you go to bed at night and when you wake up in the morning —

I think it grows a lot of soldiers up," Dobbs said. "It makes them realize that the Army is not a game. It's not just something where you go to work every day and pay your bills. You are over here with an actual mission."

NCOs make sure Soldiers don't forget the stakes, even while encouraging them to step outside the post's walls and learn about the Korean culture.¹⁶

"I try to get every Soldier that we have here up to see the DMZ (the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea)," Sump said. "That was my, 'A-Ha' moment back when I was a young staff sergeant in 1997. When you go up there and see the border, it's like, 'OK, this is why we're here.' We talk to Soldiers about 'Fight Tonight' all the time. They understand it's the environment we're in. Bags are packed. Vehicles are ready to move. They understand that if and when we're called upon, it's grab everything you need and go."

References

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