

South Dakota National Guard

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SD National Guard soldiers perform key mission in East Africa

By Staff Sgt. Dustin Jordan – 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade

CAMP LEMONNIER, Djibouti – South Dakota National Guard soldiers assigned to the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB), are deployed to Camp Lemonnier, as the core staff for Combined Joint Task force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA).

“The 196th MEB is the nucleus of Combined Joint Task force – Horn of Africa,” said Maj. Gen. Lapthe Flora, commanding general, CJTF - HOA. “Their mission is to support U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and forces here in East Africa.

AFRICOM’s mission is to counter transnational threats and malign actors, strengthen security forces, and respond to crises in order to advance U.S. national interests and promote regional security, stability, and prosperity.

“The MEB comprises 80 percent of the headquarters but the other 20 percent are individuals from around the country that bring the missing talent the headquarters needs to succeed,” said Col David Dailey, Commander, 196th MEB. It is amazing what this diverse group of people can accomplish in this small area of Africa.

This is the first time in the history of CJTF-HOA that the staff has been made up of primarily one unit.

“The 196th MEB’s mobilization marks a pivotal moment for strategic, operational and tactical operations under AFRICOM,” said Col. William Robertson, director of logistics, CJTF-HOA. “The 196th MEB’s arrival marked a paradigm shift from individual augmentation (IA) to a unit centric sourcing solution for CJTF-HOA’s enduring Combined Joint Task Force.”

The 196th MEB brings many unique talents to CJTF-HOA that benefit day to day operations.

“We have service members who come with many diverse work backgrounds that enables them to contribute experience from those jobs to some of the duties they do here,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Alan Meyer, senior enlisted leader, 196th MEB. “Also, those civilian jobs they have back home sometimes correlate specifically to duties they are assigned here. That gives the service member the flexibility to work outside of their assigned military job specialty at a very high level.”

“Every day presents a new challenge as we work our way through what it means for a unit-based headquarters solution to assume such a large portion of the headquarters structure,” added Dailey. “What worked in the past is not necessarily the best approach today, but we find solutions and work together to continue the mission. It helps knowing the majority of team and what they bring to the problem solution.”

Robertson continued, “In short, the CJTF-HOA staff now has ‘unit integrity’ which enables unity of effort and unity of support. Communication in any organization is critical and the innate, internal dynamics of the 196th MEB increased staff continuity and communication exponentially.”

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The 196th MEB arrived in East Africa last September and began replacing individual augmentees on the CJTF-HOA staff.

“The unit’s personnel are integrated across every element of the staff – from the command group, every joint directorate, special staff, etc. to include interning with national intelligence agencies,” said Col Deitra Trotter, director of intelligence, CJTF-HOA. “They are conducting, facilitating and enabling HOA’s mission every single day.”

The mission that the MEB has in East Africa is a unique and complex one, spread out across the entire region.

“As the principle sourcing for the entire HOA staff, the 196th MEB owns the CJTF-HOA mission to respond to crises, ensure strategic access and influence in Djibouti, support operations in Somalia, and serve as the senior command of the Djibouti Base Cluster,” said Robertson. “How well this mission is executed determines the U.S. and its partners overall objective as the partner of choice for Djibouti.”

The 196th MEB has been at the center of everything strategic that is occurring in East Africa. If they were not executing it, they were planning it.

From the moment they arrived on ground the MEB began planning and executing exercises for base defense. Three indirect fire drills were planned and conducted during the deployment.

In addition to exercises to enhance base defense, the MEB led a bunker hardening mission from January through April. During this time the MEB along with other units at Camp Lemonnier filled thousands of sandbags and reinforced numerous bunkers.

One of the major responsibilities of CJTF-HOA is to maintain a ready East African Response Force (EARF). The MEB planned exercises, ensuring the EARF was ready to deploy to assist anywhere in Africa.

A major shift in U.S policy happened late in 2020 when President Donald Trump ordered the repositioning of all troops from Somalia. A large portion of the mission fell upon CJTF-HOA to complete in support Special Operations Command Africa.

“The team is working on some amazing projects and doing things at a four star general combatant commander level,” said Dailey. “An example of what they have done is the repositioning from Somalia. The team was a huge part of making that happen from planning the security, the logistical, the engineering, processing of personnel, publishing and tracking media, managing the COVID environment, opening of a support location in Kenya, to coordinating with AFRICOM and SOCAF.”

The MEB’s mission took its members all over East Africa conducting training and surveys.

The crisis planning team conducted site surveys in several different countries including Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. Making sure that if the EARF had to deploy to these areas they had a clear picture of what it would be like.

