

# European, USAREUR NCOs build lifelong relationships at annual conference in Hungary

June 8, 2011

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Photo credit Sgt. Maj. Lisa Hunter

NATO Training Mission Afghanistan Command Sgt. Maj. Ralph Beam gives a briefing to senior enlisted leaders at the Conference of European Armies for Noncommissioned Officers in Szekesfehervar, Hungary, May 26. The Hungarian Joint Forces and U.S. Army Europe co-hosted the fifth annual conference.

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- U.S. Army Europe took the American Soldier's "train as you fight" concept to the international level during the fifth annual Conference of European Armies for Noncommissioned Officers in Szekesfehervar, Hungary, May 24-27.

This year's conference, co-hosted by the Hungarian Joint Forces and USAREUR, focused on the challenge of lifelong learning, a conundrum facing NCOs from every country.

"This conference is unique, in that it brings together some of the most senior noncommissioned officers from armed forces all over Europe," explained Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Capel, USAREUR's senior enlisted advisor. "The purpose of the conference is to encourage professional development among the European land forces and to establish relationships and networks among the senior noncommissioned officers from those countries."

This year, NCOs from 38 European countries, the United States and Canada attended the conference. The participants are all senior enlisted leaders in their nations' armed forces. Most are their nations' highest-ranking enlisted leaders, equivalent in rank to the U.S. Sergeant Major of the Army. Many are graduates of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. The conference is designed to strengthen partnerships and facilitate security cooperation, Capel said.

This year participants gathered at the Hungarian Joint Forces headquarters in Szekesfehervar, about 40 miles from Budapest. The conference focused on topics near and dear to every NCO's heart -- training and education -- as well as

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more diverse subjects, from an overview of NATO's Afghanistan training mission to a briefing on the mission of the U.S. Army Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization.

The conference gave everyone a chance to learn and to teach, said Command Sgt. Maj. Lazlo Toth of the Hungarian Joint Forces Command sergeant major. "The issue of lifelong learning is a big challenge for the future of all armies," Toth said.

The sergeant major said he knew the Hungarian armed forces were in for a major change when, in 1990, U.S. and Soviet aircraft both landed at the air base where he was stationed. Since then, building the Hungarian army NCO Corps has been the biggest challenge facing his armed services. Toth explained that Hungary has followed the examples other armies to construct a unique Hungarian force.

"Twenty-five years ago, the army reflected the Soviet style. Everything was in the officers' hands." Now, Toth said, the army is radically different. "NCOs have power as leaders. That means they have to accept the responsibility that comes with that power."

Other conference participants echoed those sentiments.

For example, Command Sgt. Maj. Darius Masiulis, a member of the National Defense Voluntary Forces of the Armed Forces of Lithuania, said his forces used the U.S. Army's enlisted promotion system as a model for their own. Masiulis, a graduate of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course, also noted that his own professional development has been enhanced through partnership and interaction with his international colleagues.

"I brought back a lot of ideas and suggestions [from the USASMA] that were implemented," he said. Masiulis said that nine-month school also enabled him to build a multinational network of European and U.S. sergeants major.

Likewise, the conference offered something of a reunion for many participants -- an opportunity to reacquaint with coalition partners from deployments, previous conferences and academy classes -- in addition to its professional development opportunities.

Slovenian Armed Forces Sgt. Maj. of the Army Janez Smid has attended all five of the annual NCO conferences. They are opportunities to learn while seeing old friends and making new ones, he said.

Because it is a small nation, Slovenia must be clever in its approaches to change and innovation, he explained, and so it also adopts good ideas from other armies. "Training and development are the areas that are changing most in the Slovenian military right now," Smid said. To help them focus on those areas, Slovenian forces have trained with the U.S. Army quite a bit, particularly USAREUR. To illustrate that partnership, he pointed to the fact that Slovenian troops who deploy to Afghanistan or Kosovo train with American Soldiers at USAREUR's Joint Multinational Readiness Center, which he called "an amazing facility."

Smid, a graduate of the U.S. Army First Sergeants Course and Sergeants Major Course, said his network of professional NCO colleagues has been invaluable. "You meet these guys again -- all over the world, in places like Iraq. They make your job that much easier," he said.

Capel said it has taken just a few years for European forces to embrace the conference, and member countries' senior NCOs are already looking forward to next year. "This whole concept may have started slowly, but it's really picked up speed. We used to emphasize joint training, but now, it's all about the international training. Most of these countries are our coalition partners in Afghanistan, so this conference is an excellent example of training as we fight."