



Spc. Kristal Calderon, an information technology support specialist with the 35th Signal Brigade (Theater Tactical) at Fort Gordon, Ga., practices carefully donning and removing personal protective equipment during pre-deployment training at the brigade's logistical warehouse at Fort Gordon. The training was mandatory for the Soldiers who deployed to Liberia in late October to add their communications equipment and expertise to the fight against the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. (Photo by Capt. Lindsay D. Roman/U.S. Army)

## U.S. Army Africa CSM

### NCOs Are the Ones Keeping Soldiers Safe on Ebola Mission

*By Meghan Portillo*

**F**rom designing and building Ebola Treatment Units to providing transportation to health care workers, NCOs have proven to be instrumental in the U.S. military's support of Operation United Assistance in Liberia, said the command sergeant major of U.S. Army Africa, Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffery Stitzel. But their greatest contribution, he said, has been keeping U.S. Soldiers healthy by enforcing standards and discipline.

Stitzel was the first NCO on the ground with US-ARAF's commander, Maj. Gen. Darryl Williams, when they arrived in Liberia on Sept. 16 to organize the U.S. military's response to the Ebola crisis. Rather than the

traditional adversaries in combat, the main foes these Soldiers are facing can be avoided only by adhering to a strict hygiene regimen, he said.

"The biggest advice I have for any noncommissioned officer deploying here (to Liberia) is to get educated about the disease and really understand it, because it is important," Stitzel said. "They need to realize how important discipline is. That's what NCOs do. So when we identify what the training requirements are, ... noncommissioned officers are the ones who are going to train those tasks and then enforce those standards in-theater. Discipline is what keeps our Soldiers safe."



U.S. Marines from the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force Crises Response 14-2, get their temperature checked as they exit a KC-130. All U.S. Soldiers in Liberia are required to have their temperatures taken and logged at least twice each day, as a rise in temperature may be the first sign of infection with the Ebola virus. (Photo by Pfc. Craig Philbrick/U.S. Army)

As of Dec. 2, more than 17,256 Ebola cases have been reported and 6,113 individuals have died of the virus in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, according to information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Liberia alone has seen 7,650 cases and 3,155 deaths. Four Ebola cases have been reported in the United States — two imported cases, including one death, and two locally acquired cases. A New York doctor who contracted the virus after treating patients in Guinea, as well as two Dallas nurses who treated the individual who died of the virus have since recovered and have been discharged from their hospitals.

The spread of the virus can be stopped only by quickly identifying and isolating infected individuals and those with whom they have had close contact, the CDC states. The virus is not spread by casual contact, and the CDC considers Soldiers deployed to Liberia to be low risk, as they are not in contact with Ebola patients while in-theater. Each Soldier is still meticulously monitored for symptoms including a rise in temperature, vomiting, diarrhea or unexplained bruising or bleeding, and measures have been put into place to immediately recognize any who need to be routed to care. Close monitoring and strict hygiene routines will better protect potentially exposed individuals and everyone around them, Stitzel said.

## Discipline is saving lives

Education is the best way for NCOs to set themselves and their Soldiers up for a safe and successful mission in Liberia, said Sgt. Maj. Doug Hall, who was the Operation United Assistance engineering sergeant major in Liberia during the initial weeks of the effort.

“Pay very close attention to the pre-deployment training,” Hall said. “The training is important. You need to understand the transmission of the disease and how to protect yourself and your Soldiers. And you need to understand what you are coming here to do. You are not coming to treat people, you are coming to either build or provide logistical services. Be mission-focused, and always keep safety in mind.”

U.S. Army Soldiers are in Liberia to provide mission command, logistical, engineering and living support to the organizations that are treating patients and fighting the spread of the virus. Even though they do not have direct contact with Ebola patients, Soldiers are required to lower their risk of exposure by stepping in a shallow container of chlorine bleach solution before entering buildings and by washing their hands frequently with diluted bleach.

Soldiers must also have their temperatures taken and logged at least twice each day, as a rise in temperature to 100.4 degrees may be the first sign of infection. Stitzel



said Soldiers can't get into most buildings without their temperatures being taken. A record is kept of each Soldier's temperatures every day he or she is in the country, and close monitoring will continue through a 21-day isolation period after a Soldier has left the country. These measures are in place to ensure U.S. Soldiers do not contract the virus, and, in the unlikely event one of them should become infected, to prevent the virus' further spread by identifying those individuals before they become contagious.