The MEB’s presence in Africa did not stop in East Africa. Training was conducted as far west as Timbuktu, Mali.

The trip to Mali was no easy feat, troops and cargo had to be transported by air over 4,800 miles round trip.

While in Timbuktu members of the MEB trained with French counterparts and conducted operational assessments.

Partnerships in East Africa is a priority and the MEB had continually fostered good relationships between the U.S. and its allies in the region.

There have been several exercises with the French, Italians, and Japanese including casualty evacuation, artillery demonstrations and emergency response planning.

The 196th MEB also trained with our Djiboutian partners during the deployment. The signal section (J6) held a several month training that culminated in the first combined three-day exercise with the Djiboutian military. During this training they worked with a Djiboutian signal company on setting up signal equipment.

In February, the information operations cell hosted the first cyber-defense exchange between CJTF – HOA, the Djiboutian military and the French. This exchange allowed the partners to learn from each other the best practices for cyber security.

The MEB not only worked with partner nations while in Djibouti they also worked closely with the State Department. The public affairs office and the information operations section attended weekly meetings with Ambassador Andre and Ambassador Prate, ensuring that communication between CJTF-HOA and the embassy is fluid.

The protocol section was busy throughout the deployment taking care of the commanding general's guests needs, but the thanksgiving holiday was especially busy.

CJTF-HOA simultaneously hosted Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commanding general of AFRICOM and the Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller. This was quite a challenge, but once again, the MEB was up to the task.

No matter what the MEB did in Africa there was always one constant – the presence of COVID-19. The 196th continued the mission despite the downgraded environment.

Even though COVID-19 changed the way business was conducted it never stopped the mission from getting done.

The MEB surgeon cell continued to support the mission while battling COVID-19. In early February, the first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine arrived on camp and the surgeon cell immediately worked on a plan and distributed vaccines, to everyone who elected to receive it, dramatically impacting the effect that COVID-19 had on the mission.

The 196th MEB left its mark and South Dakota's mark on CJTF-HOA and East Africa.

The 196th has accomplished so many missions here that should make everyone at home proud of their service member," said Meyer. "Not only does their day to day work impact people on this continent but it builds a foundation of trust and improvement for the follow-on units to continue strengthening."

Meyer added, "Everything that has been asked of them they have accomplished at an extremely high level. It is amazing to see your soldier work tirelessly to accomplish any mission put before them. They work long days as a team to benefit the African people and other service members and they do it without complaint and with little recognition. Your soldier is selfless and dedicated to others and they represent South Dakota and their families extremely well."

South Dakota soldiers shared a variety of South Dakota culture with the non-South Dakota members of CJTF-HOA.

“I knew absolutely nothing about South Dakota before encountering the 196th MEB. I’m still puzzling over tomato beer, jackelopes, scotcheroos and so much more, that I’ll have to visit and see for myself (in the summer, though!),” joked Trotter. “The 196th MEB has brought boundless energy, enthusiasm, team spirit, willingness to learn, grow, and improve daily and made this headquarters and our mission is exponentially better.”

Maj. Gen Flora added, “The MEB members are doing an excellent job here in support in our national security. As a commander I am very appreciative of their dedication and sacrifice.”

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IMG_001: South Dakota National Guard soldiers assigned to the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade stack sandbags at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Feb. 23, 2021. 196th members reinforced bunkers around camp to reinforce base safety and security. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Dustin Jordan)



IMG_002: U.S. Army Lt. Col. Heath Abraham, CJTF-HOA deputy director of operations talks with French partners at Timbuktu, Mali, March 19, 2021. This exercise allowed CJTF-HOA to exercise its ability to travel to West Africa in the event of a crisis. (Courtesy Photo)



IMG_003: U.S. Army soldiers assigned to the East Africa Response Force and the South Dakota National Guard’s 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade in support of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), and French soldiers assigned to the 5th Overseas Intermarines Regiment, participate in a live-fire joint artillery training event at the Djiboutian Range Complex, Djibouti, Feb. 2, 2021. U.S. and French forces took turns firing their weapons systems and demonstrating their capabilities. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Airman Kristin)



IMG_004: U.S. Army Col. David Dailey, chief of staff, Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, receives his vaccine card after getting the first round of the COVID-19 vaccine at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Feb. 9, 2021. The vaccine represents our best hope to win the fight against COVID-19. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Dustin Jordan)



IMG_005: Acting Defense Secretary Christopher C. Miller enjoys Thanksgiving dinner with deployed service members at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, Nov. 26, 2020. The visit marked Miller's first trip as the Acting Secretary of Defense to the continent of Africa. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Dana J. Cable)