

One-stop shopping for U.S. defense

Press Release

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People lingering in the newly built hallways of the U.S. Northern Command headquarters building here are likely to hear the phrase "one-stop shopping."

America's newest military command is patterned on a simple retail concept that has been around for years -- everything people need in one convenient place.

NORTHCOM people find the term useful to explain their mission, but that is where the resemblance to the corner mini-mart ends. They are not there to sell snack cakes at 3 a.m. They are there to defend the country.

The command, conceived in the aftermath of 9/11, has two missions: homeland defense and military assistance to civil authorities, referred to as MACA. In simple terms, homeland security is a concentrated national effort to counter terrorism in support of a lead federal agency. Homeland defense is the military effort to protect America's sovereignty, and the Department of Defense is leading the effort.

What it boils down to for the average American is that for the first time, there is a military command designed to watch his or her back.

"We're here to protect the American people where they live and work," said Gen. Ed Eberhart, commander of NORTHCOM.

Other combined and unified commands were created post-World War II across geopolitical lines to react to trouble spots around the world. Until two years ago, most Americans thought the United States was not vulnerable to foreign attack, except from long-range air threats.

"We felt that we weren't in danger because we were protected by two large oceans and two friendly neighbors..." Eberhart said. "But, on 9/11, we realized that we were threatened, especially by asymmetrical threats, and we needed one command and one commander to protect against all hazards. What makes our command a little bit different is that we're protecting the crown jewels -- our homeland."

The deaths of thousands in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, proved that America was vulnerable to attack, and Americans vowed not to forget that lesson. NORTHCOM was activated Oct. 1, 2002, and Eberhart, commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command and former commander of Air Force Space Command and U.S. Space Command, was tapped to lead the new organization.

So what has that got to do with one-stop shopping?

Before NORTHCOM, other commands charged with protecting the homeland overlapped in their responsibilities. No one was designated the lead agency, and no one command had more than sporadic commitment to any part of the homeland-defense mission. There was a clearer chain of command for the Indian Ocean than for America. That has all changed now. There is no confusion on who is protecting America.

"With one-stop shopping we have streamlined considerably. It's effective and efficient command and control. I would say that we use our resources much better than we have in the past," Eberhart said. "More importantly, you now have a four-star commander

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who day-in and day-out focuses on nothing else than homeland defense and security. In the past, it was one of many missions for other organizations."

NORTHCOM depends heavily upon the Canadian-U.S. NORAD for protection of the North American air space, including U.S. air space. But it can also call upon any U.S. aircraft, land forces and ships at sea to further its mission.

"The fact of the matter is, if there is something wrong or we need forces immediately from any of the forces in the United States of America, we can pick up the phone and call the secretary of defense and use those forces as needed," he said. "In a matter of minutes, we would be able to get the right forces moving to deal with whatever situation we re faced with."

The mission of the organization is not just to watch for attacks and prepare. NORTHCOM is concerned with natural threats as well. It monitors hurricanes, forest fires, flooding and other potential disasters.

"We can t beat a hurricane, and we probably can t beat a forest fire, but if we re dressed and ready to leave home, we re going to be much more effective in protecting the American people where they live and work," Eberhart said.

What most people fail to realize, he said, was that while NORTHCOM would be the overall lead in defending the country in a military situation, when it comes to countering terrorism or disasters, its role is to lend a hand to a civilian lead agency.

"Job 1 is defending the American people from foreign aggression," the general said. "But when a governor or federal agency asks for our support, and the president feels support is warranted, we will be there. Although that is not Job 1 for us, we see that as a job that we re going to be involved with in the coming years, so we must be prepared for that. When we do it, we do that in accordance with the laws of the land. We don t just ride into town and take over."

NORTHCOM will lend a hand to many federal agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the Coast Guard and even the U.S. Postal Service.

"Well before NORTHCOM, during the last postal strike in the early 90s, the military was out, making sure the mail arrived on time," Eberhart recalled.

As early as the day the command stood up, they were working on fulfilling this obligation to lend support. As Hurricane Lili approached the Florida coast, day-old NORTHCOM was working with FEMA to provide aid. In January s State of the Union Address in Washington, NORTHCOM created a comprehensive command structure for military support should it have been necessary. It even went through the unprecedented act of holding a dry-run rehearsal with the lead agency -- the U.S. Capitol Police.

"We like to be proactive," Eberhart said. "I d rather get dressed up and not have to play than be late."

Part of that proactivity is another practice favored by modern business -- networking. Being able to lend and ask for support demands that the 500-member-and-growing command get to know who it is working with.

"One of the difficulties of standing up this organization almost overnight has been the challenge of building relationships," Eberhart said. "This unified command s relationships are different from other commands. It truly goes all across all parts of our

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government, and it's not just horizontally across in terms of federal agencies, but vertically, all the way down to the first responders -- police and fire departments."

His goals, he added, are to make sure the organization becomes mature as soon as possible and build a sense of trust and confidence with the other agencies.

"We want a record of achievement (with them) as opposed to building up relationships just because they're on an organizational chart," he said. "The challenge here is a cultural one; people are used to doing this without a NORTHCOM presence."

But the real challenge in the years ahead, Eberhart said, is to get the command past the "new letterhead" stage and to silently, but carefully, set up the perimeters of defense for the country -- to help make sure 9/11 does not happen again.

"I think the important thing is that we work hard to do what we know is right and to protect the American people," he said. "But it's a team effort, not just NORTHCOM. Our goal is to get better every day. If we can look back and say that we're better now than we were on 9/11, which we certainly are; that we're better now than we were when we stood up; that we're better now than we were a month ago, then I think that's what our nation expects and deserves. That's what we intend to provide."