



Staff Sgt. Miguel Valle, senior support advisor, Maneuver Team 5211, 5th SFAB, leads an Indonesian Army patrol, Nov. 2, 2022. SFABs have the unique mission of providing the conventional forces of U.S. partners and allies with advising professionals who are subject matter experts in their MOS. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Trevor Franklin)

# SFABs and the NCO Corps

*By Command Sgt. Maj. Charles Smith and Command Sgt. Maj. Brian Robert*  
5th Security Force Assistance Brigade

**T**he 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) was activated on Feb. 8, 2018. Establishing SFABs addressed a historical necessity dating to the inception of international partnerships and alliances, essential for warfare adaptation (Security Force Assistance Command (SFAC), 2024).

The seminal role of military advisors traces back to figures like Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian officer whose expertise fortified Gen. George Washington's Continental Army during the Revolutionary War (National Park Service, 2021).

SFABs, carrying forward this legacy, respond to the contemporary imperative of Security Force Assistance (SFA) in modern Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). At the same time, they offer NCOs unprecedented avenues for professional development and advancement.

## Understanding SFABs

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* makes strengthening alliances and attracting new partners one of three lines of effort, stating that "allies and partners provide complementary capabilities and forces along with unique perspectives, regional relationships, and information that improve our understanding of the environment and expand our options" (Mattis, 2018). The answer to that call was the formation of SFAC and its six subordinate brigades.

SFABs are not the same as Special Forces (SF). Each enterprise has distinct differences in mission set. Special Forces was charged with a "critical role in the 2020 Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy" to focus on "smaller, more select partner special operations-type forces" to address unconventional warfare (Anderson, 2023).

SFABs have the unique mission of providing the conventional forces of U.S. partners and allies with advising professionals who are subject matter experts in their Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). Unlike SF, SFABs “support specific warfighting function requirements for a conventional partner force” (Thielenhaus, 2021).

## The Significance of SFABs

SFABs play a pivotal role in addressing the evolving strategic landscape, particularly in international partnerships and security assistance efforts. Regionally aligned across five Combatant Commands (COCOMs), SFABs serve as proactive agents of engagement, enhancing the U.S. military’s readiness and preparedness for potential conflicts (Feickert, 2024).

Unlike previous models, SFABs offer a persistent presence in host nations. The brigades foster enduring relationships and cultural understanding, essential for effective security assistance (Matisek & Commons, 2021).

This strategic positioning allows SFABs to provide interoperability and build trust with partner forces, positioning U.S. forces ahead of potential conflict scenarios, a concept often called “left of bang” (Anderson, 2023).

Gen. Andrew P. Poppas, commander of U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), lauds SFABs as the vanguard of global campaigning and integrated deterrence, emphasizing their crucial role in building trust and interoperability worldwide (SFAC, 2024).

They are composed of specially selected, trained, and empowered advisors, enabling them to effectively collaborate with partners while allowing brigade combat teams to focus on readiness and modernization efforts (SFAC, 2024).

The quality of SFAB advisors influences current operations and future recruitment. The organization could potentially serve as FORSCOM’s most elite force, equipped with force-multiplying skills and expertise (Wilson, 2022).

Moreover, SFABs are a strategic springboard for fostering international relationships while alleviating the burden on conventional forces conducting security force assistance missions outside their organizational Mission Essential Task List (METL) (Anderson, 2023).

During competition and crisis, SFABs play a dual role, building trust and interoperability while enabling swift responses from the Joint Force and interagency teams through liaison efforts (Feickert, 2024).

In essence, SFABs act as a bridge to future international relationships, relieving overburdened conventional forces by effectively executing security assistance missions in a dynamic global environment.

## The Role of NCOs in SFABs

NCOs are the backbone of SFABs, comprising 85% of personnel (U.S. Army Public Affairs, 2017). Tasked with company- and battalion-level advising, SFAB NCOs undergo specialized training, including the Combat



The 5th SFAB worked alongside 3rd Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland, 11th SFAB of the British Army, “The Black Watch,” and 40 Soldiers from the 6th Infantry of The Royal Thai Army from October through November 2023. SFABs act as a bridge to future international relationships, relieving overburdened conventional forces by effectively executing security assistance missions in a dynamic global environment. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Joseph E. D. Knoch)

Advisor Training Course (CATC), to equip them with the requisite skills. Moreover, SFABs afford NCOs unique opportunities to operate beyond their traditional echelons, fostering professional growth and leadership development.

Stovepiped leadership, prevalent in many conventional units, stifles decision-making at critical moments, resulting in missed opportunities and failures at friction points. In contrast, SFABs emphasize NCO empowerment, enabling them to make informed decisions autonomously, thereby enhancing operational effectiveness.

By engaging at the strategic level, NCOs gain a comprehensive understanding of the broader context and purpose behind their actions, transcending mere tactical execution.

Understanding larger Army problems provides NCOs with invaluable insights, augmenting their capabilities and value within SFABs beyond those of their counterparts in conventional units.

This holistic approach cultivates more informed and versatile NCOs, equipped to navigate complex operational environments and contribute meaningfully to mission success. As the linchpins of SFAB operations, NCOs play a pivotal role in shaping outcomes and advancing U.S. strategic objectives on the global stage.

## Specialized Training and Skill Development

An assignment to SFAB automatically includes enhanced training to qualify as an Advisor. CATC is the institutional training requirement for all NCOs assigned to an SFAB (SFAC, 2023). This comprehensive course provides basic and advanced training in fields including medical, indirect fires, foreign weapons, nonstandard logistics, battle staff, and isolated Soldier training.

