



Washington Hall at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. (Photo by Beverly Cooper)

NCOs teach the way at West Point

By Christy Lattimore-Staple

NCO Journal

Some of the U.S. Army's best noncommissioned officers are stationed at West Point, N.Y., developing cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. There, tactical NCOs play a pivotal role as the academy's military integrators — teaching, mentoring and training the cadets with a focus on leadership development and inherent responsibilities. They oversee cadets and their development in academic studies, understanding of military roles and responsibilities, and physical capabilities. All formerly platoon sergeants, drill sergeants or first sergeants, the tactical NCOs have one goal — to teach, inspire, mentor and motivate cadets to become the most prepared and qualified newly commissioned officers the U.S. military has to offer.

“Here in the Department of Military Instruction, we are the military component for military instruction here at West Point,” said Master Sgt. Lonnie L. Schultz, senior

enlisted advisor for the department. The NCO instructors at West Point were chosen because of their military expertise from the Army, he said.

“Most of the NCOs here, including myself, just got back from either Afghanistan or Iraq within the last year. We bring that battlefield knowledge to the classroom,” he said. “What the cadets see on paper and in textbooks about actual events, they can visualize it better when we explain how it actually happens. Then they understand it more.”

NCOs use various methods to teach military tactics, Schultz said.

“When I teach a lesson plan, I like to show a video of it. Then, I also share my own experiences,” he said. “If NCOs were not here, the cadets would not get that firsthand account from our own experiences.”

Cadets are being prepared for a new battlefield environment by learning how to think outside the box and make sound decisions.



Three cadets work in a group to come up with a plan of action for protecting their unit during an exercise in an enemy analysis and anticipation course. (Photo by Christy Lattimore-Staple)

“Being a part of the Army before 9/11, we trained to fight that uniform army that would be wearing bullet-proof vests and that was going to maneuver on us,” Schultz said. “Then, the decision-making process was pretty easy because it was like playing chess — if they did one thing, then we were going to do something else. However nowadays, you have to teach these cadets to think to make a decision. The most important skill a cadet can learn is how to make a decision.

“As an NCO, I try to give the cadets a base of tactical knowledge of how we operate as a military to make a decision and be creative. That’s the most important thing — to be creative and make sound tactical decisions, but more importantly make a decision and stand by their decision,” Schultz said. “I tell my cadets the worst thing they can do is get out there, not make a decision and let things happen. Doing nothing is the worst thing a Soldier can do.”

Cadets learn to think like the enemy and anticipate their actions.

“I teach enemy analysis and anticipating a course of action,” said Sgt. 1st Class Thomas E. Larkin, instructor in the Department of Military Instruction. “In my class, the cadets are taught when planning their operations orders to think like the enemy and what would the [enemy] do. The exercises I give in my class are to get the cadets to think when they actually go out on a mission. It gives their platoon a heads-up on what things they could encounter from the enemy.”

Cadets are shown the importance of their roles as future officers for the U.S. military.

“As an NCO and their instructor, I try to instill in them the importance of their [future] position,” Larkin said. “They will be in charge of 30 to 35 Soldiers’ lives in a platoon, depending on the military branch. That will always grab their attention.”

NCOs teach the cadets the importance of relying on the experiences of others to solve a problem.

“In class, we make them work in teams,” Larkin said. “I teach the cadets that when they are a platoon leader, they are not going to always get an answer by themselves. They will have to go to their company commander or their peers. Because of that, the cadets are able to bond because they are working together.”

Cadets are assigned to a company or regiment at West Point, which teaches them the inner-workings of the military chain of command. From year to year, cadets will gain the experience of having a leadership position and the roles and responsibilities that go with that duty.

“In our company, cadets receive a military developmental grade that reflects their leadership and their positions here within the company or regiment,” said Sgt. 1st Class Edmund Saldarini, a tactical instructor for F Company, 4th Regiment. “We are grading cadets on their positions as the first sergeant — what he does and how well he does it, what kind of initiative he has or lack of. It’s the same process for the company commander and all the other positions.”

Knowing how to counsel is a big part of an officer’s job and each time it’s practiced it builds confidence in the cadets.



