

Army Secretary announces 2009 'Year of NCO'

BY C. Todd Lopez

WASHINGTON -- During his keynote address at the opening of the 2008 Association of the United States Army Annual Meeting and Exposition, Secretary of the Army Pete Geren announced 2009 would be "the Year Of The Noncommissioned Officer."

"At the front of every Army mission in the United States or overseas, you'll find a non-commissioned officer," he said. "They know their mission, they know their equipment, but most importantly, they know their Soldiers."

The secretary said that during the year, the Army will accelerate NCO development of strategic initiatives, develop new initiatives that enhance the training, education, capability, and utilization of the NCO corps, showcase the NCO story to the Army and the American people, and honor the sacrifices and celebrate contributions of the NCO Corps, past and present.

"Today's NCO operates autonomously, and always with confidence and competence," he said. "Our NCOs are empowered and trusted like no other NCO in the world, and most advanced armies in the world today are going to school on our model."

More than 3,000 Soldiers, civilians and military personnel from allied nations gathered Oct. 6 for the opening of the 2008 AUSA meeting.

The opening event of the three-day meeting, themed "America's Army: The Strength of the Nation," featured music, reflection on the history of the Army, presentation of AUSA awards and Secretary Geren's address.

Due to a changing administration, the secretary said this has been a

year of "lasts" for him: last budget to prepare, last time representing the service at an Army-Navy game, last time talking with Soldiers as their secretary, and last time addressing an AUSA meeting. He told the gathered crowd he's talked about people -- those Soldiers, Army families and civilians that make up the Army.

"I came to the Pentagon late summer of 2001, and I was in the Pentagon the morning of 9/11," he said. "And for seven years, I've watched Soldiers go off to war, and watched their families stand with them. I've been inspired by the service of our Soldiers, and humbled by the sacrifice of their families -- spouses and kids, moms and dads. And it's the privilege of a lifetime to work with and for Soldiers and Army families."

The first priority of the Army, Geren said, are the loved ones in harm's way.

"They are front of mind 24 hours a day, and we're committed to meeting with urgency the ever-changing life and death needs and demands of our Soldiers in Afghanistan and in Iraq," Geren said. "And not just meet their needs and meet the evolving threats, but anticipate, and do everything we can to get ahead of the threat. And care for those who have borne the battle, and their loved ones. These are moral duties of the highest order for our nation and our Army."

The secretary also talked about an often unseen portion of the military -- those who deliver goods and services to the fighting force: the Army logisticians.

"We have 250,000 Soldiers in 80 countries, and we've been at war for seven years, with 140,000 Soldiers in theater today," he said. "Nobody ever asks, who feeds those guys? Our logisticians are victims of their own success. Their work is so good it is invisible -- it's a given. Wherever our Army goes, whatever our Soldiers need, whenever they need it, they get it. The miracle of Army logistics."

According to Geren, the Army logistics community repairs over 14,000 vehicles every year -- a number equal to the number of yellow cabs in New York City. They also move more than 700,000 personnel in and out of theater, equal to the entire population of Charlotte, N.C. And each day, he said, Army logisticians provide 750,000 meals in Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They also dispense enough fuel in theater to fill up 750,000 cars -- nearly four times the number of vehicles registered in Washington, D.C.

"We talked much about the surge -- 15,000 more Soldiers in Iraq -- but nobody ever mentioned that Army logisticians would serve 45,000 more meals each day, and ship 120,000 more gallons of water each day," he said. "Army logisticians -- invisible, because they're so good at what they do, and absolutely indispensable."

During the course of Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, over 619 sustainment and support Soldiers have given their lives, the secretary said.

Secretary Geren also pointed out the historic anniversaries the Army has celebrated in 2008, including the 25th anniversary of the Army Family Action Plan, the 30th anniversary of the disestablishment of the Women's Army Corps, and the 60th anniversary of the integration of the U.S. military.

"Sixty years ago, our Army did not stand as one," he said. "It was not a single band of brothers, rather, a collection of bands of brothers divided by race."

The policy then, he said, was that the Army was separate, but "hardly equal."

"(It was a) cruel irony of our nation sending Soldiers to fight for freedom against the Germans -- yet affording privileges to white German prisoners of war held in the United States that were denied to the African-American Soldiers who guarded them," the secretary said.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, declaring "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."

"With the stroke of a pen, President Truman launched the Army on the path to the color-blind institution we know today," Geren said. "The Army moved slowly and stubbornly at first, but now stands as the model for equal opportunity in our nation. Today, we have an Army where the only colors that matter are red, white, and blue."

Geren also took time to reiterate another priority of the Army -- the elimination of sexual assault within the ranks.

"The brothers and sisters of our Army must be able to count on each other, wherever they are, in the battlefield or in the barracks, and whenever, on duty or off, no matter the cost," he said. "We will create a climate of zero tolerance for gender-based misconduct -- in attitude, word, and deed, and become fully, as our values demand, a band of brothers and sisters."