



By Example: Army Education System Makes NCOs ‘Certified In What We Do’

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This story is part of a periodic NCO Journal feature that takes a closer look at an Army award in an NCO’s career. This month we focus on the Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbon.

Staff Sgt. Sony Merus grew up in Delray Beach, Fla., the son of Haitian immigrants. He joined the Army just after his 18th birthday in July 2005. Like many Soldiers, he thought he would soon be getting out and going to college. But a 15-month deployment to Iraq beginning in September 2007 changed his perspective on life and the Army. He is now a small group leader for the 35F Intelligence Analyst Advanced Leader Course at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence NCO Academy at Fort Huachuca, Ariz. Merus was named the NCO of the Year for the 1st Armored Division in 2010, and in January, he was named Instructor of the Year at the United States Army Intelligence Center of Excellence.

Why did you decide to join the Army and

why have you continued to serve?

I joined the Army initially for the college money, like most people do. I was still in high school and unsure of what I wanted to do. Once I got in, I was deployed, and those deployments kind of change you in terms of making you grow up fast. The responsibility that was placed on me during that deployment — it felt good, knowing that I can impact people below and above me and the mission the Army is trying to accomplish. It was a 15-month deployment. It was long, and it sucked. But at the same time, I learned a lot from it about myself and what I wanted to do. It felt right to stay in the Army.

How does the NCOPD ribbon showcase the role of NCOs?

The ribbon is given after you complete a training requirement through an NCO Education System school. I think it speaks to the military expertise and stewardship of the profession. The schools’ awarding the NCOPD ribbon is definitely a part of professionalizing the force

because it means, now that you are a graduate of WLC or ALC, you have been equipped with the tools to go out and lead Soldiers as well as accomplish the mission. It represents that we are professionals; we are certified in what we do.

Talk about your role in helping others earn the ribbon.

As a small group leader, I'm that individual they have to get through before they can get there. I have to make sure they meet that requirement to be certified as a professional. I'm not at the Warrior Leader Course level, where it starts for NCO training. I'm right at the mid-level, which I think has a big impact. Everyone has to go through ALC to become a senior NCO. So I'm right there at that crossroads, and I think that has a big impact on the military. We want to make sure everyone is certified in their job.

Do you remember when you first received the NCOPD ribbon and what it meant to you?

Yes, I received mine after WLC in 2009 at the 7th Army NCO Academy in Grafenwöhr, Germany. It was a 30-day resident course. I learned a lot. I was already an E-5 and had already completed one deployment as an NCO with Soldiers underneath me. But I still was able to learn, not only from the SGLs there, but from my peers as well. I graduated on the commandant's list, got the ribbon, everything was good. But after getting back to my unit, the realization hit — "Now Sgt. Merus has the NCOPD ribbon. The bar has been raised." The Army is saying, now you have been certified. When people see it, they know you've been through the NCO Academy; you've been equipped with the tools. So now you have to go out and execute. It became reality at that point: OK, I have to take this seriously; I can't be that guy just joking around. I have to take this NCO business seriously.

How did you choose your MOS?

I had a good recruiter; he was good at selling things. I had no focus on what I wanted to do. But he brought up the intelligence analyst, said it was like the James Bond

of the military and showed me a cool video of intel guys running around the forest with their laptops and communicating with satellites. Looking back, it's all corny. But it definitely had an impact on me back then, and I thought that's something I want to do. Once I got in and saw what I was going to do, I thought, "Wow, this is some very important stuff."

What roles have NCOs played in your professional development?

I'm a product of NCOs, officers and warrant officers. But NCOs have had that immediate impact. I remember being a young private in Germany — doing those dumb things privates do — and my NCO was always there to put me back in line. He knew I was going to make mistakes, and he was there to make sure I paid for it, but also to build me back up.

What advice would you give to junior NCOs?

During my time here at the academy, one thing I see a lot of NCOs struggle with is personal courage to make those tough decisions, specifically when addressing their peers when dealing with an issue. A lot of people shy away from it; they just don't want to be that guy or gal who is going to make that unpopular decision. It's hard to say, "Hey, I know you are having fun and enjoying what you're doing, but it's wrong." A lot of people shy away from that. The advice I give is, there comes a time in every NCO's career when you have to make that unpopular decision or that difficult decision, but it's the right decision. It's going to take personal courage, but that's expected of you. You're charged with enforcing the standard and making sure things are done right.

What is good leadership?

I think a good leader is one who not only shows up when things go right, when everything works out fine, but is also there when things go bad to take responsibility and own up. You need to be there with that team to help them through whatever they're going through. ■



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