



# More than an NCO — *a true hero*

By Angela Simental

Command Sgt. Maj. Ronald T. Riling, command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Forces Command, keeps his boots firmly on the ground and focuses on his Soldiers.

**C**ommand Sgt. Maj. Ronald T. Riling, the 16th command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Forces Command has, been hailed a hero. He certainly doesn't like that description – he says he is just a noncommissioned officer.

In 2004, Riling earned a Silver Star, the third-highest military decoration, for his actions during a fierce fight in the city of Ramadi, Iraq.

Riling was serving as the command sergeant major of the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division in 2004 when he was notified that the Marines attached to his brigade were under heavy enemy fire. He immediately prepared his Soldiers for combat.

"We quickly formed a team and went to help them," Riling recounts. "We lost 12 great Americans that day. I don't feel I deserved the medal more than anyone who fought that day. I was just doing my job as the others were. I don't wear the award for me; I wear it for the ones who gave their lives and fought so hard in combat for our country – those are the real heroes in my eyes.

To this day, I still think of them. I will never forget what they did for our great nation."

According to the award citation, "After Command Sgt. Maj. Riling's team evacuated the injured Marines and recovered a Marine squad leader's body, another Marine platoon in the area came under attack by insurgents armed with rocket-propelled grenades. Command Sgt. Maj. Riling directed two Bradley fighting vehicles from the brigade's reserve into the fight to squelch the attacks."

This experience made Riling reflect on life's meaning and the things he values.

"It made me realize that life is so precious and that, in a matter of seconds, it can be gone," he said. "It also made me recognize how lucky I was; I could have been one of the 12 we lost. I was very humbled when I received this award. I can't talk about it without getting choked up."

Besides the Silver Star, Riling has also received other recognitions, including a Legion of Merit, Bronze Star and Meritorious



Courtesy photo

Command Sgt. Maj. Ronald T. Riling, left, FORSCOM's command sergeant major, speaks with an Iraqi translator during his second deployment to Iraq in 2005.

Service Medal, among others. But, as he said, his family is his greatest achievement and support system.

"I'm happily married to my lovely wife Melinda, who is my pride and joy and best friend. She is the person who helps me make good decisions. I appreciate the sacrifices she makes for me," said the father of five. "My parents are also a big part of my life. They have always supported and helped me get through tough times. They raised me with discipline and love at the same time."

### Life as a Soldier

Riling said he proudly wears his uniform. Every patch and decoration is a reminder of the NCOs who have helped him become a better Soldier, and of the great men and women he serves with.

"I'm proud I have been able to serve with some of the finest Soldiers and leaders in the world in peace and in combat," Riling said. "I'm proud I have been afforded the opportunity to serve in

some great assignments."

A Michigan native, Riling knew from a very young age he wanted to serve his country and committed to the Army in 1983 at the age of 18.

"I decided to join the Army so I could serve, defend and protect my country," he said proudly. "I also joined so I would be able to see different parts of the world, meet new people and be a member of the team that serves our great nation."

Riling served in Haiti in 1994, in Korea from 1997 to 1998 and two tours in Iraq in 2003 and 2005.

Throughout Riling's 28-year military career, there have been NCOs who have guided, mentored and influenced him, showing him the best examples of NCO leadership, he said.

"I can't name them all. Those who really made an impact on me, have always given me great advice and have been there when I needed them are Command Sgts. Maj. Joe Gainey, Carl Christian, Jeff Mellinger, Ralph Beam, Cory McCarty, Neil Ciotola, Mark Ripka, Joe Allen, Marvin Hill, Iuni Savusa, Rafael Ramos,



in all matters pertaining to the command's more than 278,000 active-duty Soldiers.

"FORSCOM is a huge command," Riling said. "It's hard to get the word out to everyone. Yes, you can always send e-mails, but it's not the same as getting out on the ground and talking to leaders and Soldiers. You have to get out and see Soldiers and units and try to keep them informed the best way you can. I personally like to look the NCO's and Soldiers in the eye and tell them that we are doing our best to support them in the fight. We want to help them and make a difference"

## About education

The best advice Riling received from his mentors was to pursue higher education, he said.

"I'm proud I listened to my mentors when they told me to go get an education and not wait until it's too late," he said. Riling earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Touro University in 2006. "Education is very important.

Sometimes, we NCOs say we're too busy, or we find excuses not to do it."

His military education included Air Assault, Airborne, Jumpmaster, Pathfinder and Ranger schools.

