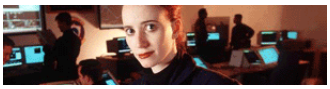

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Colorado leaders 'strat' their stuff

Bosses focus on joint strategy, accountability, communications

Colorado Air National Guardsmen discuss deploying troops to the U.S. border with Mexico during a tabletop exercise a National Security Studies seminar held Greenwood Village, Colo., Nov. 13-14, 2009. The seminar focused on joint strategy, accountability, communications. Select senior Colorado Army and Air National Guard leaders attended a two day exportable version of the NSS course that is normally held at the Syracuse University. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Cheresa D. Theiral, Colorado National Guard/Released)

By Tech. Sgt. Cheresa D. Theiral
Colorado National Guard Public Affairs

"As you move up to the upper reaches of the career triangle, you need to start thinking differently about who you are, what you do and what you're responsible for," said retired Army Col. Bill Smullens, director of National Security Studies at Syracuse University in New York.

The remarks were made to a select group of senior Colorado Army and Air National Guard leaders during an NSS seminar held in Greenwood Village, Colo., Nov. 13-14. Portions of the two week NSS course, which is normally held at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at the university, were customized for the group.

The local seminar allowed the leaders to step out of their jobs, ranks and services in order look at things from different perspectives – whether state, national or international – and challenged them to think about the world as they will encounter it in the future; to make decisions today that will better prepare them strategically so that future missions will be accomplished with the most prepared and accountable Guardsmen ever.

"Having a breadth of knowledge is important for senior leadership," said COANG Commander Brig. Gen. Bill Hudson, who, along with COARNG Land Components Commander Brig. Gen. Robert Balster, brought the localized course to the CONG. "What makes the Guard strong is the fact that we don't (permanently change duty stations). We know our jobs better than anybody. There's nobody better at what we do. Nobody. What makes us weak is we don't PCS, because we don't get a breadth of experience … (and) that experience is only what we have in the state," said Hudson.

One goal of the seminar was for lead Soldiers and Airmen to better understand the cultures of the Army and Air components, and how to best utilize their joint capabilities, said Colorado Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. H. Michael Edwards.

The first exercise, titled "Good Order and Discipline," was a game on paper that called for Soldiers and Airmen who had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan to deploy again in support of the U.S./Mexico border mission. During move one, Army and Air staffs planned separate, but straightforward deployments based on each service's individual capabilities and assets. Move two, the actual employment, called for a range of mission and personnel requirements – and challenges. The services were primarily focused on mission accomplishment but were also offered guidance from family programs, public affairs and legal personnel.

The goal of the game was to expand leaders' thinking regarding handling situations such as PTSD and depression, personnel cliques and integrating joint forces in order to manage people better; and working with public affairs to engage the media

so that the forces and the public were better informed and accepting of the mission.

“It’s very easy to get wrapped up in the job and wrapped up in the specifics of the tasking, and not necessarily think about the effects that the other surrounding issues, like the personnel issues, are going to have on your job,” said Dr. Ed McGrady, principal of Two-Stone LLC, who designed and led the game.

McGrady also reminded commanders to also keep in mind their strategies, so that through public affairs and the media, their key messages could be communicated effectively both internally and to the public.

Another point made to CONG leaders was accountability.

“In the Guard we sometimes have a hard time holding our friends accountable,” said Balster. “We’re a tight-knit community. We develop full-time professional relationships that may be awkward in military missions.”

We must hold our people accountable. In the midst of a war, we cannot take taking incompetence forward. We have to rely on dedicated people who are focused on the mission, Hudson said.

The accountability point was further emphasized using a real-life case study. Participants were asked to evaluate the Khobar Towers bombing of 1996 as if they were the key Air Force leaders at the time. They were tasked with assessing responsibility and accountability for the event, as well as determining appropriate consequences – if any – for those who oversaw the Airmen in the Saudi Arabian apartment complex. Current leaders were tasked with asking themselves if they did all they could have done to prevent the tragedy, and whether the actual consequences were put forth based on the intentions of leadership, or the tragedy itself.

“We never should forget, as leaders of our total force, that the most precious treasure that we deal with, that we are entrusted with, are the lives of the young men and women who serve in our nation’s military,” said retired Air Force Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, who was the chief of staff of the Air Force at the time of the bombing and one of several guest speakers at the seminar. “So with the responsibility of command and leadership comes something else. … It’s a profession that demands integrity.”

Fogleman then said integrity is reinforced by accountability.

“In the macro sense, it’s always looked upon as kind of a pejorative term, accountability; (as if) the only thing that can ever come out of an exercise in accountability is something bad.” But that’s not the model that true leaders should aspire to, he said, “because there will be those times when your troops, and you yourself, may be called to defend your position against a certain set of standards and values, and when it is done, your troops or you are found to have met the test. And if that happens to be the case, then I believe very strongly that the senior leadership has an obligation to step up and push off the political pressures, the naysayers, the scapegoaters, and defend their people.

“Sometimes it gets difficult to differentiate between a mistake and a crime. That’s why they pay you to be a commander, or a leader. … The authority you have over the lives of the people who work for you and with you – these are sacred trusts and should not be taken lightly,” said Fogleman.

“We learned a lot about accountability and I think accountability goes both ways,” said Balster. “Accountability is set first in clear expectations. As troops, make sure you understand what’s being asked of you. As supervisors, ensure your expectations are clear.”

Other speakers at the conference included:

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Russel L. Honoré, former commander of First Army and Joint Task Force Katrina, who shared lessons learned from joint operations following the 2005 hurricanes that devastated the Louisiana and Mississippi coastlines.

Retired Army Gen. Montgomery Miegs spoke about moral character as a leadership quality. He admitted that most great leaders aren’t born, and that becoming great involves being intuitive and insightful about mistakes, and being humble enough to admit mistakes to subordinates. “Most of us aren’t naturals. We have to work for it,” he said.

Smullen, a retired Army colonel and former special assistant to two chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also spoke about crisis management and preparedness in dealing with the media, as well as looking beyond current executive decisions in order to prepare for the future strategic challenges.

Colorado is a test case for this localized NSS initiative, as plans are being made to bring more seminars to key CONG leaders.

“The Colorado National Guard is fortunate that current senior leadership is leaning forward and taking steps like this seminar to prepare its ‘up and coming’ senior leaders for the challenges they will certainly face in the future,” said Air National Guard Lt. Col. Mari Lesniak, who evaluated the seminar for Chief of the National Guard Bureau Gen. Craig R. McKinley.

“Bill Smullen and the Syracuse team put on an excellent course that has served me well,” said McKinley, who also commended CONG leadership for recognizing

the value of this training and bringing an exportable version of the course to Colorado.

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