

# THE SMALL UNIT EXCELLENCE CONFERENCE

## POST-CONFERENCE REPORT

28-30 APRIL 2009



# UNLEASH THE POWER

## THE BASIS FOR THE CONFERENCE - A MORAL OBLIGATION

The concept for the Small Unit Excellence Conference was predicated on what organizers felt was a moral obligation to begin a national, cross-community dialogue on how to address the issues small units face. Four out of five service members killed in action in the American era of war (1950 to the present) have been infantry (primarily light infantry), and in Iraq and Afghanistan, 89 percent of all killed in action were small units, according to retired Army Maj. Gen. Bob Scales in *The Past and Present as Prologue: Future Warfare Through the Lens of Contemporary Conflicts*, Center for a New American Security (CNAS), 2009. Add to these grim statistics the fatality numbers for America's first responders: since September 11, 2001, over 2,340 law enforcement and firefighters have lost their lives in the line of duty, according to data from the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Law Enforcement Officers' Memorial Fund. These numbers make a compelling case for organizing an approach to small unit excellence. The conference was created to capitalize on the superb work and bodies of knowledge that currently exist separately within communities engaged in some aspect of small unit development, and to begin to integrate the array of activities nationally. The resulting collective knowledge would create an integrated whole that would be far greater than the sum of its parts, and the delivery of outcomes could occur at a greatly accelerated rate. There was a real urgency in accelerating this process; all involved knew lives were at stake.



## THE SMALL UNIT EXCELLENCE CONFERENCE - MORE THAN A STARTING POINT

The Small Unit Excellence Conference, held April 28-30, 2009, brought together approximately 120 representatives and leaders from a broad range of communities: academia, science, military, government policy, Congress, sports, and national first responders. Hosted by U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the conference proved to be more than a starting point and served as a major milestone toward national integration. There were three principle conference objectives:

1. Provide a first-of-its-kind national forum where the best and brightest experts and practitioners from a wide array of disciplines could come together, share respective bodies of knowledge, discover both divergence and commonality of ideas, and establish personal and professional relationships upon which communities of practice could begin to be built.







2. Develop a common understanding of the specific challenges that the community was collectively trying to solve and, by doing so, develop better awareness of the roles each individual could fulfill in resolving those challenges.
3. Serve as a foundation for a plan of prioritized action intended to deliver high impact community-wide outcomes specifically during Fiscal Year 2010 (October 2009 – September 2010), and more broadly during Fiscal Year 2011 and beyond.

The conference was preceded by a three-month series of mini forums that involved all branches of the Armed Services, first responders, and subject matter experts from academia, sports, social science, and other communities nationwide. Each forum was organized around a specialized element of small unit performance and facilitated by an acknowledged expert in the field.

- **Decision Making Mini Forum:** Held at Camp Pendleton, California, the forum brought together academics, scientists, and other practitioners to assess the science of leader decision making in small units. Members observed the U.S. Marine Corps' Combat Hunter program, visited the Infantry Immersive Trainer training environment, and discussed how these and other similar training innovations under development by the Armed Services might be improved and optimized for use in federal, state and local first responder venues in addition to the military.

- **Neurological Application and Human Performance Mini Forum:** Held at the University of Maryland, the forum exposed participants to research professionals in various fields related to human performance including neurology, bio-molecular chemistry, medicine, psychiatry, psychophysiology, life science, and human factors engineering. Participants focused on the need to strengthen the human dimension of the small unit through the examination of the cognitive, physical and social components and evaluated how to enhance the behaviors, intuition and performance that improve decision making in a complex environment.



- **Stress Inoculation Mini Forum:** Held in Long Beach, California, the forum brought together different professional communities to share knowledge about how small unit team members perform under extreme stress. Members concluded that techniques long embedded in both athletics and the military, such as immersive, repetitive, varied, and realistic exercises, actually change brain pathways to embed reflexive patterns of behavior and competency.

- **In Extremis Leadership Mini Forum:** Held at the United States Military Academy at West Point, this forum was sponsored by the military academy's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. Over several days the members developed a

program for defining and closing gaps that exist in knowledge, metrics and assessments on leader in extremis behavior and performance at the small unit level. They discussed the great need to replicate the fear and risks of close combat and the current limitations of doing so in experiments.



