

PROTECTING THE HOMELAND



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Photos courtesy of U.S. Army North Public Affairs

Above: Troops and civil authorities drive through the scene of a simulated disaster during Exercise Vibrant Response 11.1 in Indiana.

Previous pages: Soldiers take part in a variety of training exercises coordinated by U.S. Army North.

Army North always ready to help keep America safe

By Clifford Kyle Jones

The NCOs of U.S. Army North know their mission, but it's impossible to know when they'll be needed or exactly what they'll be called upon to do. Fortunately for citizens across the United States, they're ready for almost anything.

Army North, headquartered at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, conducts homeland defense, provides support to civil authorities and helps coordinate theater security cooperation with the United States' neighbors to its north and south. But almost every Army North NCO will tell you all that boils down to one thing: protecting the American people and their way of life.

Army North "is unique because we're doing things for our mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, sons and daughters," said Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Henson,

who until recently was the senior enlisted advisor for Army North's Contingency Command Post, also based at Fort Sam Houston. "When we're overseas, we have a totally different focus. Overseas, it's tactical operations combat. Here, it's life-sustaining."

The CCP is essentially Army North's deployable headquarters to support civil authorities. It's one of the many lines of protection and support Army North and its higher major command, U.S. Northern Command, provide — should civilian authorities at the local, state or federal level seek assistance from the Department of Defense. Among the first lines of that support are Army North's defense coordinating elements, small teams led by an Army colonel, the defense coordinating officer.

The DCEs are the primary point of contact for federal agencies seeking Department of Defense assistance.

"The majority of the time, the lead federal agency is going to be FEMA," the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said Sgt. 1st Class Juan Hernandez, the NCO in charge for the Army North Region IX DCE, which is based in Oakland, Calif., and covers Arizona, California and Nevada. "So what Army North and NORTHCOM have done is place all the DCOs in line with FEMA, so we're all partnered with FEMA across the United States, all of us. Whenever there's a disaster, if a regional FEMA headquarters is alerted, then we're alerted. And if they deploy to a disaster area, a majority of the time we'll deploy with them to a disaster area, as well. That doesn't mean that federal troops, Title 10 troops, are going to be used; it just means that we're going to go with them so we can help anticipate any requirements that might be requested from DoD."

Title 10 is the section of the U.S. Code that outlines the role of the armed

Working with neighboring nations

One of the ways Army North ensures that the United States stays safe is by working with our country's allies to the north and south.

Lt. Gen. Guy C. Swan III is the commanding general of Army North, and Command Sgt. Maj. David Wood, command sergeant major of Army North, said, "Swan's focus is that [North America] is not an area of responsibility, it's an area of understanding."

Army North works closely with both Canada's and Mexico's militaries.

"Canada has an army similar to ours, as in structure," said Sgt. Maj. William Smith, Army North's sergeant major for training and operations. "They have NCOs, and it pretty much mirrors ours. We have a good working relationship, and we have exchanges with officers and NCOs. It works really well with how we protect our northern border.

"Mexico, on the other hand, has a different type of military," he said. "They don't have high-ranking NCOs. The ones I've met are very professional, but when you're dealing with different countries, you're dealing with different cultures and how they do things. The different status of each — officers and enlisted.

"Many other countries — and I

believe Mexico is trying to do the same thing with us — they are trying to learn from our NCO Corps. Realistically, 86 percent of [our] Army is made up of NCOs roughly. We're actually doing everything. We can actually function without officer supervision, and generally do the right thing."

Smith recently participated in coordinating a visit for two Mexican infantry NCOs to spend two weeks with a U.S. infantry unit at Fort Bliss, Texas. The Mexican NCOs watched and mirrored the responsibilities of midlevel and senior Army NCOs at a platoon and company level. They underwent the training and preparation for a field-training exercise.

"Then in the field-training exercise, they fired our weapons, did PT tests — they did just exactly what an American NCO did for two weeks, and it was great," he said. "Now they can go back to their country and hopefully make recommendations. They were quite amazed to see the things that our NCOs were doing in El Paso and what we do daily in our NCO Corps. That's what their officers do — to inspect and make sure everything is going, whereas we [NCOs] maximize our duties to make sure the

officers have time to plan and prepare."

But the partnership works both ways.

"We're trying to do a lot of that with the Mexican military right now," Wood said. "They have their struggles, and they're dealing with some real-world events. And I keep telling them, I'm trying to learn from you guys."

As Mexico's military has struggled to combat drug cartels and maintain order in that country, Wood noted that their struggles could provide valuable lessons if the U.S. military ever had to deal with terrorist attacks or other domestic threats.

