

Strengthening the European Alliance

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The Noncommissioned Officer Corps has been the backbone of the U.S. Army for more than 240 years. The responsibility to train and prepare Soldiers has not changed; however, the role of the noncommissioned officer continues to evolve. From the cold winters of Valley Forge, to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, the noncommissioned officer has trained and prepared Soldiers to fight, win and survive in some of the most difficult and unique combat situations. The NCO Corps has adapted to the many changes in our nation and Army, all the while never losing focus of its primary responsibility — training Soldiers.

Today, we face a resurging Russia, asymmetric conflicts and terrorism, which require us to strengthen and build our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and partner nation alliances. Strengthening these alliances requires equipment interoperability, development of junior leaders, building readiness, informing, and training together to conduct unified land operations in a complex multinational environment.

Current situation

As we look forward past the last 10 to 15 years of conflict, we find ourselves in an environment that is complex, uncertain and unknown. Resources are dwindling, and our adversaries no longer have a familiar face. The operating environment is continuously evolving and our adversaries are interconnected. Today's NCO must be more agile, innovative, balanced and creative than ever. As our Army transitions to Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) supporting geographic combatant commanders and the wide range of engagements with ally nations, interoperability is critical to the development of our relationships within NATO. As the operating environment continues to evolve and the complexities of wealth, sovereignty, legitimacy and political authority create gaps, our adversaries look to exploit those gaps and adapt to what they see as limitations. The NCOs of U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) are filling those gaps created by an unstable and uncertain environment through interoperability with their allies and partner nations.

NATO is an alliance of 28 countries from Europe and North America providing a unique link between two continents for consultation and cooperation in the field of defense and security, as well as the conduct of multinational crisis-management operations adhering to the principle that an attack on one is an attack on all.

Noncommissioned officers serving in USAREUR are advising senior defense officials and briefing U.S. and foreign dignitaries while simultaneously performing their primary role of training Soldiers. The success of U.S. Army Europe is largely dependent upon its NCO Corps.

The Soldiers of USAREUR support missions throughout Europe. This land mass includes 51 countries and more than 20 NATO allies, which allows our Soldiers the opportunity to hone their skills, lead and develop in the world's largest training area. Leaders in USAREUR are leveraging not only the active component of the Army, but the Army Reserve and National Guard — a true multicomposition force. This multicomponent team allows for greater flexibility and options to commanders and reduces the away-from-home time for those Soldiers forward stationed in Europe. The Commanding General of USAREUR, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges stated, “we must make 30,000 Soldiers continue to look and feel like 300,000 Soldiers in the deterrence of Russian aggression,” and noncommissioned officers and Soldiers of the Army Reserve and National Guard are a vital part of that mission.

Interoperability

The definition of interoperability is “the ability of systems, units or forces to provide services to and accept services from other systems, units or forces and to use the services so exchanged to enable them to operate effectively together.”

As the definition of interoperability suggests, these types of exchanges happen daily under the supervision of NCOs. For example, logisticians conduct palletized load system flat rack exchanges with Lithuania and British forces. Class III (bulk) petroleum equipment exchanges ensure the successful transfer of bulk petroleum products from U.S. forces to Polish, French, German, Spanish and British forces using NATO adapters. The utilization of these adapters by the 515th Transportation Company, USAREUR's only bulk fuel company, enhanced interoperability among the six nations during exercise Trident Juncture, helping to reduce the NATO tooth-to-tail ratio. The multinational force does not need stove-piped fuel systems for each nation. Instead, one or two nations can focus on fuel operations for all partners.

Additionally, heavy equipment transporter compatibility tests continue to be a highlight, as the movement of armored vehicles in the multinational environment is important. Unit commanders may not always be able to control the type of equipment they receive from other countries, but understanding and knowing the limitations and capabilities will assist in the task organization of force multipliers and enablers.



An NCO from the 51st Transportation Company demonstrated to Polish NCOs the proper technique to load/unload and clear an M240B Machine Gun during the field training exercise Knight's Quest. The exercise was conducted in Poland to build interoperability between Polish and U.S. logistic Soldiers. (U.S. Army photo by First Sgt. Louis Steinke)

Training interoperability prepares our forces to operate seamlessly as we shoot, move, communicate, support and sustain U.S., NATO and partner nation forces, no matter where they are in the operating environment. The proof of principle to this interoperability is Operation Atlantic Resolve, where security cooperation and multinational training activities take place in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. During Atlantic Resolve, USAREUR's regionally aligned forces improve interoperability, build trust among our allies and partners, contribute to stability within the region, strengthen relationships and reassure our allies and partners of the U.S. commitment to the region. NCOs at the squad level oversee multinational training daily. NCOs gain valuable knowledge and experience all while training the Soldiers under their charge. In addition, other exercises conducted in the European theater of operation, including Operation Market Garden, Exercise Fearless Guardian, and Operation Able Falcon, allowed NCOs to integrate training concepts, develop experience, identify training gaps and leverage technology to build and strengthen alliances.