- **Performance Assessment and Measurement Mini Forum:** Held at the University of Pennsylvania, this forum focused on the challenge of quantifying and measuring improvements made through training, selection, and acculturating programs. The group concluded that the ability to establish a baseline to objectively measure effectiveness in terms of development was critical for any organization to be able to assess the real value or return on investment of any technology or program intended to cultivate excellence in small units and teams. Although it was acknowledged that substantial progress has been made in the cognitive sciences to accomplish this goal, participants agreed that there is much more work to be done.

- **Resilience Mini Forum:** Held at the University of Pennsylvania, this forum focused on learned helplessness, learned optimism and resilience, positive psychology, comprehensive Soldier fitness, and the right unit for the human dimension. The terms “Soldier” and “warrior” were used broadly to refer to small unit team members regardless of military or civilian/first responder. The group focused on understanding optimistic and pessimistic behavior, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and examined the concept of post traumatic growth. It was concluded that the framework for optimistic behavior applied to comprehensive Soldier fitness should include routine training to strengthen many aspects including mental, spiritual, physical, emotional, social, and the family.

Consistent with the three conference objectives, planners assembled a nationally recognized group of speakers and contributors. They included combat experienced Service members of all ranks, senior general officers, politicians, human and physical scientists, world-renowned scholars in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, athletic coaches and government leaders. Each contributing member was placed into one of four seminar groups, which were formed to capitalize on the diversity of experience represented.



Working members came to the conference already familiar with the outcomes of the mini forums. Many had participated in one or more these forums. The heart of the event was the two-day working sessions that were organized around the three primal elements of small unit performance: the individual, the leader and the small unit. Each group was required to identify a set of recommended actions in these areas that collectively would inform planning and establish priorities for the delivery of high-impact outcomes in the near- and mid-term. The final products were the result of the best judgments and creative thinking of the experts in each group. Each group was facilitated by a professional moderator/facilitator.





The conference was framed by the opening remarks of Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, Commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command and the closing remarks of Coach Pete Carroll, head football coach of the University of Southern California. Gen. Mattis spoke of the military's current superiority in nuclear and conventional war, and of the need to become as superior in irregular warfare as we are in nuclear and conventional warfare. Critical to this effort are small units, the basic building blocks of conventional capability, who will find themselves on the ground in complex terrain, mixed in with the civilian population, where the enemies of today and tomorrow confront us. The challenge is to unleash the power of these small units; they must be able to operate autonomously at increasingly

lower echelons, disaggregate against unconventional or hybrid threats, quickly aggregate against more conventional threats, easily integrate joint capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and joint fires, and not be limited in action by overly-centralized command and control systems. The intent is not to make regular forces into special forces, but rather to recognize that the individual, the leader and the small unit, the emerging new triad, are critical players on an increasingly decentralized and dispersed battlefield.

Coach Carroll closed the conference drawing similarities between developing a national championship football team and developing high-performing small units: a football team consists of 11-man offense, defense, and special teams, each of which is approximately the size of a conventional infantry squad or a U.S. Special Forces Operational Detachment - Alpha. Each team must be given the level of attention paid to world-class Olympic athletes to include unparalleled physical and special skill training, along with development of the moral, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual aptitudes necessary to excel in highly competitive, highly stressful environments. Done right, the end result is a high-performing team that embodies a philosophy of "win forever."

## **CONFERENCE RESULTS - WHAT WE LEARNED**

With the diversity of expertise and experience represented in the working groups, it was not surprising that the conference generated approximately 400 great ideas. Although the initial goal was to publish a conference report within two weeks after the conference, the decision was made to take the necessary time to ensure all 400 ideas were examined, prioritized, and organized to be coherent, manageable, and in full alignment with the conference discussions and the greatest cross-community needs. Recognizing that small unit excellence is indeed a national effort, the decision was made to open dialogue with professional staff members from both houses of Congress.

