

## African Lion: National Guard supports continent's largest military exercise

By Army Master Sgt. Jim Greenhill, National Guard Bureau 18 June 2021



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*U.S. Army Gen. Daniel Hokanson, National Guard Bureau Chief, reviews partner Moroccan troops with the joint-multinational Exercise African Lion, Jun 2021.*

TANTAN, Morocco – F-16 Falcon fighter jets streaked by low and fast, while plumes of black smoke from steady artillery fire and dust thrown up by advancing M1A1 Abrams tanks drifted across the desert below as Africa's largest military exercise reached its peak Friday.

Army Gen. Daniel Hokanson, chief, National Guard Bureau, joined Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander, U.S. Africa Command; Air Force Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, commander, U.S. Air Forces in Europe and U.S. Air Forces Africa; and military leaders from the host nation, the Kingdom of Morocco, and eight other participating partner nations to observe the culminating event of the two-week exercise.

About 1,000 National Guard members – 253 from the Utah National Guard, Morocco's partner in the Department of Defense National Guard State Partnership Program, plus two Georgia National Guard battalions – were

among the 7,800 service members from 10 partner nations taking part in the multi-national, multi-domain training event.

“The warfight is the National Guard’s primary mission, and readiness is one of my highest priorities,” Hokanson said. “The opportunity to participate in African Lion 21 boosts our readiness to fight and improves our interoperability, both within the Joint Force and alongside our international partners.”

African Lion demonstrates the legitimacy, responsiveness and commitment of partner forces to the regional security of North Africa. In addition to the participating partners, 20 nations send international observers.

Training events include command and control; maritime, air and medical readiness exercises; humanitarian assistance and joint forcible entry.

“Our Soldiers and Airmen gain invaluable professional experience by taking part in overseas exercises like this,” Hokanson said. “For many, it also gives them their first exposure to working with international partners. It also replicates the entire mobilize-deploy-conduct operations-redeploy process, which is the best readiness training for our Soldiers and Airmen.”

Elements of African Lion are conducted in Morocco and Tunisia, both of which are SPP nations. Other SPP partners, including Senegal, contributed to the exercise.

The enduring, almost two-decade Utah National Guard partnership with the Moroccan Armed Forces under the SPP supports AFRICOM priorities by helping to strengthen partner networks on the continent and enhance partner capabilities.

“Morocco has shown staunch support for the security cooperation relationship with the Utah National Guard, which reduces our security burdens and makes our populations more secure,” Hokanson said. “The partnership has promoted lasting friendships and deepened understanding and cultural appreciation between the peoples of the United States and Morocco.”

There’s a saying in the National Guard: You don’t want to exchange business cards in a crisis. This means building relationships like this is so important before a challenge arises.

Traditional U.S. active duty military and State Department assignments last three to four years before personnel rotate to new jobs. Through the SPP,

Guard members in the states and territories sustain relationships with partner country officials for decades, through entire careers – a unique resource to help combatant commanders and ambassadors achieve their goals.

“Trust is built over time,” Townsend, the AFRICOM commander, told the House Armed Services Committee in his annual testimony in April. “The relationships made while we develop partner capabilities provide America with long-term strategic alliances needed to address future challenges and ensure regional security and prosperity.”

The Utah Air National Guard’s delivery of emergency relief supplies within 72 hours of a major earthquake less than a year into the relationship with Morocco helped seal the nascent partnership.

Utah and Morocco cooperate on combined arms capabilities, including special forces, attack helicopters, artillery, and fighter jet refueling interoperability. Other exchanges include humanitarian demining, emergency medicine, disaster response, noncommissioned officer development and youth exchanges.

Symbolic of just how longstanding the relationship between the U.S. and Morocco is, the American Legation in Tangier was the first overseas American public property. It is the oldest continuous U.S. diplomatic presence and remains the only building on the National Historic Registry located outside of the United States.

In 1777, Morocco became the first nation to recognize U.S. independence. Since 9/11, Morocco has been a designated major non-NATO ally, one of two in Africa.

Although the traditional map projection familiar to Westerners makes it appear much smaller, Africa is, in reality, larger in land area than the U.S., China, India, Japan and most of Europe combined. The population is expected to top two billion within 30 years, and the continent includes half the world’s arable land, plus still-untapped mineral resources.

Hokanson’s visit concluded a nine-day, four-nation trip focused on National Guard readiness, troop visits, and partnership-building, his first overseas travel since he became the 29th Chief of the National Guard Bureau last August, and one of the first series of foreign engagements by a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff since the peak of the pandemic.

Among those traveling with Hokanson for all or portions of the trip were

Senior Enlisted Advisor to Chief Petty Officer and Army Maj. Gen. Michael Turley, adjutant general, Utah National Guard. The CNGB also met in Morocco with Army Maj. Gen. Thomas Carden, adjutant general, Georgia National Guard, and in Egypt with Army Maj. Gen. Tracy Norris, adjutant general, Texas National Guard.

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