

# 陸上自衛隊

## INCREASING INTEROPERABILITY THROUGH CULTURAL EXCHANGE

# アメリカ陸軍

*Editor's Note: Following the devastating Mar. 11 earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan, joint Japanese-U.S. disaster-relief efforts were aided by the 50-year partnership between the two countries, frequent bilateral exercises and participation in the cooperative work program detailed in the story below, which was written before the quake. While the current co-op group departed early to assist the disaster relief, both armies say they are "100 percent committed" to continuing the program after aid efforts have completed.*



Photo courtesy U.S. Army Japan

Sgt. Shuichi Chiba of the 4th Engineer Group, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, and a U.S. Army Japan/Ground Staff Office Cooperative Work Program participant, practices setting a Claymore mine during Sergeants Time training recently.

**By Amanda Kraus**  
**U.S. Army Japan**

Thirteen Japanese soldiers are speaking in hushed tones in a conference room at U.S. Army Japan's headquarters at Camp Zama. Only the keenest observer would notice that their quiet speech masks overwhelming culture shock and excitement as they begin a 90-day immersion into American and U.S. Army culture. Elsewhere, 13 U.S. Army NCOs study faces and names, worrying over correct pronunciation and making a positive first impression as they make their way to the same conference room.

Eventually, the two groups converged, introductions were made and the first of many speeches given. Perhaps knowing that this journey is vital to the bilateral mission of both sides gave the Japanese

soldiers courage to leave behind all that was familiar to them — friends, family, daily routines and their native language.

The U.S. Army Japan-Ground Staff Office, Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, Cooperative Work Program is an integral part of the bilateral mission in Japan. (Japan's GSO is akin to the Department of the Army headquarters in the United States.) Japanese soldiers spend 90 days living on Camp Zama, working side-by-side with U.S. Army personnel. Each is assigned to a host unit, department and individual sponsor, who will be their teacher, co-worker, leader, comrade and in many cases, a life-long friend.

Classes are small — less than 20 individuals per class — which can mean

low visibility for the program. But it packs a big strategic punch according to U.S. Army Japan's command sergeant major, Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffery Nall.

"The program benefits both armies by ensuring that we build a strong bilateral relationship at every level," Nall said. "The young NCOs from both sides will learn the significance of that, and ten years from now, they will be tomorrow's leaders and continue to uphold the U.S.-Japan security alliance with unwavering commitment."

Bilateral partnerships require interoperability, understanding and flexibility. According to Nall, all of these are woven into the

program itself.

At first glance, one might question the impact that a small group spending three months writing English diaries, going to morning physical training and giving briefings would have on U.S. Army NCOs and the significant mission they support — stability in the Pacific region. But, according to Sgt. 1st Class Chris Pasion, the NCO in charge of host-nation affairs for U.S. Army Japan, its value is clear.

"The co-op program provides a longer duration of exposure. It's important to improving interoperability and cultural understanding. The NCOs share their experiences as citizens and soldiers. They train together, work together and learn from each other."

The growing familiarity, observation, questions and a little friendly competition lead to understanding and camaraderie, Pasion said. “That understanding and appreciation grows exponentially as the NCOs share their experience with their home units.”

From the moment the Japanese soldiers arrive at Camp Zama, an English-only rule goes into effect. Each day they participate in PT with their sponsors, turn in English diaries for corrections and report for sponsor-time training, tours and classes about U.S. Army Japan units, policies, procedures and leadership.

Though Japanese law prohibits JGSDF personnel from firing U.S. Army weapons and practicing certain medical procedures, such as inserting an IV, other training opportunities give the Japanese broad experience. Some examples include briefings, demonstrations, domestic violence response, conducting vehicle security checks and troop movements.

“Sergeants Time training is a very good experience for me,” said Sgt. Shuichi Chiba, protocol NCOIC for the 4th Engineer Group, Eastern Army, JGSDF, and a former co-op participant. “Young NCOs lead training; they have the whole responsibility from planning to execution. This is very different than [in the] JGSDF.”

“Rappelling with 35th [Combat Service Support Battalion] at Camp Fuji was my favorite training,” said Chiba. “It was the first time I’ve done such training, and I was so impressed.”

For Sgt. 1st Class Masayuki Ambo



JGSDF photo by Sgt. Shuichi Chiba  
**U.S. NCOs of the 35th Combat Service Support Battalion prepare JGSDF members for rappelling at the Camp Fuji training area.**

of the 25th Infantry Regiment, Northern Army, JGSDF, and the current co-op group NCOIC, military working dogs offered the most interesting training. But, the real value of the program is improving communication, he said.

“It’s a great opportunity to speak a different language. It’s rare for most of us to be able to talk with native English speakers,” Ambo said. “We have bilateral exercises, but we don’t have as many chances [to talk], because they’re only one or two weeks in duration.”

For U.S. NCOs, becoming a co-op sponsor is both a communication chal-

lenge and intense commitment, say program coordinators. Co-op members have basic English speaking and writing abilities, but experience varies.

“There’s a lot more to this than just going out to dinner once in awhile,” said Sgt. 1st Class Eric Rodriguez of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, U.S. Army Japan. “They (JGSDF members) are very inquisitive. Our lifestyles and thought processes are completely different. A sponsor has to be willing to be a diplomat, a patient teacher and a squared-away Soldier above all,” he said.

U.S. NCOs receive an invaluable education and experience as well, Nall said.

“Both sides get a new perspective and learn new approaches to problem solving,” he said. “It helps us learn, too. We recognize areas where we can improve,” Nall said.

Pasion’s learning experience also included the realization of how much the two countries’ NCOs have in common.

“I’ve worked a lot with the JGSDF soldiers and was surprised at how similar we are; the soldier/warrior mentality is the same. Both armies emphasize training, safety and accountability,” Pasion said.

“The Japanese army has a higher level of discipline when it comes to rank and structure,” he observed. “They’ve reminded me how important it is to treat both superiors and subordinates with respect. That also comes with a sense of deep humility. That discipline, both up and down the chain, has made me more aware of my actions and example,” Pasion said.



Photo courtesy U.S. Army Japan

Japanese soldiers participating in the 90-day co-op program immerse themselves in activities like combat-focused physical training.