

SMA Preston takes charge

*I will always place the mission first.
I will never accept defeat.
I will never quit.
I will never leave a fallen comrade.*

Warrior Ethos



By Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

For Sgt. Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston, the Warrior's Ethos is more than a creed; it's a way of life. Or, as Preston would joke, "It's a hooah thing." Three months after moving into his new job, Preston's focus is clear: Continue to fight the Global War on Terrorism, transform the Army and ensure that every Soldier knows "who we are and what our priorities are."

"Every Soldier is a warrior. Regardless of what military occupational specialty you are, we are all trained as infantrymen," Preston said. "In Iraq, a transportation company first sergeant asked me, 'When are we going to get more combat troops to guard my truck drivers on their convoys?' I told him,

'You're not. You have to provide your own security.' We are all riflemen first in basic training. Those fundamental skills are what is going to keep you and your Soldiers alive."

The new SMA brings to the job a first-hand perspective of what it means to live up to the Soldier's Creed and the Warrior Ethos, as well as a first hand perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom. When Preston took the oath of office Jan. 15, he had barely knocked the Iraqi desert sand from his boots. During his previous assignment as the V Corps command sergeant major, Preston deployed to Iraq where he served as the Combined Joint Task Force 7 command sergeant major.

Preston spoke of the Army in the age of the Global War on Terrorism and what that means to today's Soldiers. "The new policy that all Soldiers will wear the flag on their uniform is a clear signal that we are an expeditionary army and we have to have an expeditionary mindset: We are ready to go when our nation calls.

"For Soldiers who have served in Iraq, Afghanistan or the Balkans, they know what it means to be part of an expeditionary force," he said. "The Warrior Ethos really says what's in their hearts."

Preston knows, however, that sewing flags on uniforms alone will not put Soldiers into an expeditionary mindset. For those Soldiers who have not deployed, Preston said that battle drills, battle-focused training and training as they will fight enables Soldiers to relate based on the experience they get from the training event.

"As Soldiers go through the decision-making process and have to choose between the mission and eating dinner tonight, it helps them understand the four tenants of the Warrior Ethos and puts the priorities into perspective of how to apply the military decision-making process," the 28-year veteran said.

At the same time that Preston is trying to ensure that all Soldiers are trained and ready for their missions, he is also looking ahead at what the Army will look like in the next decade.

"I think the biggest challenge is fighting the Global War on Terrorism; we are a nation at war; and we are going to transform ourselves. My biggest concern is that there is going to be a level of uncertainty out there among the Soldiers. I saw that following Operation Desert Storm," Preston said.

Preston sees communication as the key to minimizing Soldiers' concerns. He encourages leaders to talk about what's happening with the Army and explain to them what lies ahead in the coming months and years.

"We used to teach in leadership that there are 11 principles of being a leader; nine of the 11 principles deal with communication in one form or another," Preston said. "So, the most effective thing you can do as a leader is to communicate. The more we communicate about transformation, specifically getting into the details of transformation, is going to be better for Soldiers. That is the way you combat uncertainty, stop rumors and the gossip mill — by the passage of information."

Preston believes this latest wave of transformation will

help build a stronger Army and a better environment for Soldiers. He reflected on the many transitions the Army has undergone during his career.

“When I compare the Army today to the Army of the mid-70s, it’s a totally different organization. The Army is much better now, the units, leaders, quality of life, command climate, everything,” he said. “I know that during those transition periods, I had a degree of uncertainty, but I always trusted my leaders and the Army’s leaders, and I was always taken care of. My leaders never failed me.”

Preston spent most of his first two months in the job getting to know the Department of the Army staff and testifying before Congress on Army issues. Now, he’s starting to go out and visit Soldiers.

“By definition, I’m the principle advisor on enlisted affairs [to the Army Chief of Staff], he explained. “In a lot of ways, I’m his eyes and ears. I go out, visit units and talk to Soldiers down where the rubber meets the road. Then, I bring those thoughts, ideas and concerns back here to him. At the same time, I’m also taking his message and commander’s intent out to the Soldiers.”

One of his first stops was in Heidelberg, Germany, where he welcomed home V Corps Soldiers returning from deployment. Preston spent three days talking with Soldiers about their transition out of the Iraqi theater and their reintegration to their home bases and families.

“I want to get a feel for what they are thinking about the future, as far as what lies on the horizon and what their concerns are about the future of V Corps and the separate units.”

But while Preston is talking to Soldiers, he’s already identifying and addressing several concerns. He is using his personal experience as well as information he gathers from redeploying Soldiers to address these concerns.

One of his initiatives concerns the Noncommissioned Officer Education System. He is working to ensure that Soldiers returning from deployment have an opportunity to attend NCOES. He is also trying to ensure that the lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom are incorporated into needed courses.

The SMA is also adamant about safety initiatives. He is intent on spreading the word to NCO leadership on how they can make a difference that may save a Soldier’s life. One of his major concerns is privately-owned vehicle safety, especially because so many Soldiers are returning from deployments and buying new cars and motorcycles with the money



Photo by Master Sgt. Richard Puckett, Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston checks his leader’s book in between stops visiting Soldiers in the field. The SMA has been busy since his appointment on Jan. 15 getting settled in and testifying before Congress.

they’ve saved. Of the Army statistics on non-battle-related deaths, 40 percent of them are related to POV accidents, Preston said.

“From a leader’s perspective, I think we can do better by talking to Soldiers about their mindset when they are out there on their own time,” he said.

The SMA is also placing a great emphasis on weapons safety, especially in preventing negligent discharges.

“I just think it’s absolutely horrible for a Soldier to survive in a combat zone and then be killed by a negligent discharge. There’s no excuse for it. It’s a responsibility that lies with every noncommissioned officer. Noncommissioned officers are the trainers and enforcers of standards,” he said.

He has tasked TRADOC to come up with one standard for weapons clearing. It’s all about teaching Soldiers what right looks like he said.

“I really think the leadership out there can make a difference by putting some focus on training and talking to Soldiers about the risks involved in those activities.”

Preston is confident that the frequency of deployments for Soldiers will decrease as the Iraqi Governing Council takes charge and the area stabilizes. Just as the numbers of deployed Soldiers in Bosnia and Kosovo have decreased significantly, he believes the number of Soldiers deployed in Iraq will decline, as well.

It seems that part of his confidence is built on recent assurance by Soldiers in Afghanistan that they will capture Usama Bin Laden in the near future.

“They are absolutely confident that we are going to get Bin Laden before the end of the year,” he said. “It’s part of the Warrior Ethos: Never quit. Never accept defeat.”