

NCOS

KEEP



One of several cells in the pre-trial confinement unit of the Joint Regional Correctional Facility at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., that hold prisoners before being tried.

U.S. Army photo

AT LEAVENWORTH

LIFE

BY JONATHAN (JAY) KOESTER

Walking through the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., is unlike any Hollywood depiction of a prison. There is no yelling, no cursing, no fights and, frankly, no excitement. The Hollywood voiceover might say it is “quiet ... too quiet.”

But as any Soldier who works there will tell you, working at the USDB is nothing like Hollywood would have you believe.

“Though most days are quiet, you have to remain vigilant at all times,” said Staff Sgt. Anthony Smith, assistant opera-

tions sergeant. “To keep things calm, you have to get out there and do your job. You can’t be a timid person.”

Dropping any bravado is one of the first things Sgt. 1st Class Mamie Williams, operations sergeant, tells young Soldiers to do when they come to work at the USDB.

“Take everything that you learned from the movies or any books you have read and toss it out of the window. It won’t do you any good here,” Williams said. “We have a lot of junior Soldiers who come in thinking that they’re supposed to be the hard, tough guy who is mean and yells at the inmates. That’s really not the correct approach.”

It may not be dramatic or exciting, but what you will find at the USDB is a group of professionals working hard to keep inmates and the public safe in an atmosphere centered on rehabilitation.

“If you are looking for a [military occupational specialty] where there is a whole lot of excitement, you are going to be sadly disappointed if you come to this field,” Williams said. “It has its days that

WHAT IT TAKES

MATURITY

“If the place caught on fire, it was my job to get them out. ... That was my first day in the Army. I was responsible for 40 grown men, and I was 18 years old. I grew up fast and learned fast.”

— Master Sgt. Michael Bennett, battalion operations NCO

are exciting and challenging, but more importantly, you get up close and personal with Soldiers. We deal a lot with mentoring our junior leaders and junior Soldiers. It’s a good job if you want to develop your leadership skills as an NCO or learn what it takes to be a leader.”

THE PRISONS

Although the USDB has a long and storied history at Fort Leavenworth, a new prison building, the Midwest Joint Regional Correctional Facility, opened in October after being built as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure recommendations. Because of BRAC, correctional facilities were closed at Fort Sill, Okla.; Fort Knox, Ky.; and Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

The JRCF cost \$95 million to build. It has 512 beds with an operational capacity of 460 inmates. The facility currently holds about 150 inmates, leaving some wings empty.

In September, the 15th Military Police Brigade was reactivated after 34 years. Under its command are the 40th Military Police Internment and Resettlement Battalion, which oversees the USDB, and the 705th MP I/R Battalion, which oversees the JRCF.

The JRCF houses inmates who are serving terms of five years or fewer, while the USDB holds inmates serving terms of more than five years, including those serving life sentences and those who have



Photo courtesy Fort Leavenworth Public Affairs

The original United States Disciplinary Barracks was built by prisoners and opened in 1921. The building, dubbed “The Castle,” was made of stone and brick, and was operational until September 2002. The Castle in the center has been torn down, but the outside walls of the complex remain.

been sentenced to death. The JRCF also holds Soldiers who are in pre-trial detention, like Pfc. Bradley Manning, who is being held on charges of leaking classified information to WikiLeaks. Manning was transferred to the JRCF in April.

Pre-trial inmates are held in the maximum-security wing of JRCF so they can be segregated from those already convicted. Because of the presumption of innocence, pre-trial inmates are treated as regular Soldiers as much as possible, said Master Sgt. Patrick Manning, noncommissioned officer in charge of the directorate of operations at the JRCF.

The USDB has six inmates on death

row, though the last execution by the U.S. military was in 1961. On April 13 of that year, Pfc. John Bennett was hanged for the rape and attempted murder of an 11-year-old girl in 1954 in Allied-occupied Austria. The most recent person sent to the USDB death row was Hasan Akbar, a former sergeant convicted in 2005 of killing two officers in March 2003 during a grenade and rifle attack inside Camp Pennsylvania, Kuwait.

Though the JRCF is a new facility at Fort Leavenworth, the USDB’s history on the post goes back to 1875, when construction of the first prison began. The building was erected by prisoners and

opened in 1921. The facility, dubbed “The Castle,” was made of stone and brick and was operational until September 2002. The new USDB facility, which opened that same month, is about a mile north of the old location.

