McConville previews Army people strategy

As the Army pushes ahead with its modernization efforts, people—soldiers, Army civilians, veterans, retirees and family members—will always remain the No. 1 priority, Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville said Tuesday.

In his first Eisenhower Luncheon address as the Army’s top general, McConville previewed the upcoming Army people strategy and reinforced the importance of matching the right person to the right job and building cohesive teams across the force.

“No matter how much technology we develop, soldiers will always remain the centerpiece of our Army,” McConville said during a meeting attended by more than 33,000 people.

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McCarthy opens AUSA 2019

With a dire warning that America’s adversaries are investing billions in new weapons and methods, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy said the Army must continue its push to increase readiness, improve its strategic mobility and focus on modernization, or risk losing the next war.

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Meet the Army’s 2019 NCO and Soldier of the Year

The Army announced the winners of the 18th annual Best Warrior Competition during a luncheon Monday at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, D.C.

The 2019 Soldier of the Year is Spc. David Chambers, representing U.S. Army Forces Command.

The Noncommissioned Officer of the Year is Staff Sgt. Dakota Bowen from U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.

“You represent what we want in our soldiers: physically fit, dedicated professionals,” said keynote speaker Gen. Joseph Martin, the Army’s vice chief of staff.

Martin called NCOs the heart and soul of the Army.

“When the Army desperately needs leadership, we turn to you—and you have never failed us,” he said.

During the six-day competition, which took place the week prior to the Annual Meeting at Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia, 22 soldiers representing 11 commands from across the Army were tested on their knowledge, skills and abilities.

Specific events included urban warfare simulations, formal board interviews, physical fitness challenges, written exams and warrior tasks and battle drills relevant to today’s operating environment.

“Even after I retire, I know the Army’s going to be in great hands because of the soldiers that competed in this event,” said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston, who oversaw the competition.

During the luncheon, Grinston also named retired Command Sgt. Maj. Kenneth “Rock” Merritt as the fifth Honorary Sergeant Major of the Army.

Merritt, a World War II veteran of D-Day, Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge, said it was “one of the biggest surprises of my life” when he got the call informing him he had been chosen as the award recipient.

“It’s unbelievable. Thank you. This is one of the greatest awards I’ve ever received in my entire life,” Merritt said.

The tradition of appointing an honorary sergeant major of the Army each year began in 2016 when retired Gen. Gordon Sullivan, AUSA’s former president and CEO, received the honor.

Three others have been named since: retired Lt. Gen. David Grange Jr., retired Gen. Fredrick Krones Jr., and Elaine Rogers, president and CEO of USO-Metro.
Former Army chief and JCS chairman receives George Catlett Marshall Medal

Retired Gen. Martin Dempsey, center, receives the 2019 George Catlett Marshall Medal from retired Gen. Carter Ham, AUSA president and CEO, left, and Rudy de Leon, a member of the association’s Council of Trustees. (AUSA PHOTO)

Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs and former Army chief of staff retired Gen. Martin Dempsey accepted the Association of the U.S. Army’s highest award for service to the nation Wednesday with a call to the Army and defense industry to be less like colleagues and business partners “and act more like family.”

The 67-year-old Dempsey, who served as the 37th Army chief of staff and 18th Joint Chiefs chairman before retiring from military service in 2015, received the George Catlett Marshall Medal for distinguished public service during a banquet at the conclusion of the 2019 AUSA Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, D.C.

Dempsey said that Marshall, a soldier-statesman who served as Army chief of staff, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, secretary of state and secretary of defense, was one of his role models.

“Perhaps only George Washington helped us understand and contributed more to our understanding of what it means to serve than he did,” Dempsey said.

“One of the things that makes me so proud about our Army is that in our Army, no one is irrelevant,” Dempsey said. Soldiers are made to feel “part of something important” from the day they put on a uniform.

“We make sure they know we value their contributions. We give them something in which to believe in a world in which it can sometimes be hard to believe in anything. That very well may be our most important contribution to the nation,” he said.

Now a Duke University professor, USA Basketball chairman and National Basketball Association representative, Dempsey had praise for AUSA, which he said has been “a combat multiplier for our Army through the years.”