"What are some of their best practices that we can learn from based off of their laws? What we can adapt or not adapt to be able to facilitate what the national response is going to be for something like that?" he said. "So it's a sharing of information, both ways. They're asking us a lot of things about what we're doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, and what we've dealt with and some of our lessons learned, a lot of operational planning, intelligence, media, stuff that we've learned through hard knocks. They don't need to learn the same things."

forces. Active-duty and reserve troops fall under Title 10. National Guard troops are normally covered by a separate section of the code, Title 32.

DCEs and other elements of Army North are part of many disaster relief and assistance efforts — for instance, elements of Army North's CCP deployed to help FEMA prepare the northeastern states for Hurricane Irene in August. However, the Soldiers involved often don't grab the headlines, but that's by design.

Typically in the Army, "we take a situation and we take charge, and we follow it through to the objective. Not here," said Command Sgt. Maj. David Wood, Army North's command sergeant major. "Here you really have to go through the different dynamics of our country as a whole to be able to facilitate the best response possible — and not showcase yourself. You

want that civilian leadership — that first responder, that governor — to be perceived by the public as successful, because then you're successful. Then the federal government has done something of value. ... We want [the public] to understand that their lives and their livelihood are based on those first responders, and we're here to make sure they are successful."

A different role

This mission support role, versus the mission leadership role often customary in Army units, is one of the most unusual aspects of serving in Army North. And it requires a different set of skills from Soldiers.

"I'm an infantryman by trade; that's what my [military occupational specialty] is," Hernandez said. "So growing up, the first seven or eight years of my Army life,

I was a hard-core infantryman: 'Gung ho!' 'Hooah!' Then I got selected to be a recruiter, so I kind of had to tone down, and be friendly, and become a people person and be approachable. So I did that for three years, and then I went back into the regular Army, deployed twice to Iraq, and you get back into that gung-ho mentality. Then you come out to a job like this and you kind of have to revert to what you did in previous assignments and tone things down."

That mix of experience and maturity is exactly what Army North looks for, said Sgt. Maj. Jorge Escobedo, the personnel sergeant major for Army North.

"You want to grab an individual who has been in the Army long enough and has done a diversity of jobs, so they can be able to come into the unit and be able to cope — dealing with the high senior lead-



Photos courtesy of Joint Task Force–Homeland Defense Public Affairs

Relief workers clean up after an 8.0 earthquake struck the Pacific near American Samoa in October 2009. U.S. Army North's Defense Coordinating Element Region IX and associated joint service emergency preparedness liaison officers supported the Federal Emergency Management Agency and U.S. Pacific Command's Joint Task Force–Homeland Defense in relief efforts.

ership and with the civilians,” Escobedo said. “Especially in the [DCE] regions. ... Those are critical because they’re going to be working by themselves, so I really take the time to screen those individuals to make sure we get the right person.”

The transition to Army North can be challenging, so Escobedo works to prepare Soldiers for what they’ll encounter.

“It’s a completely different mission than the regular Army,” he said. “So we speak to individuals and make sure that they understand that they’re going to be working with a lot of civilians and that they’re not going to be in a role where they’re going to be in charge. It’s going to be more of a supporting role. We make sure they’re going to be able to cope with that. And [for the DCEs], we make sure that they’re going to cope with working in a small group, in cell planning.”

Working with civilian agencies is only one of the unusual features of Army North’s duties. The focus on natural and manmade disasters means Soldiers have to be prepared at all times — for events that can be difficult to predict.

“You’ve got to be more flexible than the general Army,” Hernandez said. “You might go six, eight months, up to a year, without ever actually doing anything in terms of disaster response. But it’s that one time — all it takes is one flood, one tornado, one hurricane, one earthquake, any disaster like that. And you get called up and you’re expected to perform — on the spot. You’re not expected to show up and say, ‘OK, can you show me what I need to do?’ You need to be ready to execute.”

Army North Soldiers achieve that readiness through continual training and staying in constant contact with the agen-

cies with which they work.

“When I came here, it was quite eye-opening to realize how much we prepare for a disaster should the states need our help,” said Sgt. Maj. William Smith, Army North’s training and operations sergeant major. “We prepare, prepare, prepare, just in case of a catastrophic event. We’re always leaning forward.”

Training’s importance

One of Army North’s biggest training events is its annual Vibrant Response exercise, which takes place in Indiana at the Muscatatuck Urban Training Complex, Camp Atterbury and other sites throughout the state. The exercise’s broad swath across Indiana gives Army North personnel, some of the units that can be assigned to Army North and civil authorities an opportunity to experience a training en-



vironment as near to a real-world disaster as possible. Last year's Vibrant Response included almost 4,000 personnel, and this year's, in August, had more than 6,000. In addition to Army North's staff, it included many members of units that are contingent to Army North.

