

'We Are Only As Strong As Our Sergeants'

By Command Sgt. Maj. Jacinto Garza Fourth Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade

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Task Force Wolf, Army Reserve instructors from Alpha Company, 399th Training Support Battalion (ROTC), assists Cadet Initial Entry Training (CIET) candidates in rappeling the High Wall during Cadet Summer Training on July 23 at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. (Photo by Sgt. Karen Sampson)

After more than 15 years of persistent global conflict, the operational environment remains as complex, complicated and ambiguous as it was during previous eras in American history. Increased access to information has created an interdependence and speed that contributes to the complexity of the modern operating environment. We now have more access to information than we can fully analyze and understand.

Because of globalization, interdependence and the speed of information, the rate of change has challenged our ability to rapidly adapt our processes and systems to stay ahead of those who wish to do us harm. Our enemies have metastasized, decentralized and in some ways have expanded their capabilities.

With the constant challenges of decreasing military budgets and force structure, we have to get better at doing more with what we have efficiently and effectively. We must simultaneously remain ready to defend the homeland, respond to natural disasters, deter a near or peer competitor, and defeat a distant foe with lethality and precision — all in a constrained resource environment.

To survive, fight and win in this environment, the 4th Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade at Fort Carson, Colorado, determined that it must be able to do four things:

- Be ready to fight tonight. This can only be achieved on the cornerstone of readiness (materiel, personnel, equipment and training)
- Be ready to deter a near or peer competitor in a decisive-action environment as a part of the Regionally Aligned Force construct.
- Be an echelon-above-brigade enabler at our combat training centers.
- Support real-world deployments to conflict zones worldwide.

How can one brigade do so much in so many places simultaneously? Simple: on the foundation of our strong sergeants.

A little more than a year ago, the 4th ID Sustainment Brigade came up with a phrase that was catchy, intriguing and captivated the organization every time it was spoken. The simple, yet powerful phrase was, “We are only as strong as our sergeants.”

The phrase resonated and began to permeate through the formations from the brigade level to the battalions and into the organic functional companies under the sustainment brigade. Since its inception, it has become the brigade’s campaign plan, and several organizations outside the sustainment brigade assigned to the 4th ID have adopted its meaning.

I am often asked about the meaning of the phrase. Many ask, “Why not say we are only as strong as our officers or warrant officers? Why not our junior enlisted Soldiers? Why Sergeants?” You see, in order for any organization to be successful, it is the junior-level leadership that must be committed to Army values and the organization’s concepts, beliefs, vision and goals. When we say the word “sergeant,” we are referring to sergeants through command sergeants major, the Corps of the Noncommissioned Officer and the backbone of our Army. Strong sergeants equal strong Soldiers, and “Soldiers” is defined as officers, warrant officers and enlisted members.

During the past 10-12 years, some in our profession have relegated the roles of our NCO Corps to participation only in the execution phases of missions. We have in many ways made our NCOs inside-the-box thinkers. If you put an NCO inside of a box, then you have set parameters, and that NCO will remain inside that box. What Col. Ronald Ragin, commander of the 4th ID Sustainment Brigade, and I wanted to do was develop our NCOs to become creative

thinkers and step outside the box without limitations. We would raise the level of expectations for the NCO Corps by empowering our sergeants, cross-training within each Career Management Field and requiring our sergeants to participate in the planning, preparation and execution, to include assessment phases of our multinodal/distributed mission command concept.

One of the first recommendations I made to Ragin upon his arrival to the brigade was the reinstatement of sergeant's time training. We understood that to empower sergeants, we had to give back the training of individual Soldier tasks to the NCOs. Also understanding that NCOs train the small units of the Army — the squads, sections, crews and fire teams — Ragin and I made the decision to block time for sergeant's time training to be conducted Thursdays from 6:30 a.m. to noon.