“I’ll be honest with you. I think in the future the Army is going to have some heavy lifting to do. This relationship between AUSA and the Army is something that’s going to be even more important than it may have been in the past,” Dempsey said.

Retired Gen. Carter Ham, AUSA president and CEO, called Dempsey “an inspirational leader who leads by example. He doesn’t have to tell us what’s right, he shows us what’s right, as he has for generations. He is an unselfish, compassionate yet tough leader and commander.”
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Opening the Association of the U.S. Army’s 2019 Annual Meeting and Exposition Monday, McCarthy noted the Army has “restored readiness across the force,” with more than half its brigade combat teams at the highest readiness levels, and “built a foundation to shift the Army’s modernization efforts and began the process of replacing the legacy systems that have served us well for the last 49 years.”

But he emphasized the need to make a major shift in the way the Army handles information, adopting better ways to process “big data” and artificial intelligence tools while ensuring cyber security.

“The intent is to move the Army from the industrial age processes to the information age of leveraging data as a strategic asset and utilizing private sector technology,” McCarthy said.

He said the Army also is developing “advanced systems in hypersonics, directed energy and other tools” to meet the future threats.

McCarthy also talked about moves to increase the Army’s “strategic readiness, which is the Army’s capability to rapidly mobilize and deploy forces anywhere in the world and sustain the joint force.”

He cited a recent rapid mobilization exercise and the upcoming Defender Europe 2020 exercise “to rehearse and validate how we would respond to a European crisis. This will be the largest exercise in 25 years,” he said.
Grinston’s ‘This is My Squad’ initiative will empower NCOs

From fitness and nutrition to mastering the fundamentals, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston wants to empower noncommissioned officers to take care of their soldiers and build cohesive teams.

In remarks Monday during a forum at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition, Grinston called on the audience, many of them NCOs, to focus on an initiative he calls “This is My Squad.”

“This is my squad, I don’t let anything happen to my squad,” Grinston said. “It shows ownership, something you’re proud of. This is going to be the driving force.”

That mentality can drive a lot of change as the Army works to combat challenges such as suicide and sexual assault.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do with that,” he said. “I want you to think, ‘This is my squad. What are the positive aspects I can reinforce?’”

During his remarks, Grinston also outlined several of his key initiatives, including a renewed focus on mid-grade NCOs, particularly staff sergeants.

“Staff sergeants are the ones we need to be drill sergeants, to be recruiters, for [security force assistance brigades],” he said.

“Almost everything hinges on the staff sergeant.”

This is why Grinston said he’s looking at ways to stabilize these NCOs so they have time to master their craft.

“We’re trying to look at that, so when you go out … you’ve been grounded in the fundamentals of your job,” he said.

Grinston also emphasized the importance of the new Expert Soldier Badge, which tests soldiers on fundamental soldier tasks, the new Army Combat Fitness Test, and balanced nutrition.

Massive 2020 exercise will foster readiness in Europe

A massive multinational exercise set to begin in April is “the right type of exercise” to foster readiness in Europe, a senior U.S. commander in the region said.

“This exercise is part of preparedness,” Lt. Gen. J. T. Thomson, commander of NATO Allied Land Command, said about the upcoming Defender-Europe 2020.

Thomson spoke Tuesday at a forum at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition, where panelists discussed the forthcoming exercise, the largest deployment of U.S.-based land forces to Europe in the last quarter-century.

Based on a fictional scenario set in 2028, the exercise will include 37,000 participants from 18 nations, conducted across 10 host countries.


Although the Army has practiced force projection for years, Cavoli said, “now it’s time to practice it at scale.”

“We want to show potential adversaries we have the potential to win a war if deterrence fails,” said Maj. Gen. John Richardson, deputy chief of staff of operations, G-3/5/7, at U.S. Army Forces Command.

Noting that the U.S. and partner nations previously have held exercises on the defense of Europe, panelists said, this one will draw on previous lessons in order to address new threats.

“Our threats have changed,” Thomson said, noting, “ours is an alliance that has to adapt.”
Senior military leaders would do well to engage on social media, because that’s where their troops are, media-savvy panelists said to an audience that live-tweeted their comments.

The comments and live-tweets occurred Monday during a forum at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition.

