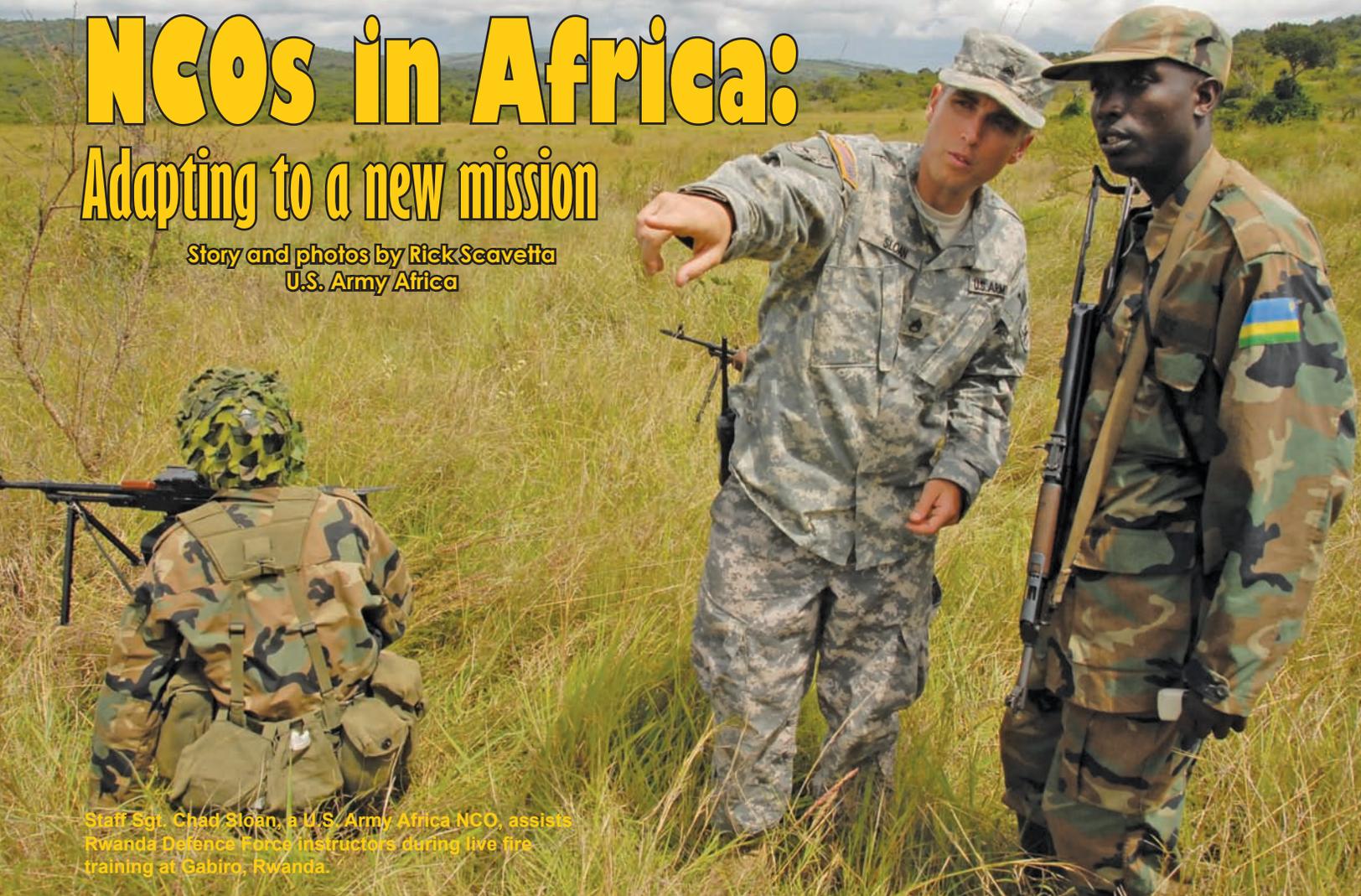


NCOs in Africa:

Adapting to a new mission

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U.S. Army Africa



Staff Sgt. Chad Sloan, a U.S. Army Africa NCO, assists Rwanda Defence Force instructors during live fire training at Gabiro, Rwanda.

During Natural Fire 10, African soldiers in northern Uganda were surprised to hear a U.S. Army noncommissioned officer speaking Luo, their language.

Staff Sgt. John Okumu, a 35-year-old logistics NCO from the 21st Theater Sustainment Command, just smiled and explained how he was raised in Kenya speaking Luo and had returned to Africa as part of the U.S. Army Africa-led humanitarian and civic assistance exercise.

Okumu rose to the challenge of being a goodwill ambassador for his command and the U.S. Army, said Maj. Gen. William B. Garrett III, commander of U.S. Army Africa.

“This outstanding NCO represented the highest level of professionalism while interacting with our counterparts,” Garrett said. “U.S. Army NCOs will continue to lead many of our efforts on the continent, setting a great example by sharing their knowledge, experience and leadership abilities.”

During renovations at Kitgum High School, curious teens asked Okumu how they could join the U.S. Army and be like him. Okumu, who joined the U.S. Army five years ago after moving to Missouri, never dreamed he would one day deploy to the continent he once called home, let alone serve as an example for African NCOs or even curious teens wondering how they could become like him.