"Personally, I've been to many field training exercises at both the National Training Center and at other installations across the United States," Smith said. "The training that I've experienced here in preparation for a natural disaster or a manmade disaster is probably the most first-class training I've ever seen. So near-realistic, it was like something you'd see in a movie. Like in *Independence Day*, when they just trash the city and everyone just starts to react and move. It was like that. I mean it was realistic. And the troops would come in, no notice, deploy to

these locations and start doing their jobs. Whether it was Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, fire, police — it was very, very impressive."

The CCP is heavily involved in each Vibrant Response, and Command Sgt. Maj. Eli Perez, the current command sergeant major of Army North's CCP, said, "Those exercises are like ARNORTH's Super Bowl.

"We're exercising all our systems — our life-saving capabilities, our communication, our transportation — and these guys are literally traveling all up and down the state of Indiana," Perez said. "So you're not in a training area; we have various training areas with about 30- to 50-mile gaps between them. So when we say this agency needs 20 pallets of water, then we have a support unit that is literally driving 20 pallets of water to the site where it's needed. And we're looking at a good 30 to 50 miles that they're driving up on the highway."

Henson added, "So you're looking at a joint support force, which is the main headquarters. And then you're looking at task force aviation, which requires the aerial lift. Then you're looking at task force operations, which is another total separate unit. Then you're looking at task force medical, which is life-sustaining."

As August's Vibrant Response wound down, Army North had to shift gears from training on a simulated nuclear attack to preparing for a real natural disaster when Hurricane Irene threatened the United States' East Coast. The effects of Irene were not as severe as feared, however, and the need for federal forces was light. However, the preparation work, planning and communication involved in bracing for the hurricane illustrated how ready Army North's units are whenever they are needed.

Communication

While Vibrant Response is Army North's largest training exercise, preparation and planning are continual throughout Army North units. Much of that training focuses on the interactions among Army North and its elements, and the numerous civil agencies Army North deals with.

"That's a big part of training: communication, communication, communication," Perez said. "Because you can just imagine the distance, and you can take

some of the events that we support here: We're not going to be within 10 miles of each other; we're not going to be within 50 miles of each other; sometimes we'll probably be up to 100 miles from each other. And then you look at the area of all these elements, and we say we're command and controlling them, so you can just imagine the challenges we have. So if there's anything we can fix, it's those processes there and our communication systems, working back."

The processes — converting a civilian request into operational orders — are one aspect of that training. But even the technology and equipment used to interact can create difficulties when dealing with civil authorities.

"Keep in mind, we have systems in the Army that are secure. But we're working closely with federal agencies and civilians, and they don't have those secure assets. They don't have our type of equipment," Perez said. "So we have to deconflict a lot of those systems so we are talking to each other. It's the same thing with our downtrace units. All they work with is military-style equipment, so we are the pivot point, the link between civilians and our military forces. We don't want them to change their systems, but we have to find a way that we're all talking. And it's a big challenge."

Command Sgt. Maj. Eddie Fields, command sergeant major of Army North's Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, said, "We have to be able to talk to a first responder, local police, on our radio — versus me talking on a secure radio between one tactical unit and another tactical unit."

But communicating is more than just operating equipment, Fields noted. There's another important element addressed when training on Army North's communication equipment, he said: "Your writing capability."

"We as noncommissioned officers, we have to be careful how we write," Fields said. "We require our noncommissioned officers to know how to write here. In other words, how to express yourself and how do you sell the organization when you're going out here explaining what's going on on your storyboard — because our storyboards have a tendency to go all the way up to a four-star level. So you've



Photo by Sgt. Nazly Confesor

Marine Lance Cpl. Hans Hetrick, assigned to the Chemical Biological Incident Response Force from Indian Head, Md., conducts gamma radiation detection training using Point Detection Radiation 77 equipment on simulated contaminated citizens. The training was conducted during Vibrant Response 11.1, a large-scale multi-agency training exercise held in March in central Indiana.

got to be particular and understand what you're writing and understand the plan and understand the mission and understand the situation or area that you're working in."

Tsunami response

Communicating and coordinating efforts were critical in one of Army North's biggest recent operations, the repatriation of thousands of Department of Defense employees and their families after an earthquake shook Japan in March. An ensuing tsunami battered the island nation, nearly creating a nuclear disaster when it damaged a nuclear power plant.