Steve Leonard, who created the popular Doctrine Man comic strip, echoed a social media post from Gen. Robert Abrams, commander of U.S. Forces Korea, who wrote last week that senior leaders need to “get on the bus” of social media.

“There are a lot of people on the bus, and a lot of empty seats,” Leonard said during the forum.

Leaders should fill the seats before others jump in to take them, he said.

The five panelists, including retired Sgt. Maj. Kenneth Ramos, who revealed himself as an admin for the popular U.S. Army W.T.F! Moments network, and Maj. Megan Jantos, a public affairs officer who also moderated the session, acknowledged that being on social media can be risky for military members.

The risks, though, are overstated, said Brig. Gen. Patrick Donahoe, the deputy commanding general for operations at Eighth Army.

Twitter, in particular, offers another component of professional reading and allows leaders to engage in lively, relevant discussions.

“The richness of the discussion outweighs the risks,” Donahoe said.

The risks can be mitigated, Donahoe said, by observing the “don’t be stupid” rule.

First Lt. Kelsey Cochran, who tweets as @LadyLovesTaft, said she does not feel overly vulnerable despite sharing many private details of her life on social media.

“I share the level of detail that I’m comfortable with,” Cochran said, adding that she tries to humanize soldiers and build rapport with her audience.

Audience members gave real-time feedback on the discussion, with their hashtag-specific tweets being displayed on a large screen.
The Army is looking for ways to make PCS moves easier for soldiers and families, but Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville is not in favor of moving families during off-peak season.

“Some people are talking about, ‘Hey, we’ll move soldiers off peak’—I don’t sign up for that,” McConville said during a senior leadership town hall Tuesday at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition.

Families tend to move in the summer—the peak permanent change-of-station moving season—because children are out of school, he said.

“I sign up for making less moves or stabilizing people longer, but we’re not going to have the soldier moving in March and the kids getting pulled out of school,” he said. “I don’t support that.”

While no changes are being announced yet, McConville said, senior leaders want to receive feedback.

Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy and Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston were also on stage to address questions and comments.

When the top leaders were asked about longer assignments at duty stations so families can have stability, McConville said it was a good idea—a response that received applause from the audience.

McConville addressed the talent management system, adding that he doesn’t see why people can’t stay in the same location for several years at a time.

“Part of the future that we see in the talent management system is we do look at preferences … where you want to go and what you want to do,” McConville said.

Adding, “If we can accommodate that, why shouldn’t we?”

Although soldiers may need to move around for career development, the future may mean getting away from the “industrial age personnel management system, where everyone moves every three years,” just because that’s the way the Army’s always done it, he said.

Housing problems continue

During a family forum earlier in the day, Army leaders heard a torrent of complaints from soldiers and family members over challenges they’ve faced with poor housing conditions and permanent change-of-station moves.

In response, the Army leaders tried to assure the room full of spouses and soldiers that they are acutely aware of the concerns and are working to correct the problems, including finding ways to better inform Army families of their rights and ensure their complaints get to their unit and installation leadership.

Maj. Gen. Timothy McGuire, acting commanding general of the U.S. Army Installation Management Command, conceded that the Army “broke faith with soldiers and families” with the management of privatized housing, and leaders “are moving to solve the crisis.”

“We’re in this for the long term,” he said, and have developed “a campaign plan” and put a four-star general in charge.

“We are determined to get it right.”

This includes preparing a handbook to inform soldiers of the 10 rights they have relating to their housing and creating hotlines to allow easier reporting of problems. The Army also has received commitments from the housing contractors to clean up and improve houses, he said.
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Ham outlines strategic plan to AUSA chapter leaders

The Association of the U.S. Army is focusing its efforts on a strategic plan with an eye toward 2025, retired Gen. Carter Ham, AUSA’s president and CEO, told the association’s chapter leaders.

The strategic plan, which is a directive from AUSA’s Council of Trustees, aligns with a significant year for both the Army and the association—the Army’s 250th birthday and AUSA’s 75th anniversary, Ham said.

“It’s far enough in the future so that our thinking doesn’t need to be captured or confined to the realities of the next budget cycle, and we can stretch our thinking a little bit,” Ham said.

Ham, speaking Sunday at the AUSA Chapter Presidents Dinner, told the chapter leaders that a strategic planning facilitator will meet with them during AUSA’s Annual Meeting and Exposition for input on “how we might best posture ourselves for an operating environment that’s probably going to be different than today.”