During exercise Trident Juncture, the largest NATO and partner nation exercise in a decade, the 21st Theater Sustainment Command, USAREUR's logistics command, led the way in training, developing and influencing our NATO logistic allies and partners. Leaders from the 21st command led the Joint Logistic Support Group, the single support element for all classes of supply during the exercise. The exercise involved 36,000 personnel from more than 30 allied and partner nations. U.S. leaders shared their knowledge and insight. In one case, that led to the risk assessment worksheet used by U.S. forces being recommended for inclusion in the NATO Fuel Operations Handbook.

Furthermore, the exercise saw movement control specialists from the 16th Sustainment Brigade serving at multiple nodes, with the senior leader being an NCO, a staff sergeant. These staff sergeants oversaw seaport debarkation/embarkation operations and airfield departure/arrival control group operations and trained not only U.S. forces, but also movement specialists from Denmark, Germany, Poland and Great Britain, supporting the onward movement of cargo and equipment to the multinational force. As our allies and partners look to USAREUR and the 21st command to provide anticipatory, on-time logistic support, it is critical that our NCOs and Soldiers are prepared to eat, sleep and operate alongside them in a complex multinational environment. U.S. Army logistics Soldiers are the greatest in the world, and our NCO Corps must continue to prepare them for an uncertain, unknown and complex multinational environment.

Build the alliance

NCOs serving in Europe are strengthening alliances through development of junior leaders, informing the local populace, ensuring readiness, and, most importantly, integrating NATO, U.S. and partner-nation forces in unified land operations to achieve the joint forces or multinational forces commander's desired end state.

Logistics leaders conducting support operations throughout the joint and multinational environment must be equally versed in these critical tasks. Leaders and Soldiers of USAREUR compete in best squad competitions with our NATO and partner nations, conduct field training exercises, live-fire exercises, airborne operations, functional training courses and culture training to build interoperability and develop a shared understanding of our systems, units and equipment. These events allow us the opportunity to better understand and learn how our allies and partners function in simulated combat environments. Leaders must take every opportunity to plan, prepare, execute and assess training with our allies and partners to help shape the training environment to produce the desired outcome while continuously building readiness.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said, "Readiness is the Army's No. 1 priority," and readiness is at the heart of all we do here in USAREUR. To maintain a high state of readiness, commanders rely heavily upon NCOs to ensure Soldiers and their equipment are prepared. NCOs ensure Soldiers and their families attend scheduled medical and dental appointments, conduct weekly reviews of Soldiers' personnel and medical records. To test the readiness of personnel systems and maintenance, the USAREUR commanders introduced the "Freedom Shock" program. Freedom Shocks are unannounced deployment readiness exercises conducted to ensure systems for personnel and equipment maintenance are viable and effective. They test a unit's preparedness and ability to deploy without advance notice. Freedom Shocks assist the Soldiers of USAREUR in maintaining their ability to deploy worldwide. Readiness is the foundation of success in USAREUR and directly correlates to the support of our NATO allies, partner nations and the development of our junior leaders.

The development of junior leaders in USAREUR is the cornerstone of our success in the multinational environment. Junior leaders (second lieutenants and sergeants) conduct convoy operations over several thousand miles, while crossing multiple nations' borders delivering equipment and supplies to our U.S., NATO and partner nation's forces. Captains command forces spread across as many as four countries, interacting with senior defense and military officials. Sergeants and staff sergeants are advising members of the national movement control centers and embassies in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These NCOs are not just leaders, but ambassadors for the United States of America.

This level of decentralized leadership is necessary as senior leaders empower junior leaders at the lower echelons by providing capacity, authority, capability and development of responsibility. Junior leaders are entrusted to make ethical and moral decisions within the guidelines of the commander's intent. Junior leaders in USAREUR have the cognitive and interpersonal skills needed to exercise the tenets of mission command in a complex tactical environment while making decisions with operational and strategic implications. Leader development continues at home station, as units and individuals compete at the USAREUR and Department of the Army level, developing and building cohesive teams. Competition includes the Army's Award for Maintenance Excellence, Supply Excellence, Deployment Excellence, the Philip A. Connelly Awards