“Everyone has a talent. You just need to find out what yours is,” Okumu said. “Education is the key.”

Okumu’s sentiment on education exemplifies the professionalism of U.S. Army NCOs working in Africa. They undertake

missions that build NCO effectiveness within African partner nation militaries. They work in small teams with niche capabilities. Often, they set examples for African NCOs to emulate.

Over the past year, those efforts have marked significant improvement to ongoing military partnerships in Africa.

In December 2008, the U.S. Army Southern European Task Force (SETAF) began its transformation to become the Army component to U.S. Africa Command. Then, the U.S. government announced it would airlift Rwandan peacekeepers’ equipment into Darfur, a war-torn region of the Sudan. A U.S. Army Africa NCO was on the Rwandan tarmac to lend a hand.

At Kigali International Airport, a U.S. Air Force officer watched skeptically as Rwandan soldiers marked equipment and loaded gear onto a C-17 cargo plane. He asked Staff Sgt. Brian Ruse if that was okay. Ruse, 31, of Summerville, S.C., was part of a U.S. Army Africa team that mentored Rwandan Defence Force troops on load planning.

“It’s all right, sir,” Ruse said, confidently. “They got it.”

It’s not always Africans learning from Americans. In many cases, U.S. Army NCOs take skills from their African counterparts. In South Africa, Staff Sgt. John Otfinoski, a squad leader with Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, attended advanced survival training in the bush.

Otfinoski, along with Master Sgt. Robert Seifert of Special Operations Command-Africa, and Sgt. 1st Class Nickolas Maney of the 6th Ranger Training Battalion, underwent a grueling three-week South African Special Forces course. South African instruc-

tors — veteran Zulu soldiers who grew up in the bush and fought with the SASF in Angola in the early 1980s — taught U.S. Army NCOs how to survive in the wild with little more than a rifle and canteen.

“Deployments have increased my awareness of training and preparation,” Otfinoski said. “South African Special Forces’ training taught me a lot. Now, I’ve passed that knowledge on to my Soldiers.”

More often, though, U.S. Army NCOs in Africa are using their leadership skills and training experiences to mentor African NCOs in partner nations’ militaries.

While assigned to Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa, NCOs from the Fort Sill, Okla.-based 2-18th Field Artillery Regiment supervised security for medical and engineering missions in East African nations. They also led several military-to-military partnership missions.

In Ethiopia, six senior NCOs mentored military instructors. U.S. Army NCOs worked at Uganda’s NCO Academy, focusing on leadership development for both junior and senior NCOs. One NCO worked at the International Mine Action Center in Nairobi, Kenya, where he mentored Kenyans and other African nationals in disaster relief operations. When the 2-18th returned to the States, NCOs from the 1st Battalion, 65th Infantry, Puerto Rico National Guard, continued the NCO-led partnerships in East Africa.

Army NCOs have also supported Liberia Security Sector Reform, a U.S. State Department-led mentoring mission in Liberia. NCOs with experience in logistics, infantry operations and military police work partnered with Liberian NCOs during three-month assignments. Most recently, Sgt. 1st Class Dedraf Blash, a U.S. Army Africa medical NCO, mentored female Liberian soldiers and medics at Camp Sandi Ware outside Monrovia, the Liberian capital. The work was rewarding to her, she said.

“There’s nothing more special than to have someone say, ‘You helped me be a better person,’” Blash said. “It brings a smile to my face and the words ‘mission accomplished’ show in my heart.”



U.S. Army Reserve Cpl. John Pearson speaks with local villagers gathered outside the health clinic at Palabek-kal, Uganda, during Natural Fire 10.



Sgt. 1st Class Roddy Rieger, a USARAF medical NCO, used hands-on experiences to mentor Djiboutian military members during medical evacuation familiarization.

In mid-2009, U.S. Army Africa welcomed Command Sgt. Maj. Gary Bronson to the command. His three decades of experience influences how U.S. Army Africa NCOs work.

When U.S. Army Africa NCOs led mentoring sessions in Rwanda, they spent one evening showing RDF instructors how to clear buildings using the “four stack.” By the next morning, Rwandan NCOs were in the lead, mentoring their own troops in the task.

“That’s a great example of what we expect of U.S. NCOs in Africa,” Bronson said. “U.S. Army Africa partnerships revolve around training the trainer.”

U.S. Army NCOs in Africa work alongside African NCOs, assisting them to take the lead, Bronson said.

“Our NCOs are not going to lecture African NCOs on the continent,” Bronson said. “It’s best for young African soldiers to see their leaders training them.”

In both current and future engagements, this belief is built into NCO planning for partner engagements on the continent.

Recently, Sgt. 1st Class Roddy Rieger, 35, of Bismarck, N.D., went to Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, to mentor 29 military students on medical evacuations. A senior USARAF medical NCO who served in Iraq and Afghanistan with the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, Rieger knew that understanding both cultural and language issues would be the key to success. When building lessons, Rieger also relied on previous partnership assignments in Tunisia and Morocco. He conducted the five-day course using hands-on exercises and simulated hostile environments, knowing that approach would leave a greater impression. That way, they take what they learned back to their units and teach others, he said.

“I’m an NCO, and medicine is my passion,” Rieger said. “If we helped just one Djiboutian learn about our medical procedure and he later uses that knowledge to save a life, or teach others to do the same — well, that’s what it’s all about.”