



Sgt. Courtney Williams, left, Aerial Delivery Directorate NCO, and Sgt. Candice Holmes, Personnel Parachute Team subject matter expert, explain an air-drop project they are working on with engineers from the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center in Natick, Mass. (Photo by Martha C. Koester / NCO Journal)

Skillful NCOs Play An Integral Role At Natick Labs

By Martha C. Koester – NCO Journal

If a Soldier wears it, eats it or sleeps under it, chances are a noncommissioned officer helped contribute toward its development at the Natick Soldier Systems Center in Natick, Mass. As the scientists, engineers and equipment designers focus on the science behind the Soldier, a small force of NCOs are charged with sustaining Natick's mission – maximizing the warrior's survivability and combat effectiveness.

It's easy for Soldiers first assigned to the small installation to experience culture shock after coming from posts with larger Soldier populations. Located in Massachusetts, the birthplace of the U.S. Army, the SSC employs about 120 active-duty Soldiers and 2,250 civilians. The majority of the Soldiers at Natick serve as human

resource volunteers for studies, ensuring every product is Soldier tested and approved.

NCOs work at SSC's several tenant units, including the Army's Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center, also known as Natick Labs, and the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. At Natick, NCOs fill roles such as coordinators for the HRVs taking part in studies, parachute riggers in the parachute shop or noncommissioned officers in charge at USARIEM.

For Sgt. 1st Class Adam Nicholas Adams, a senior combat advisor for Operational Forces Interface Group, his 15 years of experience as a Soldier has proved essential in serving as a liaison between the



Noncommissioned officers help Aerial Delivery Directorate researchers test the RA-1 parachute's harness for comfort and fit in the Doriot Climactic Chamber's Arctic unit. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center)

Army and researchers on projects. OFIG works closely with NSRDEC on equipment.

Adams is often deployed to Army installations — whether in Afghanistan or Fort Bragg, N.C. — to field requests for information from Soldiers on equipment, which will be used in the development of new projects. The NCO extrapolates information from Soldiers in the battlefield, compiles it, then presents it to NSRDEC researchers, who may make adjustments to products.

“My experience in having deployed to combat zones helped me understand exactly what [kinds of issues with equipment Soldiers encountered] because they were exactly the same problems that I had faced,” said Adams, an 11B infantryman. “My deployment time became really important [for researchers] to understand the nature of combat and how we operate in that environment.”

“Coming from the ground up [as a Soldier] and having different tiers of leadership along the way allowed me to interface with [lower-ranked enlisted] Soldiers in a way that no one really can unless they are [an NCO],” he said. “There’s a certain bond that happens ... and when you have that, Soldiers tend to really open up to you [in the field]. For the cross talk and information exchange, it just has to be an NCO [in my job]. I can’t imagine it would work with anyone else.”

Respect for the Rank

Being an NCO comes with its own set of benefits when working with other professionals at Natick.

“When [researchers] see that you are an NCO, you’re afforded credibility when you walk into a room by nature of your rank,” Adams said. “You bolster that by the way you speak and carry yourself as a professional. We carry ourselves pretty proudly, but we also carry ourselves very professionally, because that’s what they expect from us and that’s what we project.”

Aside from having a group of HRVs under his charge, Master Sgt. Brian David Gemmill, senior NCO of Headquarters Research and Development Detachment at NSRDEC, is on an advisory group and offers a “non-engineering stance” on newly developed equipment. He helps to determine if a new product meets the needs of Soldiers, he said.

“What I try to focus on is working with the acquisition professionals and ensuring that the ideas coming from the field are based off an operational need,” Gemmill said. “Most of these scientists and engineers here haven’t been in the military, so they are working in an academic capacity and they may not understand if the Army or Soldiers are saying, ‘This piece of equipment needs to be improved upon.’ They may not understand

the backstory on what the problems are with this piece of equipment, and that's where myself and these NCOs who have hypothetically carried that piece of equipment can say, 'Here's the problem.'