As a result of this careful process, four priority focus areas emerged along with critical



associated tasks that, once addressed, represent the most potential for high impact community-wide outcomes, some even before the end of 2010. The four focus areas and their most critical associated tasks are:

1. **Cross-community integration:** Identify the array of activities that are taking place across the communities and disciplines. Correlate, then rationalize how these activities overlap or relate to each other. Host forums that bring together activity sponsors to synthesize and share results and expand the knowledge base. Publish outcomes.
2. **Collaborative tools and Knowledge Management:** Assess web-based technologies that enable cross-community collaboration to include access to shared (or centralized) data/knowledge repositories. Deliver such a capability along with a plan for sustainment.
3. **Assessment and measurement:** Assess the existing body of research related to objective assessment and measurement of functions such as psychological and physical stimuli. Through rigorous testing, assess available training technologies that demonstrate the most potential to integrate science-based assessment and measurement capabilities. Establish the science of human and group performance as the centerpiece upon which training technologies will be evaluated and built around. This approach should also lead to the ability to objectively quantify return on investment.
4. **Spotlight studies on group behavior:** Less is known about group performance when compared to what is known about individual performance. Assess the existing body of cross-community knowledge and research related to the study of groups, identify gaps that can be agreed upon and acknowledged by subject matter experts across all communities, and prioritize resource sponsorship to fill those gaps.

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? THE NATIONAL PROGRAM FOR SMALL UNIT EXCELLENCE**

Based on the moral obligation to address the issues small units face and the national scope of these issues, operational demand, and direction from senior Defense Department leadership, USJFCOM will work in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security to implement a National Program for Small Unit Excellence (NPSUE) beginning in October 2009. Moving with a great sense of purpose and urgency, the Program and the fiscal resources allocated to it by the Defense Department with the approval of Congress will be used to accelerate advancements in all four priority areas.



The Program will exist to build upon, promote, fill knowledge gaps within, and accelerate progress in the body of existing work across the Armed Services, academia, behavioral sciences and private industry. NPSUE will serve as the connective tissue across multiple communities and disciplines so that the whole collection of work becomes something greater than the sum of the various parts. Program management will be executed through the lens of the new triad of individuals, leaders, and small units because what is ultimately delivered *must make a difference* to the speed and effectiveness in the way small units/teams adapt to and confront the challenges they face.

The Small Unit Excellence Conference provided a glimpse into the magnitude of what needs to be done. NPSUE will move forward upon the basis of mutual confidence, transparency and collaboration and through an intense focus on community-wide gain. In essence, the Program will move forward at the “speed of trust,” as described in Steven M.R. Covey’s *The Speed of Trust - The One Thing That Changes Everything*. Covey shows

a direct correlation between trust, speed, and cost: when trust is high, speed is high and cost is low. When trust is low, speed is low and cost is high. The levels of trust, speed, and cost are up to us. Time, manpower, and dollars are limited, but we are setting the trust meters high as we move forward together as a community, trusting that our course is clear, trusting that the support is there and trusting in our ability to achieve what needs to be done to *unleash the power*.



For more information, please contact:  
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**ON THE COVER**

*Clockwise from upper left:*

1. Officer candidate Brandon Spears and his fire team from Fourth Platoon, Delta Company, Officer Candidate School, low-crawl under a barbed wire obstacle during the Small Unit Leadership Evaluation (SULE) course at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Feb. 4, 2009. The SULE course is one of many designed to test candidates leadership skills. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. John Kennicutt).
2. Border Patrol BORSTAR team members effect a difficult rescue in the extreme conditions of a Texas desert (Photo by James Tourtellotte).
3. During a riot exercise at the North Louisiana Criminal Justice Academy in Benton, La., March 19, 2007, the 2nd Security Forces Squadron has just begun a working relationship with the local Bossier City Police Department where Airmen from Barksdale Air Force Base can share their law enforcement techniques with the Police of Bossier City, and in return learn the ways of civilian law enforcement (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Joanna M. Kresge).
4. U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Daniato Bacchus, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, radios back to base as he and his squad descend a mountain ridge during a dismounted patrol mission near Forward Operating Base Baylough, Zabul, Afghanistan, March 19, 2009. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adam Mancini).
5. Ambulance photo from the Official Ladder 54 website ([www.Ladder54.com](http://www.Ladder54.com)).
6. Tech Sgt Everett Emerson, an Air National Guard medic from Kulis Air National Guard Base Alaska works with firefighters from the North Pole Fire Department to secure a simulated accident victim on a backboard for transportation to the Fairbanks Memorial Hospital May 9. The scenario was part of the Alaska Shield/ Northern Edge 2007 exercise which is scheduled from May 7-18 and is designed to test all agencies preparedness and interaction and response to a variety of incidents ranging from natural disasters to terrorist attacks and other emergencies. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. J.G. Buzanowski).