Most of the old USDB was torn down, though the outside walls of the complex remain. The area has been converted to other uses, including a small deli called The 12th Brick Grille, which refers to the inmate-produced bricks used to build the prison. Every 12th brick was stamped “USMP,” as the original name of the facility was the United States Military Prison.

The new USDB facility cost \$67.8 million to build and has three housing sections that can hold 140 inmates each, for a total of 420. Both the JRCF and USDB reflect a design strategy that eliminates cell bars. Each cell, instead, has a solid door with a small window that looks into the prisoners’ common area. Each common area is provided natural sunlight from high windows and skylights.

Minimum- and medium-security inmates have some freedom inside prison walls. They have jobs, and educational opportunities are available. Inmates also have access to telephones, though all conversations are monitored. Inmates are allowed to make a list of up to 20 phone numbers they may call.

Inmate common areas have TVs with satellite cable. However, prison directors monitor the satellite feed, censoring objectionable content. For instance, inmates at the JRCF recently went a period of time without the Fox network (and, perhaps more importantly, its NFL football game telecasts) because directors blocked the channel when the series *Prison Break* was on air.



Photo by Sgt. Vincent Daly, Fort Leavenworth Public Affairs
Staff Sgt. Dawn Shields searches a cell at the USDB. Shields, who works in a housing unit at the USDB, said the key to doing her job and staying safe is being “firm, fair and consistent” with inmates.

LEARNING THE SKILLS

The skills Soldiers and NCOs need to work inside the walls of the USDB and JRCF include maturity, patience, discipline, a calm demeanor and a thick skin.

Young Soldiers have to be immediately ready to deal with inmates who are older and often previously were authority figures in the Army. Those inmates will use every trick in the book to manipulate

the young guards, prison officials say.

Meanwhile, those young Soldiers must treat each inmate firmly but fairly, no matter what abuse is thrown at the Soldiers and no matter what crime the inmates may have committed. Being nonjudgmental toward the inmates’ crimes is one of the first hurdles young Soldiers must overcome, senior NCOs said.

“It’s not really a physically demanding job but more of a mentally demanding job,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Steven

WHAT IT TAKES

DETERMINATION

“You have to be a person who is really, really headstrong and is not easily persuaded — a person who is more naturally a leader than a follower.”

— Sgt. 1st Class Steven Varnado, training NCO for the 705th MP I/R Battalion

WHAT IT TAKES

A CALM DEMEANOR

“You have to ignore the games that go on. Don’t respond in kind. People are going to push your buttons, and you have to let it roll off your back.”

— Sgt. 1st Class Warren Freeman, JRCF housing unit NCOIC

Raines, command sergeant major of the 705th MP I/R Battalion. “You have to be a very diverse noncommissioned officer to be able to handle not only the physical stuff that comes with the Army, but also the mental stuff that comes with working with inmates.”

“It has different stressors,” said Sgt. 1st Class Steven Varnado, training NCO for the 705th MP I/R Battalion. “It’s not like the combat stress of getting shot at every day, but it does have its stressors that wear and tear on the body. You feel just as exhausted after four or five days of working in that facility as you would going out on a mission.”

And make no mistake, 31E internment/resettlement specialists do go downrange. They deploy and usually focus on detainee operations on the battlefield. Senior 31E NCOs have worked hard to make sure that is the case.

“This MOS previously was only garrison duty,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Jonathan Godwin, command sergeant major of the USDB and 15th MP Brigade. “We are now a deployable organization based upon the skill sets we bring to the table.”

A NEEDED MOS

The Army was close to discarding that skill set until its importance was demonstrated by the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When the world saw the abuse some military police personnel had inflicted on foreign detainees, the need for a professional group of well-trained internment specialists became very clear. The Army’s internment

specialists went from being on the chopping block to growing to the point where the 15th MP Brigade now includes nearly all 31E Soldiers.

“I remember when I first got here in 2000, the secretary of defense said, ‘We’re shutting you down. We don’t even need your MOS,’” said 1st Sgt. Charles Clements, first sergeant of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, USDB. “But then Abu Ghraib kicked off, and they said, ‘Oh, we have guys who can do this for real? That’s their job?’”