In addition to helping the scientists and engineers in project development, Gemmill said he also trains and continues to develop the Soldiers serving as research volunteers.

"We're also in charge of maintaining their tactical proficiency while [the volunteers] are here," Gemmill said. "They're at Natick for 90 days of research studies, and we want to make sure they are just as proficient when they get to their first duty stations three months later as they were when they graduated [advanced individual training]."

Part of the Equation

NCOs are necessary cogs in the machine at Natick, and work collaboratively with the scientists, engineers and equipment designers to bring projects to fruition. At the Aerial Delivery Directorate at NSRDEC, engineers work side-by-side with NCOs such as Sgt. Courtney Williams, Aerial Delivery Directorate NCO, and Sgt. Candice Holmes, Personnel Parachute Team subject matter expert.

"The most interesting people [we work with] are these guys right here," said NSRDEC mechanical engineer Marc Tardiff, pointing at Williams and Holmes. "It's just amazing how helpful they are. We probably pull them in every direction possible, and they still keep coming back for more. ... [We appreciate the] knowledge that [NCOs] have, and they get a chance to influence how a project is being developed and created. Then, when they move on to their next assignment, they have that much more knowledge of a particular item and can share it."

"In the field, there are a lot of myths about [equipment like parachutes]," Holmes said. "[Soldiers will complain], but they don't really know the technology and the statistics behind the parachute and how much testing it went through. When I go back into the field [for my next assignment], I can squash those myths and actually show them what I have learned at Natick through the testing and the systems."

Working at Natick has given NCOs a new appreciation for Army equipment and the people who developed it.

"We have the [military] experience; they are the engineers, they are the designers," Williams said. "[When you're using your equipment,] you don't really realize all the processes it has to go through to get to us [Soldiers]. It takes time, years and years, to get to us."



Various checks and balances are performed on equipment, such as rucksacks, before the Army rolls out a new product. NCOs serve on advisory panels or as liaisons between the Army and project researchers. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development and Engineering Center)

“Seeing this side of things, where our parachutes come from, how much testing they go through before they get to the actual units is amazing,” Holmes said.

Broadening their Fields

The opportunities for broadening weren't lost on NCOs such as Williams, who said he appreciated getting cross-trained in his field and learning more about the Personnel Parachute Team while working on new projects.

Staff Sgt. Eric M. Murray, combat arms NCO at Natick Labs, deals exclusively with volunteers, which has afforded him the opportunity to broaden his leadership skills.

“I have been able to develop more of my leadership style because I don't deal with my actual military occupational specialty as an 11B infantryman on a daily basis,” Murray said. “We get all kinds of Soldiers from all different MOSs. I get to see not just how the 11 bravo world works, but how other branches of the Army work as well.”

NCOs agreed that their experience at Natick, the only active-duty Army installation in New England, has been unique and unparalleled.

“Because I'm also friends with some of the [scientists and engineers who work here], I talk to them and see where some of the products that I have actually worn

come from,” Murray said. “I get to see some of the ideas that are going into the future.”

“[Working at Natick] really has recharged my view of what and how broad the military is,” Adams said. “It's not just the very obvious units out there that are doing great things in the battlefield, but there is an entire infrastructure of civilians, contracting professionals, academia and all the military acquisitions folks here who are all pushing you forward to cross the finish line. A lot of folks sitting in little, tucked-away offices are dedicating themselves to trying to find a new way to create better readiness on battlefields. They are doing amazing things and leaning forward on amazing projects.”

After his experience at Natick, Staff Sgt. William D. Chandler hopes to open other Soldiers' eyes to the research aspect of the medical field. Chandler is the NCO in charge for the Office of Medical Support and Oversight, USARIEM.

“What being at Natick has done for me is helped me to understand where our military equipment comes from, why we use it and why it was designed,” he said. “When you get to see altitude studies and others like it, it gives you a greater appreciation of why we have a lot of the rules in the Army. If an NCO has an opportunity to come to a military research facility like this, I would say do it because you get to see a side of the Army that hardly anyone gets to see.” ■



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