"I went to the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy in 1999 – Class 50," he said. "I had a wonderful experience, and met many wonderful leaders with whom I still keep in touch. When you go to a school like this, you form a bond with the brothers and sisters you serve with, and you never forget them. There is a bond that was formed, and it will never be broken."

Before attending USASMA, Riling attended Drill Sergeant School in 1990 as a young sergeant first class.

"I really learned a lot about training Soldiers and becoming a better leader. It's tough duty and long hours, but it is very rewarding when you see Soldiers graduate after 10 weeks of basic training. It makes you feel good when you know you were part of their success, helping them become Soldiers," he said. "I have had Soldiers come up to me and say, 'You were my drill sergeant.' Some of them are now wearing sergeant major rank – amazing!"

Although Drill Sergeant School proved to be one of his most rewarding experiences, Ranger School was the toughest and most demanding and is, hence, his favorite.

"In Ranger School, you learn a lot about yourself and what you need to accomplish the mission. You learn that quitting is not an option," he explained. "I was glad I went when I was a young staff sergeant in the 82nd Airborne Division. This school helped me become a better leader and taught me a whole lot. This is a school you never forget, and you are proud



Top: Command Sgt. Maj. Ronald T. Riling, left, while on tour in Iraq in 2006 with Gen. James D. Thurman, then major general of U.S. Army Forces Command. Thurman selected Riling to serve as the FORSCOM top enlisted Soldier in 2009. Courtesy photo

Left: Riling stands next to his awards and deployment memorabilia in his office at Fort McPherson, Ga. Photo by Paul D. Prince, FORSCOM Public Affairs

Joe Spain, Pat Castin, Rick Hearn and Sgts. Maj. of the Army Robert Hall, Jack Tilley and Ken Preston," he said. "These are the guys who have always steered me in the right direction. Many of them have already retired. I'm very respectful and thank all of them for their friendship and mentorship."

Riling became the top-ranking NCO at FORSCOM on July 12, 2010, serving as the commanding general's personal advisor

when you graduate.”

### Wise advice

From the NCOs Riling looks up to, he has learned the only way to lead Soldiers is to set a good example.

“Be fair to your Soldiers, but be hard when needed,” he said. “Show Soldiers how to get where you’re at and how they can better themselves in the future. This requires a lot of teaching, coaching and mentoring.”

He advises NCOs to “take the time to listen to others. Take care of your Soldiers, and they will take care of you. Get a good education, and make the best of the Army.”

Riling believes loyalty, teamwork and good communication are the Army’s driving forces.

“You have to be honest and tell the truth to people. Loyalty goes a long way,” he said. “Also, having communication from the



Photo by Paul D. Prince, FORSCOM Public Affairs

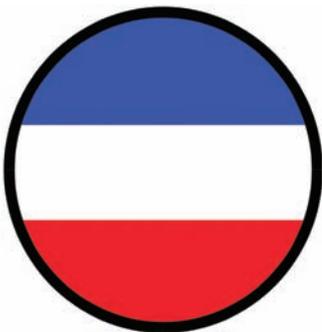
Command Sgt. Maj. Ronald T. Riling, a Silver Star recipient, has been the top enlisted NCO at FORSCOM since July 2010.

senior levels down to the junior levels is very important. Units must communicate to be effective, and leaders have to listen to the concerns of their Soldiers and families.”

He also explained that senior NCOs have to support their commander 100 percent in order to create a good command climate and solve important issues.

“You have to be the eyes and ears for the commander and make good recommendations so good decisions can be made for the entire unit. This way, all Soldiers will benefit,” he said. “Being flexible is also very important. Things will change from time to time, and you must adapt. Work well with others, even if you have disagreements on certain things – always try to work it out, and be professional. Lastly, be yourself.”

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## Facts about FORSCOM

- U.S. Army Forces Command is the largest command in the Army.
- Currently headquartered at Fort McPherson, Ga., became active in 1973, but will relocate to Fort Bragg, N.C., this year as part of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission changes.
- FORSCOM’s mission is to train, mobilize and deploy ground forces to meet the nation’s operational requirements.
- Responsible for mobilizing and training more than 278,000 active duty and 570,000 reserve Soldiers.
- Today, almost 200,000 FORSCOM Soldiers are deployed in 120 countries.
- 8,200 FORSCOM Soldiers provide protection within U.S. borders.
- Soldiers are primarily trained for warfighting missions, but are also prepared to quickly respond to America’s allies in danger or provide aid after natural disasters.
- Units also protect key national assets against terrorism.
- FORSCOM’s major units are spread throughout 15 installations.