Sgt. 1st Class Thomas E. Larkin, an instructor in the Department of Military Instruction, teaches his cadets how to think like the enemy and anticipate courses of action. (Photo by Christy Lattimore-Staple)

“I talk to the platoon sergeants formally once a week,” Saldarini said. “I bring them in, we sit, and I ask them about their relationship with their officers.”



A cadet draws his unit's plan of action for a mission during a 360-degree security analysis exercise. (Photo by Christy Lattimore-Staple)

“I ask them about the cadets in their platoon. Who is the best cadet? Who is having problems or any issues? How are they handling certain situations? I want to make sure they are getting involved with their subordinates, doing what an NCO cadet is supposed to do.”

“We really push cadets to understand that the NCO is not the big bad wolf,” said Sgt. 1st Class Clifton E. Rush, tactical instructor and NCOIC for F Company, 2nd Regiment. “The sergeants and platoon sergeants are not against you, I tell my cadets.”

Cadets are taught to respect rank and the responsibilities that come with being an officer.

“Here, respect is heavily stressed,” Rush said. “I teach my cadets not to be the hot head. Don't go off without all the information. I give my cadets the example of when I was a young sergeant: We were changing tires at a launching station, and the lieutenant came in and flew off the handle. ‘Why is LS3 [launcher] here?’ he yelled. ‘LS3 should have been at this place at this time, and that was an hour and half ago!’ The NCO at the time had to tell him, ‘Sir, the launcher that was scheduled to leave was LS5.’”

“What happened was the lieutenant lost face not only with that junior NCO, but also those Soldiers he locked up and was yelling at,” Rush said. “Through coaching, teaching and mentoring — all these things put together — we can teach cadets how not to do that, how not to lose face. Something as simple as taking a step back and finding out what is going on by pulling someone to the side to ask a question — that is a lot better than just flying off the handle without any information. Communication is absolutely key to doing better.”

Tactical NCOs find their jobs rewarding, but teaching subject matter to cadets who may not understand its importance can be challenging. West Point cadets take classes in their chosen major but also have to take classes in the Military Science Department.

“The biggest challenge is keeping the cadets' attention,” Larkin said. “For some of them, they think their other classes more of a priority. But most cadets are willing to learn.”

“In the Military Science Department we teach a lot of infantry- and combat arms-related subject matter,” Schultz said. “Some of these kids know they are not going to go infantry, but it's important they learn about it.”

“You have some of these cadets who are extremely talented and in their other classes learning nuclear physics,” Schultz said. “But when they come to the DMI department, they may struggle. “But [the importance] really hits home when we do cadet summer training. They get out there and are in leadership positions,” he said. “We've taught them about platoon operations, leading a platoon, operations orders, writing mission statements, doing tactical tasks. But when they get out there on the field, they realize how difficult it is to actually be in charge of a platoon.”

“Then there are cadets who come to West Point because they wanted to get a military education, and they are going to serve in the military — that's their focus here,” Schultz said. “When they are across the street in their other classes, they may struggle with calculus. But they can come in here and can whip out an operations order likes there's no tomorrow.”



Cadets make their way to their next class during their busy day at West Point. (Photo by Christy Lattimore-Staple)

“We are trying to incorporate a new branching model so it will give those cadets who are top-ranked in their academic classes across the road the classes they want, and those cadets who want to be in infantry, in the combat field, will have their opportunity,” he said.

Teach, inspire, mentor, motivate

Through teaching and coaching, tactical NCOs inspire, mentor and motivate their cadets to do more.

“I sincerely enjoy my job,” Saldarini said. “I like teaching, mentoring — everything I do here at the academy. To have the ability to mold these future officers, my future leaders, and to have an impact on them is an honor.”

NCOs feel that inspiring young cadets is a privilege.

“As an NCO, one of the greatest honors that I have had while being here at the academy was graduation day,” Saldarini said. “The cadet regiment commander, my company commander, my company executive officer — which are three big command positions cadets have to be chosen for — asked me to provide them with their first salute. Officers, if you ask them, they will tell you who their first salute was, because it’s special to them. And it was special to me. As an NCO, to have such an impact on their lives, it was truly an honor.”

The tactical NCOs have various teaching styles, but they all work to get the cadets to understand the lesson material.