The annual meeting ran Monday through Wednesday at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C.

Ham also lauded attendees for their efforts over the past year as AUSA approaches record membership numbers, but he urged continued improvement.

“What I’d really ask you to focus on in this coming year is to find ways to collaborate with each other,” he said. “Share your ideas and best practices. Contribute to AUSA Extra, send us your stories for the website, help us share and highlight the great things you are doing, and in so doing, help our association continue to improve.”

He also encouraged the chapter leaders to continue supporting the Army’s recruiting and retention efforts.

“Our challenge is to help the Army make a difference,” he said. “Find more and more ways to support recruiters in your chapter. That includes Army National Guard and Army Reserve. Help get access to high schools, colleges and junior colleges.”
Gary Sinise & the Lt. Dan Band thrill crowd at AUSA 2019

Gary Sinise & the Lt. Dan Band rocked the house Tuesday evening at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

“Gary Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band always bring energy and enthusiasm,” said retired Gen. Carter Ham, president and CEO of the Association of the U.S. Army. “The concert is an opportunity to say thank you to all those who have served and sacrificed—the Gold Star families, the wounded warriors. This is a celebration for their service.”

The band’s performance, co-sponsored by Veterans United, took place on the second day of AUSA’s Annual Meeting and Exposition in Washington, D.C.

“This crowd is always so appreciative, so friendly, and just pumped up after a couple of days out on the floor doing this stuff,” Sinise said. “Everybody just comes in here and wants to have a good time.”

Sinise and the Lt. Dan Band, named after his character in Forrest Gump, have been performing on military bases around the world for more than 16 years to entertain troops and raise money for disabled veterans.

In 2011, Sinise created the Gary Sinise Foundation to provide entertainment, support and acts of appreciation for active-duty service members, veterans, first responders, wounded warriors and their loved ones.

Sinise, who has been supporting veterans and the military community since the 1980s, was presented with the George Catlett Marshall Medal—AUSA’s highest award—in 2017 for his work.

“It’s always a friendly crowd and great spirit,” Sinise said. “I appreciate being able to come.”

Army needs to acquire and retain civilian talent for success

The Army needs talented civilians, and it should streamline how it brings them into the force, panelists said Wednesday during a forum at the Association of the U.S. Army’s Annual Meeting and Exposition.

“We need to shorten the hiring time and improve the acquisition of talent,” said Carol Burton, director of the Civilian Human Resources Agency for the Army deputy chief of staff for personnel.

Noting that the hiring process for civilians typically takes 180 days—during which time prospective candidates may go somewhere else—Burton said: “It’s time to change.”

Civilians bring high value to the Army, panelists agreed.

“They are the most cost-effective way of getting something done,” said E. Casey Wardynski, assistant secretary of the Army for manpower and reserve affairs.

“They are the backbone of our force,” he emphasized.

The Army needs not only to acquire civilian talent but also to retain it, panelists said.

The key to keeping talent, they said, is to be a good employer.

“Our civilians want to be value-added,” said Lt. Gen. Todd Semonite, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which employs 35,000 civilians.

The non-uniformed force has proved crucial to the mission, Semonite said.

“We cannot do our jobs without civilians.”
Scenes from AUSA 2019

Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville sits in the cockpit of Bell’s new Vertical Take-Off and Landing aircraft on the annual meeting’s exhibit floor. McConville is the first Army aviator to hold the position of chief. (AUSA PHOTO)

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston greets Medal of Honor recipient retired Master Sgt. Leroy Petry before the Sergeant Major of the Army’s Award Luncheon on Monday. (AUSA PHOTO)

New technology, educational opportunities and networking exchanges were just a few of the exhibit hall offerings. (AUSA PHOTO)
An attendee plays a video game inside the Army esports team’s specialized vehicle. The team is part of an effort by U.S. Army Recruiting Command to better connect with potential recruits. (AUSA PHOTO)

Soldiers speak with one of the more than 650 organizations that exhibited this year. (AUSA PHOTO)


Soldiers, family members, veterans, defense industry representatives, Army civilians, retired soldiers and more interact on the exhibit floor. (AUSA PHOTO)
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