Regardless of MOS, all NCOs undergo this foundational training. SFAB NCOs must be professional leaders with extensive experience in the profession of arms, capable of solving complex issues and possessing common sense.

In addition to CATC, NCOs are encouraged to pursue institutional training in their MOS and beyond their specialty to enable teams to achieve multiple training objectives while collaborating with host nations.

These additional courses, known as Mission Enhancing Schools, are integral to NCO development. SFAC emphasizes it by enabling attendance to any school in the Army Training Requirements and Resources System (ATTRS) course catalog linked to a host nation training requirement.

## Professional Growth

“NCOs are responsible for conducting standards-based, performance-oriented training,” according to the U.S. Army NCO Professional Development Guide (Department of the Army, 2023). However, many don’t have the opportunity to gain experience beyond the company or battalion level (Saxby, 2021).



Advisors from 3rd Squadron and 4th Battalion, 5th SFAB, participate in a live fire exercise, June 26, 2024. Assignment to an SFAB automatically includes enhanced training to qualify as an advisor. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Sara Ingrao)

In SFABs, Company Advisor Teams (CATs) advise at the brigade and division levels, while Maneuver Advisor Teams (MATs) operate at the company and battalion levels. This doctrinal relationship allows NCOs to work beyond their current expertise levels, fostering the experiences necessary for developing well-rounded professional leaders.

The U.S. Army’s development guide emphasizes providing challenging, relevant, and rigorous leadership training, education, and experiences. SFABs challenge NCOs to operate at higher echelons of influence, conducting advising missions in foreign environments while potentially overcoming language barriers to achieve strategic objectives aligned with the U.S. Army’s leader development strategy (Department of the Army, 2023).

SFAB NCOs must demonstrate their core attributes and competencies to host nations to build trust and confidence in the U.S. military. Living alongside



Sgt. 1st Class Albert Jacques and Sgt. 1st Class Lester Reed, 5th SFAB advisors, conduct an after-action review with a Mongolian squad during a field training exercise in Mongolia. SFABs challenge NCOs to operate at higher echelons of influence, conducting advising missions in foreign environments while potentially overcoming language barriers to achieve strategic objectives aligned with the U.S. Army's leader development strategy. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

international partners as part of a small, four to 12-person team encourages NCOs to exercise mission command. Through collaborative efforts, NCOs identify operational and capability gaps in host nation activities and recommend solutions to enhance capacity.

Often, NCOs work across multiple host nation military services, civilian agencies, and multiservice components, providing unique experiences not typically encountered in conventional Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs).

### Testimonials from SFAB NCOs

Staff Sgt. Elijah Bolden, a combat medic deployed to the Indo-Pacific region twice with an SFAB, brings invaluable insights into the unique challenges he faced. His team's actions during their assignment had a profound strategic impact, particularly during advising duties in Bangladesh.

Bolden provided critical assessment and advice to Bengali service members on Tactical Combat Casualty Care (TC3) and tactical evacuation, directly influencing their preparedness for African missions under the U.N. banner.

Notably, he was tasked with leading battalion-level medical support planning, a responsibility typically reserved for higher command levels — showcasing the trust bestowed on SFAB NCOs.

Sgt. 1st Class Ronald Thomas, a combat engineer, recounts his experiences in Thailand advising the Royal Thai Army. Witnessing different approaches to command and control, Thomas observed how SFAB's mission command philosophy inspired shifts in mindset among host nation officers.

His collaboration with SFAB intelligence advisors gave him unique opportunities for professional growth and skill development, enhancing his contributions to the mission and his capacity to provide accurate assessments to higher commands.

Command Sgt. Maj. Gregory Harmon reflects on his tenure with SFABs as one of the highlights of his military career. He emphasized that the caliber of SFAB personnel represents the best of the U.S. Army, enabling partner nations to surpass previous capacity limitations.

Harmon underscored the pivotal roles SFAB NCOs played in strengthening partner armies' NCO corps, ultimately contributing to regional security and stability. His observations highlight the transformative impact of SFAB NCOs in shaping global strategic environments and fostering international partnerships.

These testimonials highlight the pivotal roles SFAB NCOs play, showcasing their adaptability, expertise,

and dedication to advancing U.S. strategic objectives and fostering international cooperation.

## Call to Action

NCOs seeking unparalleled opportunities for professional growth and global impact should consider joining an SFAB. With a strategic presence across five combatant commands and a mission focused on proactive engagement and security assistance, SFABs offer a unique platform to hone leadership skills and build enduring international relationships (Feickert, 2024).

By becoming part of the SFAB community, NCOs can enhance U.S. military readiness and preparedness for potential conflicts while relieving the conventional force from missions outside their METL (Anderson, 2023).

Through specialized training and hands-on experience in advising roles, SFAB NCOs are empowered to make strategic decisions, collaborate with partner forces, and shape the global strategic environment (SFAC, 2024).

To become a force multiplier and a U.S. Army ambassador on a global stage, visit [www.army.mil/SFAB](http://www.army.mil/SFAB), email [5thSFABrecruiting@gmail.com](mailto:5thSFABrecruiting@gmail.com), or message them through Facebook and Instagram. ■

## SFABS CONTACT INFORMATION

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**Undecided?** Write the SFAC Recruiting Team: [usarmy.liberty.forscom.mbx.sfac-recruiting-accessions-group@army.mil](mailto:usarmy.liberty.forscom.mbx.sfac-recruiting-accessions-group@army.mil).

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