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ARMY'S HIGHEST-RANKING NCO MAKES BUSY NINE-DAY VISIT TO U.S. ARMY, EUROPE SOLDIERS

By David Melancon

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- Junior Soldiers are now taking on more responsibilities, so the Army's Education System is adapting to give them the leadership and warrior skills they need for the continuing fight against global terrorism, the Army's top NCO told a group of military policemen during a breakfast meeting here Oct 26.



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Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston discusses Army training and standards with Soldiers of U.S. Army Europe's 529th Military Police Company during a breakfast meeting with the MPs in Heidelberg, Germany Oct. 26. The breakfast was one of several meetings on Preston's whirlwind nine-day itinerary spanning U.S. Army Europe.

"Because of how we operate, we are putting more and more responsibilities on younger Soldiers," Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston told 24 Soldiers from the 529th MP Company. "So our training models need to change, too."

The Army's 13th top NCO leader spent the day meeting with Heidelberg community Soldiers and taking part in a ceremonial signing of the Army Family Covenant.

Basic training is increasing from nine to 10 weeks so new Soldiers can spend more time in simulated operational environments, Preston said during his breakfast meeting here. They carry their weapons longer -- starting from their third day as Soldiers -- and develop

marksmanship skills in a more combat-like setting and during simulated convoy operations.

These new Soldiers have combat veteran drill sergeants who are serving as team and squad leaders in addition to being their first Army trainers, Preston said.

New troops will get “a lot more time in the field with more warrior tasks and a lot more emphasis on using your weapon as you would in combat,” he said.

Advanced individual training has also become more combat-focused, Preston said. Soldiers are undergoing more warrior drills, instead of focusing only on their technical skills, and the Warrior Leader Course is emphasizing more hands-on leadership training he said.

This year, the Army's Basic Noncommissioned Officer course is changing to the Advanced Leader Course and the Advanced NCO course is changing to the Senior Leader Course. The redesigned curriculum will incorporate skills formerly taught in higher-level courses, he said.

Battle-tested Soldiers are attending these courses and those Soldiers are filling positions traditionally held by their seniors, he said. These new and longer courses will give these leaders the skills that they need to complete their missions.

“You have sergeants first class stepping up and filling first sergeant positions; you have staff sergeants serving in platoon sergeant positions; you have sergeants serving as squad leaders,” Preston told the MPs. “You have privates first class serving as team leaders.”

Preston fielded several questions on topics ranging from recruiting standards to new small-arms weapons systems to the roles of civilian employees and contractors in the Army.

Preston said the Army is looking at its structure and swapping Soldiers for civilians “where it makes sense.” More civilians are working in jobs once filled by Soldiers, freeing more troops to serve in the operational Army, filling more units and saving money in recruiting, health care and retirement costs.

Preston reminded the MPs that the Army is built upon standards and NCO leaders at all levels who enforce and exemplify the Army’s standards. It is a matter of safety and discipline, he said.

“We are a standards-based organization,” he said. “We empower our leaders -- noncommissioned officers -- to enforce the standards. Any time a Soldier is killed in training or something bad happens, it is usually because of a failure to enforce standards.”

Following a whirlwind nine-day itinerary, Preston has already visited with U.S. Army Europe Soldiers and Families in the Benelux; at Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, and in

Heidelberg, Grafenwoehr, Vilseck, Kaiserslautern and Landstuhl, Germany. He is scheduled to visit Vicenza, Italy and Darmstadt, Germany as well. The sergeant major has shared a variety of activities with Soldiers during his visit, including several meals; physical training sessions, and open forums and town hall meetings. He also took part in the signing of the Army Family Covenant here Oct. 26.



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