Although 31B military police and 31E Soldiers often train together and progress

through the NCO Education System together, the mindset each must bring to his or her job is completely different.

While military police are trained to be aggressive and often need to be aggressive to complete their mission, internment specialists learn to use interpersonal communication skills to control a situation, said Master Sgt. Michael Bennett, battalion operations NCO.

“When the [31Bs] deploy, they go and close with the enemy. They’re out there ... getting in firefights,” Bennett said. “We already know that the bad guy is right in front of us, behind the door. Our job is



Photo by Prudence Siebert, Fort Leavenworth Lamp

Command Sgt. Maj. Jonathan Godwin, 15th MP Brigade and USDB command sergeant major (left), and Col. Eric Belcher, 15th MP Brigade commander and USDB commandant, present a road sign to Elizabeth Sabalu to honor her brother, Master Sgt. Wilberto Sabalu Jr., during a ceremony dedicating a road in the fallen Soldier’s name Sept. 28 near the USDB. Master Sgt. Sabalu, who served several years as a corrections specialist at Fort Leavenworth, was killed in Afghanistan in 2007.



Photo courtesy Fort Leavenworth Public Affairs

Cells at the Midwest Joint Regional Correctional Facility do not have bars. The two-person cells have solid doors with thick windows. The cells open to a common area where inmates can sit or watch television. The JRCF cost \$95 million and was built to comply with American Correctional Association Standards.

just to keep them locked up and to provide them with the basic human rights that they deserve.”

REHABILITATION

A recent Pew Center study released in April indicated that more than four in 10 state prisoners return to prison within three years of being released. Meanwhile, officials at the USDB and JRCF said they rarely see their inmates re-offend after release.

The motto at the USDB is “Our Mis-

sion, Your Future” and is meant to focus on the balance the military and civilian staff bring to making sure inmates are prepared for life on the outside.

“We try to have a mindset knowing that, for the majority of the inmates, eventually they are going to be released. We would like for them to get the social skills and a job skill set that will allow them to be productive members of society,” said Sgt. Maj. Joseph Fowler, of the directorate of operations at USDB. “Eventually, they are going to be your neighbor, my

neighbor, your family’s neighbor. ... So, we take pride in the vocational and educational training that we provide for the inmates.”

The different atmosphere also stems from the inmates having military backgrounds and few prior offenses, Fowler added.

“We are dealing with only military prisoners, and they all have some level of training and a level of discipline,” Fowler said. “Though they committed a crime, most of them have a love of their country

WHAT IT TAKES

A THICK SKIN

“They’ll try to find that one nitpicky thing, that one name that you don’t like being called. ... There are a lot of mental games inmates play with females that a male might not have to go through.”

— Sgt. 1st Class Mamie Williams, operations sergeant

and really respect the rank that people are wearing. ... The environment is much different than what is portrayed on all the TV shows.”

Each inmate has a job to do during the day, and the skills learned in that job are meant to serve them later. Some of the first jobs inmates do upon arrival, such as laundry or kitchen duty, are unpaid. The inmates must work their way up to jobs in textiles, embroidery or woodworking that pay up to about \$1 an hour.

One of the more competitive jobs to get is at the licensed barber college. Five inmates work there at any given time, and if they complete their training, they'll receive barber's licenses. Those five inmates cut the hair of all the other inmates every two weeks. For Soldiers or NCOs who work there, the haircuts cost \$4.

In addition to the inmate work details, the correctional facilities at Fort Leavenworth provide medical and dental services, religious activities, workout facilities and libraries to their inmates.

That all adds up to a mini-post behind the prisons' walls. From the 68X mental health specialists to the 92G food service specialists, 32 different MOSs work together in this unique environment.

“The brigade comprises Soldiers from 32 MOSs that, just by their reaction, just by them coming to work with an attitude, could very well spark a situation that could escalate out of control,” Godwin said. “The type of Soldier who works here is someone who is mature, someone who has foresight and knowledge of how to de-escalate.”

NO SPOTLIGHT

Just as important as knowing what kind of NCO can succeed in the 31E occupational specialty is knowing who is better suited serving the nation elsewhere.

“We don't need someone in this MOS who is looking for the spotlight,” Godwin said. “This is not a self-serving MOS. We are servants to the people, the community and the nation.

