

Former USASAC command sergeant major has seen how Army, Soldiers adapt

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After serving more than 30 years, Command Sgt. Maj. Dana S. Mason Jr. has seen how the Army adapts to the times. As the former command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command, he has seen how the Army adapts around the globe.

USASAC, based at Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, oversees the Army Material Command's Security Assistance Enterprise, developing and managing the Army's security assistance programs and foreign military sales to build allies' capacity.¹ USASAC's teams' reach spans 153 countries and organizations, making it "the U.S. Army's face to

the world.”² It manages more than 5,300 foreign military sales, valued at \$172 billion.³ USASAC also supports the United States’ Combatant Commands’ engagement strategies and strengthens the United States’ widespread global partnerships.⁴

Despite his position as a former senior enlisted advisor to such a large and far-flung organization, Mason has kept a Soldier-centric view of his role that serves as guidance for NCOs at all levels.⁵

“The [commanding general’s] guidance to me is: ‘Go check on Soldiers,’” he said.

He spends so much of his time traveling, interacting with, and helping Soldiers, because, he said, “They see my picture but (otherwise) they never get to meet the person. I just want to meet the Soldiers.”



He said he wants to make sure he has met as many of his Soldiers as possible so, if there are problems in the future, they feel comfortable giving him a call or sending an email.⁶

Mason himself benefitted from the advice and career guidance of the NCOs in his life, both during his time in the Army and long before.

Mason was raised by his single mother until he was in elementary school, when his mom remarried to the man Mason calls his father.⁷

“So I became a military brat at the age of 7 or 8,” Mason said. “He gave me direction, and I decided I wanted to join the military when I graduated high school.”

Mason's father was originally a combat engineer, but after being injured, he worked in an Army supply room. "I used to help him with his hand receipts when I was younger," Mason said. "I was in high school doing hand receipts and other supply work."⁸

Mason wanted to be an Airborne Ranger, but his father did not approve, saying, "Well, son, you probably need to be a supply guy," Mason recalled. "'They get to stay in the rear; they don't go out to the field,'" he remembered his father telling him. Then Mason laughed and said, "Which is not true."⁹

He followed his father's advice and entered the Army as a 76Y, Army unit supply specialist, but he never gave up his goal of being a Ranger.¹⁰

His first duty assignment was in Germany, and even though there was no opportunity for him to attend Airborne School, he said, "I was the only private out in the field walking around with my rucksack. People used to ask, 'What are you doing, Mason?'"

His reply? "I'm getting ready for Ranger School," he said.¹¹

He spent his free time in Germany marching up and down mountains in full ruck and exercised continually to be as fit as possible.¹²

At his next duty assignment, at the U.S. Army Information Systems Command at the Pentagon¹³, Mason, a specialist, saw an article in Army magazine that said the 75th Ranger Regiment needed Soldiers in the supply military occupational specialty and promised quick promotions to sergeant or staff sergeant for those who qualified and were accepted. He didn't make it to Ranger School then, but he clipped it out. He still has the clipping, attached to his Ranger graduation picture that decorates his office.¹⁴

"I always keep it right there to remember where I came from, what drove me to get there," he said.

But he wasn't there yet. After the Pentagon, his next assignment was with the B Battery, 1/319th Field Artillery, 82nd Airborne Division¹⁵, and a tragedy at the Ranger School would keep him from earning that tab for a while longer.

Late on the night of Feb. 15, 1995, Soldiers in Ranger Training Class 3-95 were in the last days of their nine-week course, having already completed the desert and mountain courses. During the last phase, the swamp, two companies conducted an operation in a rain-swelled river and thick fog.¹⁶ In the fog and confusion, four Soldiers stayed in the 52-degree river too long and died of hypothermia.

The ensuing investigation into the Ranger School's process took years, and enrollment was limited to special operations forces.¹⁷

Mason had deployed in support of Operation Desert Storm/Desert Shield, and his next assignment was A Company, 1/3d Special Forces Group.¹⁸

While he was there, he competed in the Soldier of the Year competition for his brigade as a favor to his brigade sergeant major. "I didn't win, but I did pretty well, and he was very appreciative," Mason said. "You know, Special Forces guys: No one is going to want to go to the Soldier of the Year board."¹⁹

After the competition, the appreciative brigade sergeant major asked Mason what he wanted to do next. Mason didn't hesitate: "I want to go to Ranger School."²⁰

"He said, 'When do you want to go?'" Mason recalled. "'Right now,' I said. I was in really good shape. I used to work out three times a day."

After more than a decade in the Army, Mason had finally made it to Ranger School. Qualifying for Ranger School is no mean feat, but getting in is easier than getting through. Fewer than 40 percent of those who start Ranger School earn their Ranger Tabs on that attempt.²¹

Since 1995, the Ranger School has been divided into three phases — previously known as the crawl, walk, and run phases and now called Benning, Mountain, and Florida phases. The first phase is made up of two components. The first, the Ranger assessment phase (known as “RAP week”) consists of grueling qualifying physical tests, combat water survival assessment, land navigation tests, and runs, marches, and confidence courses. The second, known as the “Darby Phase,” trains Soldiers to conduct patrols and assesses their abilities in a variety of operations.²²

The Mountain phase provides instruction on military mountaineering tasks, mobility training, and combat patrol operations in a mountainous environment.²³ The students must execute a variety of combat patrol missions in the mountains, and patrol operations account for more than 60 percent of the “recycles,” students who must repeat a phase of the school before graduating.²⁴ Mason was “recycled” in the Mountain phase.²⁵

“But the tab is still the same,” Mason said of overcoming the challenges of Ranger School. “It happens to the best of us. But it gave me a chance to gain some weight, gain some strength. So when the other guys came in, the guys who recycled were a little stronger.”²⁶

He had momentum going into the final phase, Florida, where students receive instruction on waterborne operations, small boat movements, and stream crossings upon arrival.²⁷

Mason had been promoted to sergeant quickly because of the Airborne Promotion Advantage program. He credits his Ranger Tab directly for his promotion to staff sergeant.²⁸

“I was the only E6 on the promotion list that time,” he said. “The cutoff score was 998, but because I had the Ranger Tab, I got promoted to E6. I was the only person in the Army in my MOS to get promoted.”

