



U.S. Africa Command NCO Partners with Female Soldiers in Liberia



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"She taught me to stand up for who I am and to be able to make sound decisions"
—Private Martha Nebo, AFL

Overview

With 20 years of experience in the U.S. Army, a charismatic personality, and a positive attitude, Sergeant 1st Class Shanwte Reynolds was a perfect candidate to travel to Liberia partnering with the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) to provide advice and guidance to the AFL service members.

Selected by U.S. Africa Command's senior enlisted leader, Command Sergeant Major Mark Ripka, Reynolds spent four months, April-July 2009, at Edward Binyah Kesselly Barracks outside of Monrovia, Liberia working with non-commissioned officers in the AFL. Reynolds was the first female NCO to participate in the mentoring initiative, which was part of the Liberia Security Sector Reform program, a U.S. State Department-led effort to help build leadership capacity within Liberia's military. The AFL was recently re-established following many years of civil war.



The Bottom Line

U.S. Army NCOs worked with Liberian NCOs, providing support as mentors and helping to promote gender equality within the Armed Forces of Liberia.

the four months," Reynolds said, "they were listening to [the female 1st Sergeant], and they were coming to her if they had problems."

In addition to providing support and advice, Reynolds taught classes covering topics such as uniforms, professional relationships, and other areas. After a few weeks, she said, many of the female soldiers started opening up to her, allowing her to identify other opportunities, such as the need for a planned parenthood program within the AFL. As Reynolds developed relationships with the AFL soldiers, she continued to learn more about them, both professionally and personally. "They were curious about my story, but I was more curious about their story," said Reynolds, who was particularly impressed with their work ethic and attitude. Many of them,

she said, left their jobs and took a pay cut to join the AFL. When asked why, many responded, "For my country."

Outcome

Reynolds saw many positive changes in attitude throughout the four months, and the AFL members showed greater respect to one another and seemed to take more pride in what they did. "It was baby steps but we got there," Reynolds said, adding that she still keeps in touch with many of the soldiers through regular phone calls and emails. After Reynolds left Liberia, the program continued with the arrival of Staff Sergeant Veronica Soto, U.S. Africa Command, and Sergeant 1st Class Dedraf Blash, U.S. Army Africa. As of January 2010, there is an Army National Guard and a Marine Corps detachment providing support.

A native of Flint, Michigan, Reynolds is an Administrator in U.S. Africa Command's Commandant's office, where she works on Army personnel issues. Prior to working at AFRICOM, Reynolds was at U.S. European Command, also in Stuttgart.

Challenges and Opportunities

Throughout the four months, Reynolds worked side-by-side with the Liberian soldiers, of which approximately 70 were female, sharing her experiences in the U.S. military, listening to their concerns, and offering advice. One of her biggest challenges was helping the soldiers break out of their traditional gender roles and respect one another as equals. "Getting [the AFL soldiers] to respect the females and getting the females to earn the respect they should be given—that was the key," Reynolds said.

One of the women, the only female 1st Sergeant in the AFL, experienced difficulty leading the male soldiers, who did not respect her because "she couldn't go to war." Reynolds expressed to them how important everyone's role was in the military from medics, to logistics personnel, to those who order supplies. "By the end of