

U.S. Army South hosts War College staff for week-long learning opportunity

By Maj. Tifani Summers 28 September 2022



Retired Army Col. John A. Bonin gives brief to U.S. Army South staff during the U.S. Army War College's mobile Theater Army Staff Course at Fort Sam Houston, Texas on Sept. 12, 2022. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Tifani Summers)

JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-FORT SAM HOUSTON, Texas – [U.S. Army South](#)'s staff officers, noncommissioned officers and civilians had the opportunity to take part in the first iteration of the U.S. Army War College's (USAWC) mobile Theater Army Staff Course Sept. 12-16. Participants ranged from those who arrived within the last two weeks to those who had been assigned to the headquarters for over a year.

The five-day course consists of over thirty briefings from USAWC faculty and included instruction from Army South directorate leads with the first block of instruction focusing on the history of Theater Armies.

"The Theater Army is an essential headquarters that the Army provides to the joint commanders, in this case [U.S.] Southern Command, in order to do all manner of functions that the Army provides to all joint commanders

and joint headquarters, stated Theater Army Gen. Sean MacFarland.

Bonin, a distinguished fellow of the Center for Strategic Leadership, elaborated on what makes the Theater Army unique.

“Unlike most Army headquarters it has at least two bosses,” he explained. “It has an Army boss, the Department of the Army, for resources, guidance and for supervision and Army functions, but they also support and work directly for a joint commander who are all four-star combatant commanders.”

Throughout the week, participants were given the opportunity to dialogue and query instructors on best practices when operating at this level of command.

Sgt. Maj. Juan Rivera, Army South G2 Sergeant Major, was thankful for the opportunity to learn from the USAWC faculty and senior Army South directorate leads.

“It allowed me to understand how my directorate integrates into the broader Theater Army mission as well as how we work with other directorates to meet the CG’s intent,” he said. “I also learned that it’s really hard for us to get resources so the job for the staff is to negotiate on behalf of the command to get the resources we need to accomplish our missions.”

The course was led by a senior mentor, retired Army Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, who provided critique and analysis throughout the day-to-day instruction.

“We want to help new members of the team understand what sort of organization they’re a part of, because there is always an assimilation process, and we can help accelerate that by giving them a better appreciation of the challenges and the requirements of that particular command,” emphasized MacFarland.

He went on to express the complexities facing Theater Armies today which include refocusing doctrine to large scale combat operations (LSCO) as well as gaps that Army South specifically has that are important to the overall mission of an Army Service Component Command/Theater Army.

He further explained that his team’s intent was to explore those challenges and help the Army South team begin the process of creating solutions for those challenges identified during the course.

MacFarland expressed how an economy of force theater like Army South,

which is severely-resource constrained, requires creative and innovative thinking to accomplish the mission in front of them.

“The big challenge in this theater of operations is perhaps declining Russian influence but growing Chinese influence. This is our front yard and it’s important for us to continue to ensure that the western hemisphere remains an American hemisphere,” he said. “The key terrain here is obviously the Panama Canal, which is so essential to our war plans in the Pacific and Europe and the ability to shift resources between them. It was critical in the second world war, and it will remain critical throughout the 21st Century.”

MacFarland also discussed Army South’s role in the geostrategic balance of power within the region.

“We also need to make sure we don’t have any malign influence causing us problems in our front yard driving ever higher levels of migration, criminal activities, intelligence collection against us and destabilizing of our partner nations,” he said. “We must ensure, despite a scarcity of resources, none of that happens, and at the same time disrupt China’s plan for extending its Belt and Road initiative across the globe.”

Army South as an organization has evolved over the decades with roots stemming from the Caribbean Defense Command, U.S. Army Caribbean, to an eventual merger with Sixth United States Army in 2008.