

Sustainment NCOs keep Army moving along in Korea

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Army Pvt. 1st Class Vairon Calcedo-Ocampo, a fuel specialist assigned to the 348th Quartermaster Company, 194th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 501st Sustainment Brigade, prepares for his next oil and water pump separator demonstration during the 501st SBDE Petroleum Expo, August 8, 2012, at Kusan Airbase, South Korea. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Robert DeDeaux)

As tensions rise on the Korean peninsula — with President Donald Trump calling North Korea a “very grave threat,” and North Korea responding with a video showing the White House in crosshairs

and declaring “the enemy to be destroyed is in our sights”¹ — it is as important as ever to have an Army prepared for war in South Korea.

Keeping the Army ready is the full-time job of the sustainment NCOs in South Korea. Because of the large area, the NCOs have to sustain; they are counted on to do their jobs professionally without supervision, said Command Sgt. Maj. Arthur Mohead, command sergeant major of the 194th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, headquartered in South Korea. The Army divides up South Korea into six areas, with different regulations on Soldier behavior in each zone. The sustainment battalion keeps the Army going in all six areas.²

“We rely on our NCOs more so here than probably anywhere else I’ve been,” Mohead said. “Here I have to completely trust the noncommissioned officers because, if they tell me — ‘Hey, sergeant major, it's good’ — I'm on the other end of the phone and it could take me hours to get to where they are and check myself. I have to trust. There is a lot of confidence in the noncommissioned officers here, and they do an amazing job.”

On the road

Keeping Army vehicles supplied with the fuel needed to keep them on the road is one of the most important jobs performed by sustainment Soldiers is keeping. Staff Sgt. Gotson Constant is a petroleum supply specialist with the 194th CSSB and is part of a team that provides the entire peninsula with fuel and water. The job can be intense, with young Soldiers driving large vehicles on foreign roads.³

“It's scary for a majority of the new Soldiers,” Constant said. “This is their first duty station. They are out on the road in oversized trucks. Sometimes the locals drive crazy, so it scares them being in an oversized truck going long distances.”

The stress helps the Soldiers become better at their jobs; Constant said.⁴



The 46th Transportation Company, 194th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion conducted their Annual Sustainment Truck Rodeo allowing Soldiers to demonstrate driving skills and warrior tasks and battle drills in the spirit of a friendly competition May 28, 2014, at Camp Stanley, South Korea. This peninsula-wide event pitted the best drivers from across Korea. It tested their knowledge and proficiency while giving them the opportunity to prove they are ready to "Fight Tonight." (Photo by Cpl. Dongweon Kim)

“It’s going to make them stronger when they get to their next unit because of the fast pace of this unit,” Constant said. “They are gaining a lot of experience doing all these missions, so they are going to have that advantage over their counterparts when they get back stateside.”

Despite the availability of high-tech GPS systems, the Army still teaches young Soldiers land navigation. Why? Because those GPS systems can fail. Sgt. Dallas Reece May has experienced that firsthand, left forced to navigate the streets of Korea on his own. May is a wheel mechanic and wrecker operator in the 194th CSSB. One of the lessons May learned while serving in Korea is the need to be able to speak and read at least a little of the local language. His unit does not have KATUSAs (Korean Augmentees to the U.S. Army) to help translate while on the road.⁵

“The language barrier is a big thing,” May said. “The NCO who was here before me taught me how to read Korean. Some of the stuff you are going to read is going to be what he called Konglish, Korean English. It will be Hangul characters, but when you read it out, it’s an English word. But if I read a city name, I’m going to understand that’s a city. So, when I get these locations, and I have to go out to places — of course, we all use GPS, but sometimes it’s wonky, and you can’t get anything out of it because you lose signal — so you have to be able to do it on your own. For the most part, it’s pretty easy to get to these places, but there have been a couple of times when I had to read. I was forced to read Hangul, and it helped out. I was looking for Osan, for instance, and it helped out that I could read the sign that said Osan.”

Adding to the difficulty of the sustainment mission on the Korean peninsula are the rules restricting when Soldiers can have large vehicles on the road, Mohead said.⁶

“We can’t drive certain types of vehicles during daylight hours,” Mohead said. “So our Soldiers have to be on the road after-hours, which can be a safety issue. They have to sleep during the day and

drive at night. The roads here in Korea can be a little bit dangerous because the traffic is different. It's a bit safer at night, as far as traffic is concerned, but the problem we run into is being tired."

Lessons learned

The mission in Korea, providing sustainment services over a large area, often without supervision, helps develop better Soldiers and NCOs. They learn professionalism and leadership when they are counted on to accomplish their mission, said Sgt. 1st Class Johnny Montoya.⁷ Montoya is a mechanic and maintenance control supervisor with the 194th CSSB.

"As a combat sustainment support battalion, we provide support to the whole peninsula," Montoya said. "Maintenance support, water support, fuel support, ammunition — whatever customers need, we're going to provide that support. It helps Soldiers learn leadership because they have to do stuff on their own, with little to no guidance, and make the mission happen on their own."

Staff Sgt. Paris Wright, an automated logistical specialist with the 194th CSSB, said the Korean mission prepares Soldiers well.⁸ Wright said she learned how to drive some of the Army's big trucks for the first time while in Korea.

"Because it's so fast-paced, Soldiers will be ready at their next duty station to handle the workload and pace," Wright said.

Learning how to get things done in a foreign country, with a different language and culture, also makes NCOs stronger, May said.⁹

"Serving in Korea is going to teach you problem-solving skills because that's about 80 percent of our job," May said. "You have to figure it out then and there. Then, these Soldiers are going to go somewhere else, and with everything they have dealt with here, they are going to be thinking, 'This is

about 50 percent of what we did back in Korea.’ So it is setting them up for success. It’s tough love. You make it hard now, and it pays off in the end.”

The mission and requirements in Korea develops the empowered NCOs the Army is always working toward, Mohead said.¹⁰

“We talk about how we want to empower the NCO Corps,” Mohead said. “We say that, but sometimes we babysit them. Here, we can’t afford to do that. We’re going to empower you, and then the expectation is that you will get it done. We can spot-check here and there, but in general, we have to trust that you will get the job done. That gives noncommissioned officers confidence in themselves and their leaders.”

References

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