

# FISTers in Army's 1st SFAB encourage 13Fs to volunteer

By Staff Sgt. Sierra A. Melendez

FORT BENNING, Ga. -- Fire support specialists, also known as 13Fs, or FISTers as they often refer to themselves, provide a critical capability on the battlefield with their ability to synchronize and integrate fires. Whether fixed wing or surface-to-surface indirect weapon systems, they play an integral role in ensuring fires are on target and on time.

For 13Fs in the Army's 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, headquartered at Fort Benning, Georgia, their role as fires advisors for foreign partners is twofold - train them on fires standard operating procedures while simultaneously embedding with them in an austere combat environment.

"It [the training] leaves the classroom and heads straight to the battlefield," said Lt. Col. Melvin S. Jackson, the 1st SFAB's fire support officer. "That's a key piece that the SFAB employs that the conventional Army typically doesn't. This is an organization the Department of the Army has tapped to perform a difficult mission set."

Jackson explained the SFAB's particular mission set is to train, advise, assist, accompany and enable conventional foreign forces - not Special Forces - so that they have the ability to take ownership of their own security, establish stability and encourage autonomy.

The Department of the Army developed the SFAB to act in the capacity of combat advisors - not nation builders. While there is only one current SFAB, the planned activation of five additional SFABs shows that these units are permanent, additive force structure.

Although the SFAB remains similar in structure to conventional brigade combat teams, their elements are significantly smaller. For fire supporters, this will allow them to work alongside their infantry counterparts on a deeper level - reminiscent of the times before the division artillery units were reactivated.

"We're able to enable combat and battalion advisor teams with fire support to allow them to

focus on their respective mission set," said Sgt. 1st Class Kyle B. Ihrke, 1st Battalion, 1st SFAB fire support noncommissioned officer. "We are able to communicate with close air support, attack aviation, artillery or mortars while simultaneously de-conflict situations if necessary to meet the commander's intent."

The utilization of FISTers as advisors for battalion level foreign forces enables them to use their indirect fire assets and become a force multiplier for ground forces. Combat Advisor Teams (CAT) work in small elements to create a more intimate training environment and cohesive bond. Once manning requirements are met, the intent is to have one fire support Soldier per CAT.

"We're still achieving the same goal as a 13F would in your BCTs," said Capt. William R. Edwards, 1st Battalion, 1st SFAB fire support officer and Madison, Alabama native. "We're just achieving it with fewer personnel."

Edwards said he is overwhelmed with the plethora of knowledge from fire support specialists in the SFAB's ranks. As part of selection for the SFAB, volunteers are chosen based on qualifications and experience. Many have served in the same position in their former BCTs on the same echelon.

"There's less learning your military occupational specialty (MOS) or going over redundant material and more performing your MOS," said Edwards. "The wealth of knowledge is unmatched and that creates just an overall more professional unit. I have really benefitted from the mentorship and the dedication of the SFAB's Soldiers and leaders." Ihrke echoed his sentiments.

"Everyone here believes in our mission at hand and wants to be successful at it," said Ihrke. "They volunteered to be here, so everyone genuinely wants to be here. It's a refreshing change."

Both Edwards and Ihrke encourage 13 series Soldiers interested in joining the SFAB to contact the field artillery branch manager for more information.

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*From left to right: Sgt. 1st Class Kyle B. Ihrke, fire support noncommissioned officer for 1st Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade and Capt. William R. Edwards, fire support officer for 1st Battalion, 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, study a map at Fort Benning, Georgia, Nov. 2, 2017. The SFAB is a specialized unit designed specifically to conduct security force assistance operations to train, advise, assist, accompany and enable partner nation security forces in support of combatant command requirements worldwide. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Sierra A. Melendez, 50th Public Affairs Detachment, 3rd Infantry Division public affairs)*

“For the enlisted side of the house, it’ll aid in the advancement of your career similar to other broadening assignments like being an observer controller at a training center or a drill sergeant,” said Ihrke. “We get to solely focus on joint fire support versus being pulled away for something outside of your trade because of a tasking or as borrowed man power.”

“It’s a very fluid organization,” said Edwards.

“It breeds the ability to adapt and therefore think outside the box and encourages innovation. A young 13F or a seasoned 13F can both benefit from that.”

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