“I try to keep my classroom in a relaxed atmosphere,” Larkin said. “The first 10 minutes of class, I let the cadets ask me any questions they have about the Army. I am a loud person, and I like to joke with the cadets at times. I try to keep my classroom learning environment lively, to keep my cadets’ attention. But most importantly, I make sure they understand the subject matter.”

One thing they learn is how and when to do a counseling.

“As an NCO, I mentor seven cadets here,” Schultz said. “I personally sit down with them, and because their parents are not here, I have become that role for them. A lot of cadets seek out that parent figure; they look for motivation. They love to hear the NCOs combat stories and about our own experiences.”

Tactical NCOs also have the opportunity to teach by example and show how the officer and NCO relationship is supposed to work.

“The cadets love to hear about the officer-NCO relationship,” Schultz said. “Cadets will ask me, ‘How am I supposed to go and work with a guy who already has 10 years in the Army, and this is my first year?’ In that [officer] role, they will have to be able to counsel that person. They have to be able to stand in front of that platoon, where some of those Soldiers may be the same

age as them — their peers — and have more service in the military and know more about their job than they do.”

The more counseling the cadets do, the more comfortable they are doing it.

“I make all my cadets counsel me, every three or four months,” Schultz said. “I give my cadets homework assignments like writing an award. I will give them a situation where they have to figure out the course of action, which sometimes includes counseling. It is some of those things that the cadets really need.”

The successful cadet

The Tactical NCOs have a theory on what makes a successful cadet — accountability, drive, dedication, selfless service and responsibility.

“The most important thing is accountability and the love and drive for what you do to become a successful cadet, officer,

Soldier and NCO,” Rush said. “I tell these cadets all the time: I can train you how to drill, I can make you better at PT, I can teach you how to do anything in any manual. But if you don’t have heart, if you don’t have that thing inside of you that makes you want to be here, then I can’t help you. I tell them that their hearts have to be in it and that if they are unsure about what they want to do, then we need to get some counseling, we need to do some reflecting, we need to talk about what they are really here for.”



Cadets stand on the parade field during a ceremony at West Point. (Photo courtesy of West Point Public Affairs)

“You have to be dedicated,” Schultz said. “I have seen some of the best cadets and some of the worst cadets. What it really boils down to is the level of their dedication. Cadets have to have something within that is bigger than them. Because to come here, most kids don’t say, ‘I am going to get my degree, then go work for a Fortune 500 company.’”

Most cadets’ focus is a commitment to serve their country.

“They know that there is more,” Schultz said. “During the cadets’ third year, they go through their affirmation ceremony, during which they commit to seven years in the military. Unfortunately, less than half of the cadets stay in the military after those seven years.”

Because the cadets hold different positions and ranks, the experience is a building block to teach responsibility.

When cadets become platoon leaders, they become responsible for everything that platoon does or fails to do.

instructors here, cadets should gain the confidence that their NCOs are good, strong leaders.”

Cadets will be able to use the military and academic material they learn in their branch of service, Schultz said.

“I think the academic environment that we teach these cadets in is outstanding,” he said. “I have cadets in my class who are studying Arabic, and some of their degree studies are down in the Defense Strategic Services, where they are going to learn how battles were fought, what the key players did or didn’t do. Those cadets are going to the Army, where they are going to apply that knowledge.

“There will never be a price that could be put on getting an education here, especially as we try to push more Soldiers and NCOs into college to get everyone more schooling,” Schultz said. “The advantages these cadets are going to have are many, because they are going to apply the military aspect and the schooling aspect to their jobs in the military.”



Sgt. 1st Class Edmund Saldarini (right), instructor for F Company, 4th Regiment, stands with cadets Alex Kim, Dan Park, John Janigian, Colin Mansfield, Dan Bryce. (Photo by Mary Saldarini)

“As their instructor, I want the cadets to take that responsibility now,” Larkin said. “It’s serious, and I want my cadets to take it seriously. I am not trying to scare them, but I want them to understand the importance of their job. I tell them that I do not want you or any of your Soldiers to get hurt or die on a deployment because you did not take responsibility for your actions or did not take that leadership role.”

West Point education

Cadets receive a top-notch military education and training from the U.S. Military Academy, Larkin said.