Several of the regional DCEs played important roles when the families arrived at U.S. airports. Region X, headquartered in Seattle, was the first to be notified, Hernandez said, and that team was able to establish

the equivalent of an in-processing center at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

"Here in Region IX, we were alerted almost at the same time that Region X was. But it was a toss-up where we were going to go," he said.

At first, Hernandez said, his team expected to go to Los Angeles International Airport. Then that changed to San Francisco International Airport. Finally, it was decided the Region IX DCE would welcome citizens back to the United States at Travis Air Force Base, Calif. — "which for us ended up being awesome," he said, "because it took a lot of the burden off us as a DCE in Region IX, because we already had flights coming when we were told to go to Travis, and we had no time to get anything set up."

Fortunately, Travis already had a plan

in place to evacuate Air Force personnel from overseas, so the DCE and Travis personnel were able to set up an in-processing center almost immediately. And although it's an Air Force base, Travis has many of the same amenities as a commercial airport — security, check-in counters, baggage claim and a waiting area.

"Flights came in, and we worked there with the Travis command to pretty much track everyone coming in; over 3,000 people ended up coming through Travis alone," Hernandez said. "It was a completely different role than the DCE was expected to do. It was more of a command and control role, which is totally the opposite of what we're supposed to do. But it got us to work in a different environment and see what else we're capable of doing — this nine-person team that

we have — what we're actually capable of doing. We can do more than just assist with disasters. We can turn around and do things like this. It was a good experience, in terms of we're so focused on working with the states and working with our federal partners, and here we were able to help our own, our DoD family. And we were able to do it at a moment's notice."

NORTHCOM, which is headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colo., was created in response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to help protect the homeland, said NORTHCOM's previous senior enlisted advisor, Air Force Chief Master Sgt. W. Allen Usry. "And its maturation was caused by Katrina," he said. The federal response to the hurricane in New Orleans showed the many things that can go wrong in disaster relief. But Army North's and others' handling of the repatriation effort from Japan illustrates how far federal efforts have progressed when it comes to helping its citizens.

"I'll tell you, a lot of Americans leaned forward; a lot of USO leaned forward," Wood said. "And again, it's bringing all those entities together to make a success. A family gets off an 11- to 12-hour flight, and they land and they've got these screaming kids. All of a sudden there's a playroom set up by family members, the [family readiness groups]. The USO's there and providing child care, and the people are being processed through.

"All those things happened in our major city airports. And the airports themselves bent over backward to facilitate that kind of stuff. Just getting in there, setting up what we have as far as processing and accountability and ensuring onward movement of the family members, yeah, that's a small portion. But a bigger portion of that is what did that family feel like? Were they just a number? Or were they a family?"

"I think we did a very good job as a whole — the United States — of being able to facilitate that type of environment where families actually were relieved that not only were they being onward moved and they were getting help, but they had the child care, the babysitting, the nurturing room, all that little stuff that people often don't think about." 📺

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U.S. Marine Corps photo by Gunnery Sgt. Jim Goodwin

A public affairs NCOIC responds to questions during a U.S. Northern Command's Joint Task Force—Civil Support forum in January at Fort Monroe, Va., facilitated by U.S. Army North to rehearse the Department of Defense mission of support to civil authorities.

What all NCOs need to know about operating in the homeland

Several Army North NCOs said one of the biggest transitions to their duty defending the homeland was learning about all the rules that govern the use of the armed forces within the United States — and those are lessons that all NCOs should know, said Command Sgt. Maj. David Wood, command sergeant major of Army North.

"I'd ask the NCOs outside of Army North to start understanding the dynamics of our country — political, social, economic, not just the military — understanding those kinds of different dynamics within our own country to better understand their role," he said. "Army North is a great place to get a lot of face time with that type of environment. But I'll tell you I did not know anything about defense support to our homeland at all before I got here, and it was a struggle trying to catch up and understand."

He said he had to learn how to facilitate first responders and state and national authorities within the United States' legal framework. Some of the laws and regulations covering the actions of Army North:

POSSE COMITATUS ACT: The act was passed after the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. It limits the powers of the federal government to use Title 10 military forces for law enforcement.

STAFFORD ACT: Authorizes various forms of federal assistance to state and local governments, certain nonprofit organizations, and individuals and households in the event of a presidentially declared emergency or disaster. Since its enactment in 1988, the act has been significantly revised by the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 and the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006. The amendments strengthened FEMA's capacity to support hazard mitigation and emergency response.

DEFENSE SUPPORT OF CIVIL AUTHORITIES: The process by which U.S. military assets and personnel can be used to assist in missions normally carried out by civil authorities. These missions include responses to natural and manmade disasters, law enforcement support, special events, and other domestic activities.