The implementation of the eight-step training model, along with troop-leading procedures, has provided superb dividends for the program. Sergeants are using the task, conditions and standards format and assessing their Soldiers on four or five individual Soldier tasks with the Go/No Go concept. Our NCOs are responsible for identifying essential Soldier and small-unit tasks that support their unit's mission essential task list. They are also required to identify resources needed for the training and provide a list of those needs to their platoon sergeants. Sergeant's time training has also allowed our junior NCOs to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their Soldiers and has created dialogue to help NCOs know their Soldiers better. It has built several intangibles, including good order and discipline, cohesiveness within the squads and platoons, and trust from their leaders.

The second initiative of cross-training our NCOs within each CMF came from necessity because of the shortage of majors and captains within the brigade. With the brigade at about 50 percent strength with both majors and captains, NCOs had no choice but to fill in the gaps as they awaited inbound officers. This was definitely a new concept and way of thinking that, at first, made everyone involved a little skeptical and uncomfortable. Sergeants typically have one military occupational specialty and now were required to perform in other MOSs inside their career management field. An example of this initiative was the creation of an additional intermediate Movement Control Team filled with personnel mixed in the 88 CMF (Transportation Corps). A training concept was developed by our senior 88N (Transportation Management Coordinator), validated through the battalion commander to cross train 88Ms (Motor Transport Operator) on 88N skills to build capability and capacity in support of 4th ID missions.

"This is exactly the outside of the box thinking we are trying to achieve," Ragin said. The additional MCT mixed with 88Ns and 88Ms is conducting on the job training at the Arrival/Departure Airfield Control Group and railhead operations at the Fort Carson Railyard.

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The 92 (Quartermaster Corps) and 91 (Ordnance Corps) Civil are two additional fields the 4th ID Sustainment Brigade is cross-training their NCOs on. During my military career I have been a 92Y (Unit Supply Specialist) by trade. I am a Soldier first who focused in the 92Y realm. In today's Army, with the reduction of forces, we need our NCOs to be flexible enough to work in other MOSs inside their career fields. This is definitely a game changer for logisticians in the Army and by no means is this concept doctrinal or conventional, but it is exactly what the Army needs during these times in which the military is asking Soldiers to do more with less.

The third initiative that has tested our NCOs and required them to step out of their comfort zones was Ragin's multinodal distributed mission command concept. During his first 60-day assessment of the division's priorities combined with the brigade headquarters being assigned to U.S. Northern Command and Army North's priorities, Ragin recognized the need to dissect his staff into three Tactical Command Posts with an additional mobile command team. These TACs were filled with minimal personnel of about 40 Soldiers consisting of administration, operations, logistics, intelligence, communications and materiel management capabilities.

This multinodal concept was validated during a recent U.S. Northern Command exercise, Vibrant Response 16, in which one TAC was sent to Camp Atterbury, Indiana, to conduct a Defense Support of Civil Authorities operation, while a second TAC deployed to a field site at Fort Carson and had mission command of two battalions conducting mission essential task training. A third Command Post stayed inside the 4th Infantry Division Sustainment Operations Center and received real-time feeds of information from both TACs while continuing to sustain and generate readiness for all of Fort Carson units.

The mobile command team circulated to all TACs, ensuring connectivity and communications were consistently flattened, and all Soldiers had situational awareness of the operations.

"It was an incredible sight to see," Ragin said. "Our NCOs stepping up to the plate, filling the gaps, participating in the planning, preparation and execution of this new concept, which shows that it can be done and that sergeants can do more if they are allowed and required to do more."

The campaign plan of, "We are only as strong as our sergeants," has completely changed the culture of the 4th ID Sustainment Brigade. It has brought back memories of when sergeants ran the day-to-day operations of the United States Army. It reminds us of when sergeants were experts at the fundamentals, consisting of physical readiness training, weapons, maintenance, communications and first aid. A time when sergeants knew their Soldiers, were the example and led from the front. What started as a simple phrase, morphed into a campaign plan and has become a belief.

Infantry Division, which was recently recognized as a Distinguished Unit of the Quartermaster Regiment. Garza has served with the Rough Rider Brigade since September 2012, first as the command sergeant major for 43rd Special Troops Battalion (now 4th STB) and has been the brigade Command Sergeant Major since September 30, 2014. Garza enlisted into the U.S. Army in 1996 as a 92Y (Unit Supply Specialist) and is a native of Jasper, Texas.