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USNORTHCOM expert discusses lessons learned from Ft. Hood massacre

TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – With more than 200 eyes riveted on the lone briefer on stage, John Kress carefully and methodically detailed many of the lessons learned that were gleaned from a Department of Defense report regarding the November 2009 shooting at Fort Hood, Texas.

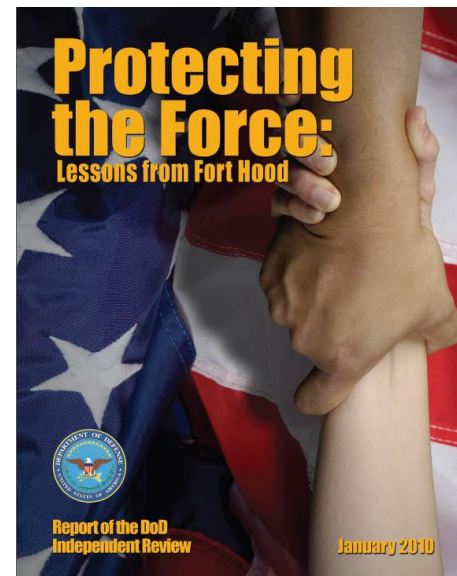
Kress, U.S. Northern Command's deputy chief of Force Protection & Mission Assurance, spoke to attendees at Air Forces Northern's Annual Commanders' Conference held here April 13-15. His purpose? Not to rehash the chronology of events that transpired on that fateful Autumn day in Killeen, but more to inform the audience about the steps now being taken to avoid another mass shooting on a federal installation within the 48 continuous United States, and how USNORTHCOM is initiating those steps.

The DOD report, "*Protecting the Force: Lessons Learned from Fort Hood*" was released in January 2010 and examined policy training and programs related to force protection, emergency response, handling of adverse information, and intelligence sharing, just to name a few. The report also tackled the possible deficiencies of DOD's capability to respond to mass casualties on bases and posts throughout the United States as well as the adequacy of policies and processes that applied to the shooter, Army Maj. Nidal Hassan.

"The Fort Hood shooting has presented the most significant challenge to USNORTHCOM's Force Protection Division since the command's inception in 2002," said Kress, "so it's important that we act upon the findings and recommendations within the report."

As with any post-event analysis, shortcomings are more often highlighted and scrutinized, areas for improvement are recognized, and critical gaps are identified and discussed. But post analysis also measures and evaluates positive outcomes and notable best practices. This was certainly the case with "Protecting the Force" lessons learned.

One such best practice identified was the swift response by the civilian law enforcement officers who patrol Fort Hood. According to the report, first responders used active shooter tactics and procedures to stop the attack within 90 seconds after arriving on the scene. The tactics focused on neutralizing a threat as quickly as possible, and their quick reaction was a result of local commanders understanding the need to train their personnel before a crisis occurred.



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Best practices aside, USNORTHCOM senior leaders want stateside military personnel – regardless of branch – to understand and be able to identify indicators and warning signs related to a potential ‘insider threat’ at their installation.

“We’ve looked to other organizations to assist us with educating our people,” said Kress. “For example, the U.S. Postal Service has a solid training program and syllabus in place for its employees when it comes to dealing with and identifying disgruntled co-workers or unusual workplace behavior, and they’ve made it available to us. It’s another example of how important interagency cooperation is.”

A key finding involved information sharing and command and control structures. The report detailed the necessity for DOD to continue to refine its abilities to provide emergency response in concert with other agencies and jurisdictions.

“We must always look to improve our ability to share information,” said Kress. “USNORTHCOM never operates in a vacuum – our homeland defense mission and the protection of our forces cannot be accomplished without close coordination and cooperation between ourselves and key partners like the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force, service Military Criminal Investigation Organizations and the Department of Homeland Security.”

One interesting point Kress brought up during his presentation was a myth he believes that has been perpetuated, but one he also is quick to debunk.

“There are those who believe that there is no way to prevent violence,” he said. “I don’t believe that to be true. The risk posed by would-be attackers can be effectively mitigated with the right training, protection posture and application of resources. Couple that with common sense and situational awareness, and I believe a violent situation can be thwarted before it escalates into a more serious – and potentially deadly – scenario.”

According to Kress, challenges still exist across the service branches, especially since USNORTHCOM’s role and presence in the broader sense is a relatively new concept. It’s a culture change for many who may not fully understand the Combatant Command’s purpose, which includes the protection of DOD personnel, family members, mission assets and infrastructure. Kress hopes his briefing will help to further educate commanders under USNORTHCOM’s command and control.

Four main lessons learned Kress focused on during his presentation included:

- Creation of an overarching force protection policy for USNORTHCOM;
- The importance of continuing efforts for information sharing between federal, state, regional and local law enforcement agencies;
- Ongoing efforts to improve installation access and identification management; and
- Establishing trust between investigating agencies and commanders.

Brig. Gen. Jeffrey G. Lofgren, USNORTHCOM’s deputy director of operations and independent panel member on the “Protecting the Force” review board, has been charged by USNORTHCOM commander Gen. Gene Renuart to oversee the application of the lessons learned and ensure all USNORTHCOM personnel are educated about the report and its findings.

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“General Lofgren has been a key advocate in making sure we take all the lessons learned from Fort Hood and apply them to our everyday life at all CONUS-based installations,” said Kress. “He grasps the critical importance of learning from the past and ensuring we avoid a repeat of any kind of mass casualty that deeply affects our fighting forces. He also knows the value of maintaining the integrity of our internal review process in order to validate the findings and recommendations from the panel.”

On April 15, the Pentagon announced the implementation of 26 of 79 security and administrative recommendations made by the panel, which was appointed by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and chaired by retired Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark and former Secretary of the Army Togo West.