From then on, he wanted to be part of the Ranger community. He had hoped to become part of the Ranger Training Brigade, but the Ranger branch manager told Mason that if he wanted to “live the life of Ranger,” he needed to join the 75th Ranger Regiment. “That’s where the Rangers are,” Mason said he was told.²⁹

“In the community, we say, ‘The tab is just a school, the scroll is a way of life,’” Mason said.”

He was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, at Fort Benning, Georgia.³⁰ He said he didn’t really understand what the 75th Ranger Regiment did before his conversation with the branch manager. His time there would end up being one of the highlights of his Army career.³¹



“It’s very tough in the regiment,” Mason said. “It takes a while to get your body used to that type of physical activity. I thought I was in decent shape. I could run 2 miles in 12 minutes, but down there, there are guys running [2 miles] in 9, 10 minutes.”

In addition to the physical challenges, life in the regiment took its toll in other ways. Mason said he checked his calendar one year, and he had been gone on training or TDY more than 270 days.³¹

As a supply specialist, Mason said, he went on assignments early and stayed afterward to shut everything down. “We supply guys, we got used pretty well,” he said. “We can’t complain, though. We’re there with some of the best infantrymen in the world.”³²

The training he received and the responsibility given to even junior enlisted Soldiers more than made up for the challenges, he said. “The way they think there: ‘Sua sponte!’ – of their own accord,” he said. “It’s just the way Rangers make things happen.”³⁴

He spent three years with the 75th Ranger Regiment and made sergeant first class before his next assignment. He says his time at the Ranger School and with the 75th Ranger Regiment were also critical to his advancement in the Army.³⁴

“There’s no doubt in my mind that my promotions from sergeant first class through sergeant major were on account of me going through Ranger School as a sergeant,” Mason said. He said completing Ranger School is somewhat typical of infantrymen, “but for a supply guy, it makes you stand out among your peers,” he said.³⁵

After his first stint with the 75th Ranger Regiment, he next spent 18 months in the Ranger Training Battalion. Having seen the Ranger School from both sides, he wanted to make sure the Army knew that even though the training changes and the Ranger School adjusts with the times, “the standards are always high,” he said.³⁶ “It changes, but everyone who gets through is a Ranger.”

He returned to the 75th Ranger Regiment just before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the ensuing conflicts. He deployed three times with the regiment, twice to Afghanistan and once to Iraq. Mason has deployed a total of six times.³⁷



Mason had set himself up well with his experience, but he still needed some help from his NCOs to reach his goals. From the time he joined the Army, his dream job had been to be the senior enlisted advisor to the Army’s Regimental Corps. But he felt his career had stalled a bit after he made battalion command sergeant major, and then he received another battalion command sergeant major post.³⁸

He spoke to a senior NCO whom he trusted. That NCO told Mason, “You’re not qualified as a quartermaster. You haven’t done a brigade support battalion. You need to support a BCT. That’s what quartermasters do. Until you do that, you’re not going to be certified to do the job.”³⁹

That NCO's advice helped Mason kick-start his career.⁴⁰

Good leaders provide "little nuggets like that," Mason said. "We think we're good, and they're like, 'Nah, not quite.'"

He remembered another sergeant major, a logistician, who was "phenomenal," "just an expert" at NCO Evaluation Reports. "Being around him and him teaching me how to write NCOERs helped me to help other NCOs as I looked at their NCOERs." Because of the help he received, Mason was able to build their skills and give Soldiers better feedback in this critical development tool.⁴¹

After following his mentor's career advice, Mason's next assignment was as command sergeant major for the 407th BSB, 2nd BCT, 82nd Airborne. After that, he was named the command sergeant major of the 45th Sustainment Brigade, 8th Theater Sustainment Command.⁴²

Near the end of a deployment to Afghanistan with the 45th Sustainment Brigade, he was ready for his next assignment and was selected to interview for the Regimental Corps position, a one-star command. But he was also selected to interview for USASAC, a two-star command. He wasn't very familiar with the security assistance mission, but he and the then-commander, Maj. Gen. Mark McDonald, "just clicked," Mason said.⁴³

And even though he believes he would have made a good Regimental Corps command sergeant major, he is glad he joined USASAC.⁴⁴

"The best part about the job is, I think, the travel," he said of something he has enjoyed throughout his career. He takes 30 to 40 trips a year, many of them overseas. He enjoys that and especially interacting with Soldiers. "You can't beat the travel and the people you get to meet, different foods you get to try out. But mainly it's just interacting with my Soldiers downrange. Once I get a chance to meet them, then they have no problem reaching out to me on email."

After more than 30 years in the Army, Mason knows that his Soldiers are the Army's future. ⁴⁵

"I take pride in seeing my young Soldiers now, that were coming up then," he said. "Now they're first sergeants, sergeants major; some of them are officers, warrant officers. I look back at them and say, 'Wow, that's my legacy.'"

"They're going to take my place," he continued. "My time's limited; I understand that. I have to move on, move to the side, and let these younger guys take it over. But I still want to play while I can."

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Dana S. Mason was the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command and offers advice on:

