Kansas National Guard Soldiers partner with Armenian forces for demining training

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By Petty Officer 2nd Class Patrick Grieco

Sgt. 1st Class Jacob Nelson of the Kansas National Guard uncovers a simulated mine on a metal detector lane as part of humanitarian demining action training taught by the Guard Soldiers and a civilian representative from the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Training Center, in Yerevan, Armenia, Sept. 19. Kansas National Guardsmen and a civilian representative with the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Training Center instructed Armenian peacekeepers and engineer battalions on international demining standards as part of the Humanitarian Mine Action program to assist the Armenian government in developing a national standard operating procedure for demining. (Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Patrick Grieco)

YEREVAN, Armenia -- Soldiers from the Kansas Army National Guard and a civilian representative from the U.S. Humanitarian Demining Training Center are here to teach international Humanitarian Mine Action standards to members of the Engineering Companies of the Armenian Peacekeeping Brigades from Sept. 18-28.

The partnership between Kansas and Armenia is one the 22 State Partnership Programs under the U.S. European Command, and is administered in part by U.S. Army Europe.

"In essence, we’re doing a train the trainer mission and trying to build their internal capacity," said Martin Dumond, on-site training instructor from the HDCT, out of Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.

"Armenia at this point does not really have a national set of standard operating procedures for demining, we give them our training and as a result the idea is that they take the concepts to help develop their own national training programs."

Dumond said the procedures taught in the HMA program are based around the approved international set of standards set down in Geneva, Switzerland. He said the goal of he and the Soldiers are to show the Armenians the basic framework and then allow them to tailor that to fit their respective country’s needs.

"It’s a way of engaging with the Armenians in the humanitarian realm," said Dumond. "If they can begin to follow internationally approved methodology and move in the direction the international community recommends. What makes
this mission different than most is the Armenians are at a point where they are developing standard procedures and a training program, so we are building it from the ground up here."

The officer-in-charge of the Kansas National Guard detachment in Armenia, Capt. Michael Liotta, has said this is not the first partnership engagement Kansas has had with Armenia.

"I believe we've done this demining training almost three times, maybe more," said Liotta, a Topeka native. "We also help them to set up their emergency management plans. The adjutant general of the Kansas National Guard is also in charge of emergency response management in Kansas, so we brought in Armenian first responders to tour and train in our facilities."

Liotta said Kansas and Armenia are state-partnership-program nations through a cooperative agreement that was forged at the time Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union.

"Bob Dole, a senator from Kansas was hurt in World War II and the doctor that tended to his wounds was Armenian," said Liotta. "Apparently they stayed in contact over the years and when Armenia declared independency, the U.S. was the first country to recognize them and it was due in large part to that relationship between Bob Dole and the doctor."

Liotta also said ever since the state-partnership was formed between Kansas and Armenia, a Kansas National Guard officer has been stationed here to help facilitate partnership type engagements with Armenia.

One guardsman said this opportunity was a chance for him to come face-to-face with his State's international partner nation.

"You always hear about this partnership, but you never really see the other partner and this was a great opportunity to come out and meet the Armenians," said Sgt. Michael Rogers, Pittsburg, Kan., native and combat engineer in the Kansas National Guard. "Now that we finally have a chance to come out and do some direct joint training with them, it has been amazing."

Rogers said Kansas has always been very supportive of U.S. service members and he sees this each time the Guard deploys. He said this training is a chance to show Kansas another aspect of the Guard.

"We are showing them we do something else in the world than war, that we're training people to do a humanitarian mission and save lives," Rogers. "It's a big deal to me and I can really see it becoming a thing of pride for the people of Kansas."

Sgt. 1st Class Jacob Nelson, a Wichita native and combat engineer in the Kansas National Guard, has said landmines are dangerous if left unchecked and this training will enable the Armenians to remove these hazards from their country. He said even helping to train someone to remove these mines gives him a good feeling inside.

Rogers said it's about helping the Armenians to return a piece of normalcy to their lives.

"Armenians just want to be safe and work a normal life, like we do," said Rogers. "They want the chance to work their land, play soccer games, go out and enjoy life and this is part of it. They are truly respectful of their land and these people love being Armenian, and you can really see it. In a way, Kansas is instilling pride in a whole other country."

Rogers also said many Armenians already recognize Kansas and when they are approached by Armenian troops who see their unit patch, the Armenian soldiers instantly recognize their partners in Kansas.

"That just shows how close we are," said Rogers.

During one portion of the class, Armenian and American members introduced themselves. Many of the Armenian peacekeepers had conducted deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq and even the Balkans.

"I was actually surprised to hear that," said Liotta. "A few of these guys were with us in Iraq, and well I believe anytime our militaries can work together on a mission that's a fantastic opportunity, it really shows that we're all on the same team and can associate ourselves as being one."

Liotta and Rogers both said they noticed the intense discipline, work ethic and determination of the Armenian soldiers. Both said they are highly impressed by this intense dedication to duty and country.

One of the Armenian students, Junior Sgt. Tigran Nikoghosyan, of the Engineering Company of the Armenian Peacekeeping Brigade, said this was not his first time encountering the Kansas National Guard.

"I remember and befriended Sgt. Travis Eichhorn from the 2008 visit," said Nikoghosyan, referring to a Jan. 22 visit by the Kansas National Guard that was timed to correspond with the arrival of mine detection and disposal equipment provided by the U.S. "Having known him and recognized him from that visit, I instantly recognize the knowledge and skills these soldiers bring out here."
Nikoghosyan said the field exercises were among his favorite portion of the training as it enabled him to physically apply the knowledge he has been studying in the classroom thus far. He said judging by his six years in the peacekeeping brigades, he can say Armenia is no stranger to international military-to-military cooperation and hopes to see such cooperation increase and magnify overtime.

"When it comes to cooperation, I would like not only to see the Americans come out to Armenia, but I would like to see some more Armenian specialists have the opportunity to study in America with U.S. troops," said Nikoghosyan.

Another student, Pvt. Robert Abajyan of the Engineering Company of the Armenian Peacekeeping Brigade, said he feels the exchange of knowledge and skills through these types of cooperative training exercises is essential when it comes to humanitarian mine action missions.

"As these contacts bring with them flows of information, new knowledge, and experience cooperation these days plays a vital role in global security," said Abajyan. "Honestly, you never know what may happen next, cooperation and joint-training such as this helps us to be prepared as professionals to face any mission Armenia or the world may ask of us."

Abajyan said demining is a critical mission in today’s world as much of the world has unexploded ordnance and minefields scattered about. He said by conducting international demining missions lives are being saved around the world.

The Kansas National Guard are in Armenia assisting a U.S. European Command host nation to develop its own Humanitarian Mine Action infrastructure capable of eliminating landmine hazards, returning land for economic use, educating people on landmine hazards and assisting victims of landmines and other explosive remnants of war. In addition to the traditional demining, EUCOM also provides training in mine risk education, mine victim assistance, and EOD courses in stockpile destruction.

Currently future HMA events include conducting stockpile destruction and management in Cyprus, underwater explosive remnants of war disposal in Montenegro, mine victim assistance in Kosovo and Romania, underwater explosive remnants of war in Ukraine, and explosive ordnance disposal in Albania.

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