“The objectives of Army correctives are to protect the community from offenders, provide a safe and secure environment for the incarceration of military offenders, and prepare inmates for eventual release so they will be productive members of society. We do our jobs efficiently and effectively, but in a low-key manner.”

Soldiers and NCOs often learn they need to tone things down when they arrive in the 31E field.

“One of the biggest things, if you

were to switch over from a different MOS like infantry, you need to take the mindset of that MOS, that Type-A personality and switch it to, not necessarily Type B, but somewhere in between,” said Staff Sgt. Michael Dayus, brigade operations NCO.

So, why take on this difficult job — one where you won't receive accolades for good work, but if anything goes wrong, it could become national news? The teamwork of an outstanding group of NCOs is the key for many.

“Having held a prior MOS and this one, I think the NCO corps in the 31E field is better than any NCO corps I've been around,” said Sgt. 1st Class Brian Wildman, operations sergeant for JRCF. “I've



U.S. Army photo

This common area in the pre-trial confinement unit of the JRCF at Fort Leavenworth serves to keep pre-trial inmates segregated from convicted inmates in an attempt to treat them like regular Soldiers as much as possible.

LEADERSHIP & TRAINING

“We're outnumbered 10-to-1. When you are a lone NCO on a tier of 60 inmates, that's when your training from your leadership really kicks in. Or, that's when your mentorship of that Soldier kicks in.”

— Staff Sgt. Michael Dayus, brigade operations NCO

WHAT IT TAKES

VIGILANCE

“You could go years and nothing ever happens. Then there goes that one time when a Soldier is taken hostage, and it’s everything you can do to get in and get that Soldier out.”

— Master Sgt. Michael Bennett, battalion operations NCO

met many, many amazing NCOs as a 31E that I never met in my prior one, which I held for almost four years. I think the loyalty that is really instilled in the 31E field plays a crucial part.”

And joining the 31E specialty doesn’t necessarily mean you’re destined to go to Fort Leavenworth, Wildman added.

“There are only three or four prisons that you can go work at, but there are a ton of BCT [brigade combat team] slots that you can go to all over the United States, or OCONUS [outside the continental United

States].” Wildman said. “There are always people looking for subject-matter experts with detainee operations. You could deploy. It’s actually limitless as to where you could go as a 31E NCO.”

The training and experience Soldiers receive as 31Es create NCOs who know how to lead, Master Sgt. Bennett said.

“We force a great amount of responsibility on our young Soldiers right off the top,” Bennett said. “When we get a brand-new Soldier in from AIT [Advanced Individual Training], they’re charged with

watching 80 to 100 individuals. ... If we do it right, then they will grow into a great NCO.”

The opposite is true, as well, he said.

“It kind of helps us weed out those who don’t need to be an NCO,” Bennett added. “If they can’t take care of the guys in the cell block, maybe they’re not ready for a team or a squad.”

The experience helps Soldiers and NCOs prepare for a future outside the Army, said Sgt. Maj. Stephen Hansen, brigade operations sergeant major. Most stay in the law enforcement arena, though not necessarily at correctional facilities.

“Just around here in the area, there are a lot of retired 31Es who have taken over prison systems or sheriffs’ departments because of their knowledge in corrections,” Hansen said. “So, it’s definitely an asset to be in this MOS after you retire or ETS [expiration term of service] from the military.”

Though you could spend months — even years — at the USDB and JRCF and witness nothing that would raise your pulse, the 31E Soldiers know they have to stay vigilant at all times. Godwin said guards eventually develop a sixth sense to anticipate when trouble is brewing.

“The biggest thing we fight here is complacency, because rarely does anything happen,” Godwin said. “But we have to be prepared for something to happen at a moment’s notice.”

Because it isn’t Hollywood, those in the 31E field know fame doesn’t await them at the end of another tough day. Their rewards are less exciting, more quiet — just like they keep the USDB and JRCF. 🇺🇸



Photo by Sgt. Vincent Daly, Fort Leavenworth Public Affairs

A USDB Force Cell Move Team gets briefed before entering the maximum-security housing unit to move an inmate. Inmates in USDB’s maximum-security unit are locked down 23 hours a day, with 50 minutes for recreation and 10 minutes to shower.

To contact Jonathan (Jay) Koester, visit the NCO Journal website at <https://usasma.bliss.army.mil/NCOJournal/>.