NCOs are the key to enforcing these preventative measures and protecting Soldiers' health, Stitzel said. From avoiding exposure to the Ebola virus and malaria to lowering the risk of accidents, NCOs save lives by ensuring every Soldier follows protocol.

"Whether it's in this Ebola environment or anywhere else in Africa, safety is about discipline," Stitzel said. "It starts with, 'Do you have your bug spray? Are you taking your malaria pills?' Malaria is our biggest threat, and it is easily mitigated by discipline. So we come up with different plans. There is a sergeant who looks at everybody and says, 'OK, take out your pills and put them in your mouth,' and then he watches them take it. The commanding general and I do the same thing every morning. He is my battle buddy, and I'm his."

## Great NCO leadership

Stitzel said everywhere he goes in Liberia, he sees exemplary NCOs. Their hands-on style of leadership has contributed greatly to this particular mission, he said.

"There is an Air Force senior master sergeant – Senior Master Sgt. Michael Jordan – who is here with the joint task force port operating team," Stitzel said. "He has a little over 100 folks working out at the airport, bringing in all the supplies. They take care of all the passengers who come in and all of the equipment that comes in, as we start building out this theater. I watch his airmen and the Soldiers who work for him, and they are doing phenomenal work."

"You go out and see the Seabees out there, and you've got a petty officer directing his sailors in two- and three-person teams, getting the land set for us to build these life-support areas. Sgt Maj. Doug Hall went in and helped design and coordinate with the contractors to build the living areas and work areas. These tents and all of these [buildings] that are going up, somebody has to divide up the plan and tell them where to do it, how we are going to do it and set it up. Hall has been the right NCO at the right time to get done what needs to get done."

In a partnership with the armed forces of Liberia, Hall's unit was responsible for starting construction of



U.S. Marines and Soldiers enter a U.S. Marine Corps MV-22 aircraft after a site survey of a future Ebola Treatment Unit site near Barclayville, Grand Kru, Liberia. The U.S. Agency for International Development is the lead U.S. government organization for Operation United Assistance. The U.S. Army is supporting the effort by providing mission command, logistics, training and engineering support to contain the Ebola virus outbreak. (Photo by Pfc. Craig Philbrick/U.S. Army)

the Ebola Treatment Units, the Monrovia Medical Unit in the country's capital and the headquarters area.

"We have all of our officers and our engineers – they design, and I am more of a get-out-there-and-make-it-happen person," Hall said. "It's been important to get NCO eyes onto what they are designing on paper to develop a product, to get from the conceptual stage to actually building and get the mission done. I think NCOs here have brought that to the plate."

### **'I'm proud to be part of this joint effort'**

On Oct. 25, USARAF transferred authority of Operation United Assistance to the 101st Airborne Division. The 101st Airborne Division will continue the work USARAF began: overseeing the joint military operations and providing mission command, logistical, engineering and living support to those fighting to stop the virus.

After witnessing the large-scale joint effort – which includes the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marine Corps and Liberian military units – of OUA, Stitzel said this deployment will always stand out in his mind.

"I was at the Monrovia Medical Unit today, and right there at the airport you see the joint force working together," Stitzel said.

U.S. sailors completed the land preparation and built latrine and external structures; U.S. airmen were in

charge of building and setting up the structures, and U.S. Army engineers contributed by building the floors at the airport's now-functional 25-bed hospital.

"To me, personally, I think it's an amazing opportunity, not only to help out our airmen, but help out in a global situation — helping out wherever we are needed," said Air Force Master Sgt. Will Villalobos, who helped lead the team working at the airport. "We will always be ready at a moment's notice. I'm proud, so proud, to be part of this team and to help out the people of Liberia in every way we can."

Stitzel said NCOs should take pride in this unique mission and in their work alongside so many other organizations assisting the Liberian people. He has been impressed, he said, by the swift and effective cooperation between the United States and Liberian militaries, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Doctors Without Borders and others.

"I've been on a few deployments, and they were all very important missions. But this is definitely going to be one I look back on with pride. We are here in support of USAID, and so I feel very proud to not only be a part of this fight against Ebola but to work with all of the other federal agencies and departments that are here working so well together. It has been a great experience and a blessing to being a part of this mission of helping the people of Liberia." ■



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