

Swiss USASMA student explains country's unique role

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USASMA Public Affairs

The small, central European country of Switzerland has created a unique role for itself in the world. Though it is politically neutral, it is far from disengaged. The United Nations and Red Cross have headquarters there, and Swiss business ventures flourish on every continent. Senior Warrant Officer Michael Giroud, a 41-year-old student at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy and soldier in the Swiss Armed Forces, is another example of that active engagement.

Giroud serves full-time as the commander's assistant in the Military Disaster Relief Rapid Reaction Command in the Swiss Armed Forces. He and his fellow soldiers provide life-saving services and engineering support at home and around the world after disasters such as floods, earthquakes and hurricanes. He was personally involved after earthquakes in Greece and Turkey in 1995 and 1999, respectively, and flooding in Switzerland in 1999 and 2005. Others in his command have been involved after earthquakes in Latin American and Asia, and the 2005 tsunami in Indonesia.

His command does more than react; they also put those skills to use proactively. A few years ago, for example, they employed their engineering expertise to help a Swiss mountain village that faced an almost certain uncontrolled rock slide. The MDRRRC came in and collected water from snow and melting glaciers to create a controlled slide. "We created a huge manmade reservoir high in the mountains and then channeled 12,000 liters of water per minute for 3 weeks to force the rocks apart." The mission was a success.

"Our command is more visible to the Swiss public than any other since we are there when they need us," said Giroud. "Our army has every kind of job specialty – combat, combat support, and combat service sup-

port – but our constitution allows us to employ them only within our borders for self-defense." This precludes the army from participating in any combat-related roles in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, but it does allow them to support peacekeeping efforts in places such as Korea and the Balkans.

Despite their neutrality, the Swiss are actively engaged with NATO – through the Partnership for Peace program. Unlike most other countries, the Swiss do not see the program as a stepping stone to full membership. Instead, they see it as a chance to be actively engaged in peace support operations.

"The Partnership for Peace program does not require our country to sign a mutual defense treaty, so it does not violate our constitution and it allows us to train with NATO soldiers," said Giroud. "Each of us learns from the other."

True to their nature of neutrality, the Swiss population voted against joining the European Union, but that has not stopped the country from actively engaging with its neighbors. Switzerland's 7.5 million citizens, in an area twice the size of New Jersey, have four official languages – German, French, Italian and Rumantsch. Each Swiss student is required to study two languages in school – the language of that region and another official one. These skills come in handy for international banking and travel – two of Switzerland's most important economic sectors.

This melting pot of language and culture traces its roots back more than 700 years. In 1291, three cantons – similar to American states – joined together for mutual defense and trade. For more than 500 years, additional cantons joined the confederation and greatly increased its size and population, much as the United States expanded over time. There are more similarities between the two countries, Giroud added.

"When the United States was founded, James Madison mentioned that our original constitution from



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Senior Warrant Officer Michael Giroud also serves as a civilian volunteer in Swiss Rescue, an organization funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs. Here, he relaxes after more than 45 continuous hours of disaster relief work following a 1999 earthquake in Turkey.

1291 was one of the documents your country used to shape your Articles of Confederation. You returned the favor when we looked to your constitution when we revised ours in 1848," he said.

Participation in foreign military leadership training, such as the Sergeants Major Academy, is another commonality. Each year, the Swiss military sends one of its senior enlisted leaders here. The first Swiss attendee, in Class 34, was Gottfried Wiedmer. After graduation, he went on to become the Swiss equivalent of the Sergeant Major of the Army. He also was instrumental in efforts to improve acceptance of the Swiss NCO corps and restructure it to be more effective.

While the United States relies on a completely volunteer military force, the Swiss require each male to serve in his nation's defense. Paragraph 19 of their

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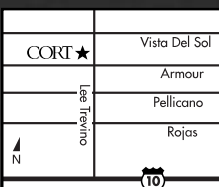


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