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From drill sergeant hat to USACE hard hat, Apuya demands high standards

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — His drill sergeant hat may have been traded in for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hard hat, but retired Army drill sergeant Benny Apuya still demands high standards be met by everyone he oversees. Only this time, it's on a construction site instead of at basic combat training.

“I am a drill sergeant. I will assist each individual in their efforts to become a highly motivated, well disciplined, physically and mentally fit Soldier, capable of defeating any enemy on today's modern battlefield,” begins the U.S. Army Drill Sergeant Creed. It's a motto Apuya, 50, still lives by even though it's been about a decade since he transformed recruits into Soldiers, he explained.

“Every time I'm out at the construction site, I am mindful of exactly what we're doing and who we are doing it for. It's got to be done right, and I'm going to uphold the rigorous standards,” Apuya said of the mission to build high-quality military installations for Afghan National Security Forces.



Benny Apuya, a quality assurance and construction representative with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District – South, inspects electrical work at the Kandahar Regional Military Training Center project in Kandahar province. Apuya visits the site several times a week to make sure construction complies with plans and specifications as well as International Building Code standards. (USACE photo by Jasmine Chopra-Delgadillo)

As a quality assurance and construction representative with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District – South, Apuya makes sure contractors follow the International Building Code as well as project plans and specifications. His nearly 30 years of experience in construction, including 15 years of service as a military occupational specialty 21N, construction equipment supervisor, have afforded Apuya the expertise required to identify potential problems with construction and coordinate corrective actions.

Before enlisting in the Army, Apuya worked under the guidance of his brother, a master electrician. As a young Soldier, Apuya served as an MOS 21E, heavy construction equipment operator. He also earned an associate's degree in drafting and went on to build dozens of firing ranges, training areas, roads, quarries and more.

“I love construction because I can see the results of my work,” Apuya said. “From nothing to something that matters; something useful and good,” he added.

In 1998, Apuya was selected for Drill Sergeant School. Only the most qualified noncommissioned officers are selected to attend Drill Sergeant School because each is entrusted with teaching new recruits every aspect of the Army’s initial entry training. One of the highest honors for a noncommissioned officer is a seat in Drill Sergeant School; yet Apuya was not certain he wanted to attend. He had already graduated from Air Assault School, Airborne School and the Master Rappel Course to name a few. He was eager to remain in construction, near his family which includes his wife Rose and their four, then young, children. But it was an offer he could not refuse and serving as a drill sergeant turned out to be one of his greatest achievements, Apuya said. Over the course of his 30-month stint as a drill sergeant, Apuya estimates he trained and mentored 2,000 recruits who went on to become Soldiers. He was selected as drill sergeant of the cycle, an award reserved for the best drill sergeants, three times. Like construction work, Apuya saw the results of his labor within each basic training graduate he said, “From civilian to soldier.”

After retiring from the Army as a master sergeant with 21 years of service, Apuya worked for a private sector construction company as an assistant superintendent before joining the USACE Savannah District’s Fort Benning, Georgia Area Office.

The old Soldier was happy to be back working on a military base, he said.

“In the beginning, civilian life was very hard. It took a period of adjustment,” said Apuya.

Once back within the Department of the Army as a USACE employee, Apuya felt reinvigorated by the Army Values which are Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage.

“Although I may be very direct and vocal with my expert opinions on a job site, I strive to treat everyone with respect” Apuya said. “The bottom line is that we want to make sure the contractors build safe and reliable facilities that comply with the IBC, designs and specifications, and the contract,” he said. “And it must be done within the time and budget allotted.”

Respect is his favorite Army Value, said Apuya and according to Army doctrine, respect is what allows us to appreciate the best in other people and self-respect is a vital ingredient which results from knowing you have put forth your best effort.

In Afghanistan, where access to adequate supplies and a highly-skilled workforce is not easy due to years of hostilities and neglect, Apuya, within the bounds of his prescribed authority, provides some mentoring to Afghan contractors on the job sites. He visits construction sites several times a week and when he sees a deficiency or error, Apuya brings it to the attention of the contractor immediately and the contractor provides a corrective action plan to bring the construction into compliance. Since language differences can often be a barrier, Apuya says the best policy is to be clear, brief, and straightforward and verify required changes have been made.

To make sure construction complies with the design and code requirements, Apuya conducts preparatory, initial, follow-up and final inspections. During preparatory inspection, which is performed prior to the start of construction, Apuya reviews design drawings and confirms all required materials and equipment meet required specifications and

have in fact been delivered to the job site. During the initial inspection, which is performed after the first segments of the site are constructed, Apuya inspects and verifies the quality of workmanship. He also verifies that the contractor's preliminary work is in compliance with specifications, design drawings, dimensions and contract requirements. Further along in a project's development, Apuya conducts follow-up inspections a few times a week to ensure continuing compliance with contract requirements, plans and specifications. Inspections culminate with the final inspection where all remaining issues are resolved just prior to the project being turned over to the end user. To promote quality construction, Apuya conducts one to two hour-long meetings with the Afghan contractors weekly to make sure processes are working and to resolve any issues hampering progress on the project.

Although he uses the same expertise he's honed over the years in his approach to all construction projects, Apuya admits there is something special to him about building training facilities for Afghan National Army soldiers.

"I was a Soldier once and I trained a lot of Soldiers. Yes, Soldiers have the heart to live, work and train just about anywhere, but adequate facilities do make a difference," he said. "I want to build the best facilities we can for the Afghan National Army because they are entrusted with a significant mission, to serve and defend their citizens."

Building the best facilities is not an easy task to accomplish in Afghanistan, but he's committed to making it happen, Apuya said.

"I have been told, 'Benny, you always like tackling problems other folks shy away from,'" said Apuya. "Guess that's a part of my spirit," he added.

With his deployment in Afghanistan coming to a close in December, Apuya will take his problem-solving spirit to the USACE Far East District's Southern Resident Office in Daegu, Republic of Korea. With their children grown, including one son in the U.S. Marine Corps and a daughter at university in the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps, Benny and Rose Apuya, who enjoyed serving in Germany and Korea before, have decided to live and work overseas once again.