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U.S. ARMY, EUROPE SIGNAL SOLDIERS SHARE WORKINGS OF OFFICER-NCO RELATIONSHIPS AT INTERNATIONAL COURSE

By **Kristopher Joseph**

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SION, Switzerland -- "Communication is the key" was the main theme for the 2007 NATO/Partnership for Peace International NCO leadership course at the Swiss Armed Forces junior training center here, and two "communicators" from U.S. Army, Europe's 5th Signal Command were hand-picked to share their expertise with NCOs representing 19 different nations.

The 128th Signal Company command team of Capt. Ken Donnolly and 1st Sgt. Samuel Taylor were chosen by NATO's top enlisted Soldier, Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bartelle, to teach "Officer and NCO Relations at the company level" Oct. 19, the last day of the two-week course. The 128th is part of the 5th Signal's 39th Signal Battalion, 2nd Signal Brigade, based in Belgium.

"It's a great honor that we were picked," said Taylor. With duty at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons, the first sergeant is no stranger to working with military members from many nations.



KRISTOPHER JOSEPH

The 128th Signal Company command team of 1st Sgt. Samuel Taylor (left, facing camera) and Capt. Ken Donnolly teach officer and NCO relations during the final day of the 2007 NATO/Partnership For Peace International NCO leadership course at the Swiss Armed Forces junior training center in Sion, Switzerland Oct. 19.

The signal duo described the U.S. Army company-level officer/NCO relationship as a "quasi-marriage" in which the partners often spend more time together than they do with their actual spouses. The pair drew rousing laughter from the class when they debated which is the husband or wife in their "marriage."

Many eyebrows in the crowd were raised when Taylor revealed that U.S. NCOs train not only junior enlisted Soldiers but often officers as well, in courses such as Airborne and Ranger schools.

"Young officers are bred, trained and guided by senior NCOs at a company level, and the experience and knowledge they gain from those NCOs shape them into becoming good senior officers and commanders," Taylor told the class.

Donnelly, who was also an NCO before becoming a commissioned officer, said no commander can succeed without strong NCOs leading the way.

"A key strength of any good officer is his or her ability to delegate responsibility to their NCOs," said Donnelly.

The pair was followed by NCOs from Norway, Spain and Great Britain who described their armed forces' NCO structure and how they relate with officers. This time it was Taylor and Donnelly who raised their eyebrows when the Norwegian NCO said he was on a first-name basis with every officer assigned to an air base.

In stark contrast, the Spanish NCO said their officers and NCOs work and live in strict, segregated worlds where most mission responsibility is given to officers.

The British NCO said their officers sometimes speak a different language that enlisted Soldiers don't understand, but that NCOs are slowly given more responsibility in their units.

The class was by and large in agreement that NCOs in any military need to be "the backbone" of a unit. "The officers are the managers, but the NCOs make it happen," said Taylor.

Another topic was the NCO rank structure of the different nations. Attendees said many countries have less than four NCO ranks, due in large part to conscription of enlisted members who are required to serve a minimum amount of time; those who excel are often offered career officer positions, keeping the NCO ranks sparse.

Taylor was introduced to a 22-year-old Swiss first sergeant who had served only two years, as opposed to his own record of 15 years time in service. Taylor said that disparity exemplifies the need for some nations to increase the size of their NCOs corps and place more emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of NCOs in the chain of command.

Command Sgt. Major Richard Blanc, chief of NCO development for the Swiss Armed Forces and co-developer of the international NCO leadership course, said one of main reasons the course was created was because there is such a strong need for NCO development in most Partnership for Peace forces. The program began in 2005.

The two-week training offers preliminary, intermediate and advanced NCO courses. NATO invites two NCOs per country to attend each course. Course modules are taught by senior NCOs and experts from various partner countries on a rotating basis. The courses have earned high marks and positive feedback from attendees, said Blanc.

He added that he is trying to conduct the courses more often, and create more development courses that bring nations together.

“We want to spread the virus of international relations through these courses,” said Blanc.

“We designed the course to include group tasks where NCOs from different nations are teamed together to solve problems and work through scenarios.”

The attendees also had an opportunity to escape the classroom to negotiate rappelling and rope-climbing drills designed to build team cohesion.

“This experience was awesome,” said Canadian air force Master Cpl. Don Caron. “This course really showed me a lot about myself as a leader and as a person in general.”

Caron said he was excited to take the lessons learned from this course and apply them to his current unit.

“I hope the attendees learn that no military can work without strong NCOs,” said Donnolly.

“I hope they take from this course that communication is the key to success,” added Taylor. “Good officers trust their NCOs to get the job done and good NCOs listen and get know their Soldiers,” he said.

“The concept and success of this course is a dream come true,” said Blanc. “The international collaboration that happens here is something the whole world can benefit from.”



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