

Infantry-Armor merger to boost Army operations, training

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By Vince Little

FORT BENNING, Ga. - The Army is more focused on counterinsurgency than ever before, and the Infantry-Armor alliance in one locale will help fuel that drive in Afghanistan and Iraq, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told Soldiers here June 4.

Adm. Mike Mullen was updated on progress toward the Maneuver Center of Excellence and took an aerial tour of the \$3.5 billion in construction around post, much of it aimed at accommodating the thousands of Armor School personnel relocating here from Fort Knox, Ky., in 2011.

"We're changing how we fight," Mullen said. "We're also changing how we train ... so that as we fight together, we back that up with how we train together. That's what's happening at Fort Benning."

Mullen closed a two-day visit by addressing a forum of more than 200 basic trainees, Soldiers in one station unit training and their cadre at Sand Hill.

"You've joined the best military in the history of the world," he said. "You want to serve a cause greater than yourself, even as many of you are just beginning. I'm very grateful."

The chairman also discussed budget cuts, the importance of leadership in today's military and family support programs during Friday's stop.

U.S. deficit a 'national security challenge'

When asked by a Soldier how a funding shortfall could impact service members, Mullen said the military can overcome an upcoming budget crunch by taking care of families, retaining NCOs and young officers with combat experience, and reigning in overhead costs.

"We are going to see increasing budget pressures," the admiral said.

In the past decade, military appropriations bills have risen dramatically each year, he said, but those increases are set to slow down.

Mullen said this comes at a time when the U.S. deficit is the nation's "greatest national security challenge." Within the next two years, interest paid on the debt alone will equal the entire annual defense budget, close to \$600 billion, he said.

"It's not sustainable, so we've got to get that in order and then make sure we resource our people correctly," he said, "and I know we can beat that challenge."

In the next few months, defense leaders will tackle overhead expenses and launch a funds-shifting effort called "tail to tooth," Mullen said. It includes incentives for all the branches.

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"As each service looks at its budget and finds this money in overhead, it will be able to keep that ... and resource it for needed personnel or equipment items," he said. "The current initiative is not a cut inside the Department of Defense; it is the movement of resources from one area to another, and to really make sure that our overhead is absolutely minimized in support of the missions we know we've got to execute."

Leadership attributes crucial

As the Defense Department looks to streamline funding and address budget issues, leadership will be critical to the military's evolution, the chairman said.

"They come from the front, the middle and the back," Mullen said. "It's all about how we mentor our people ... If we get it right for our people, we'll be able to execute the missions effectively."

Adjusting to military life

Mullen said families struggling to adapt to military life should take advantage of the vast resources available - and he urged leaders to do a better job linking those programs and support mechanisms with Soldiers' loved ones.

"All of us have to remember when we came in and how foreign it was to us ... and that much more foreign to our families," the senior military leader said. "Leadership has to reach out to make sure that young, new families understand as much as they possibly can about what their new life is and the challenges it faces, and the adventure as well. It's a big transition. It's an area that they haven't spent any time in their lives."

First impressions and making that connection early is very important, Mullen said.

"In the longer run, it'll make a difference in terms of whether a young Soldier decides to stay in the military," he said. "There's a lot in place, we just need to connect it better than we have."

Editor's note: Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also discussed hot spots around the globe during his town hall meeting with Soldiers at Sand Hill. See story in the June 18 edition of The Bayonet.