“The training we give during the summer cannot be beat,” he said. “The cadets experience a lot of leadership roles where they have a lot of responsibility to take on. Here cadets get to see what officers and NCOs are actually like. We are their first impression. With the NCO

NCOs’ advice

Tactical NCOs have words of wisdom to share with their cadets — their future officers.

“I think that the culture we have in the Army — being on a team, supporting the unit, sacrifice — we instill that from day one, whether they are a cadet at West Point or an enlisted Soldier,” Rush said. “We teach them to respect rank and authority and that having that authority over others is a privilege, one that can be very easily taken away.”

NCOs and officers have to be aware of the importance of their roles and how their relationship should work.

“NCOs and officers should be aware of their individual roles, how they overlap and the responsibility of those roles,” Rush said. “If we allow ourselves, or our peers or our leaders, to do things just because they can or because they can get away with it, then that’s not right. That’s not living up to the seven Army Values. That’s not in the Creed of the NCO. That’s not what’s in the Officer’s Creed or in the Oath of Enlistment. I teach my cadets that they must always take the harder way. It’s a great privilege to have greater responsibility.”

Part of being a good leader is knowing and caring about one’s Soldiers.

“My advice to a new graduating lieutenant is to have a true concern for your Soldiers, your platoon,” Larkin said. “No matter who they are, what branch they are, they should have a genuine concern for their Soldiers.

“I do not want them to be one of those lieutenants who sits in the office and does not know their Soldiers.

I want that platoon leader to know if his Soldier has a drinking problem or whatever the issue may be. But I also want that leader to know what their Soldiers' hobbies are, what they like to do, where that Soldier may be from — not be their friend, but know their Soldiers, know their platoon.”

NCOs instill the meaning of the profession of being an officer.

“The cadets are taught by the military, they live with the military, they are totally immersed in everything that has to do with the military,” Schultz said. “That’s one of the many things I try to instill in them, to make them never forget what their profession is — the profession they chose — the profession of arms. A profession is something you do for the rest of your life.”

Relying on the NCO Creed or Officer’s Creed is a pathway to success, the academy’s NCOs said.



Sgt. 1st Class Edmund Saldarini renders the first salute to 2nd Lt. Angela Smith as her family watches. (Photo by Colin Mansfield)

“Do the right thing all the time and live by the NCO Creed, or for officers, the Officer’s Creed,” Saldarini said. “That’s the most important advice I can give. The NCO Creed will not set you up for failure; it will always set you up for success. I keep the NCO Creed on my desk. I look at it all the time. It’s very important to me as an NCO. It tells me how to be an NCO, what to do as an NCO. By following it, I set my officers up for success.” ■

West Point’s Department of Military Instruction

- **Military Science:** The West Point Core Military Science Program consists of three 40-lesson courses that prepare cadets for tactical leadership. The program is outcome-based and teaches sound decision-making under pressure. Instructors emphasize the principles that underlie U.S. Army Doctrine while avoiding reliance on checklists and set processes. The curriculum is designed to strengthen cadet character and adaptability.
- **Military Training:** The Military Training branch plans, coordinates and executes Cadet Summer Training and the Sandhurst Competition. MT officers coordinate with the Army Accessions Command to program Army Common Core Tasks concurrent with the Basic Officer Leader Course program into the cadets’ 47-month USMA experience. Every MT officer and NCO instructs Military Science courses during the academic year.
- **Cadet Summer Training:** Cadet Summer Training provides all four classes with challenging, realistic military training commensurate with their respective level of development. The broader purpose is the inspiration and development of each cadet as a future Army officer.
- **Defense and Strategic Studies:** A degree in Defense and Strategic Studies prepares cadets for many positions in the military, the U.S. government and various civilian professions. Cadets are prepared for the complexities of modern warfare and a lifetime of service to the nation through the wide range of approved electives, which develop well-rounded leaders.
- **Department of Physical Education:** The Department of Physical Education strives to develop warrior leaders of character who are physically and mentally tough by engaging cadets in activities that promote and enhance a healthy lifestyle, physical fitness, movement behavior and psychomotor performance.
- **Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic:** The William E. Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic educates, trains and inspires leaders of character in the Corps of Cadets through the development, coordination and integration of the Professional Military Ethic in the curriculum and activities at West Point.

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