



Instructors Teach Army, Life Lessons through Air Assault School Rigors

By Martha C. Koester

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It's called the 10 toughest days in the Army, and nobody knows the challenges of the celebrated Sabalauski Air Assault School at Fort Campbell, Ky., better than its NCO instructors.

"It's a very proud feeling being an NCO instructor. But it's also a lot of pressure," said instructor Staff Sgt. Donald Davenport. "You always have to be on top of your game because we are the focal point of the 101st Airborne Division. It takes a lot of composure and perseverance to be at the top of your game, day in and day out.

"We are limited on mistakes as NCOs. We have to be the most professional at all times. Yes, everyone slips, but the group of instructors we have here I would definitely say are the most professional NCOs I have worked with in my career."

The Sabalauski Air Assault School is a U.S. Army Forces Command unit that trains Soldiers assigned to the 101st Airborne Division, other Army units and

FORSCOM service members. Courses offered at the school include rappel master training, fast rope insertion/extraction (FRIES), special purpose insertion/extraction (SPIES) and Pathfinder training.

Though air assault training is offered at other Army installations, Fort Campbell's school was the original.

"We [emphasize] here at the schoolhouse [to] every air assault student that is stationed at Fort Campbell that this is a job requirement here," said Sgt. 1st Class William McBride, chief instructor. "In order to [be successful] at Fort Campbell, you must be air-assault qualified. You have to have that drive and determination to earn that Air Assault Badge in order to work here and to lead Soldiers in this division."

Earning the coveted Air Assault Badge is dependent on discipline. Attention to detail will bring students success, but rank will win them no favors from Day 0 to Day 10 of training, instructors said.

“From the lowest-ranked private to the top general, we have all ranks come through Air Assault School,” McBride said. “They all get the same disciplinary treatment. We don’t care what their job is ... we don’t care who they know. They are in an Army school. Discipline has to be enforced on everyone. [Students] are told to get in formation, they are told to march, they are told to sound off. That happens with everyone, regardless of their rank.”

Perhaps no Soldier illustrates this point better than recent graduate Col. Michael W. Minor, the commander of the 101st Airborne Division rear detachment, who graduated air assault training in June 2013 alongside his son, Cadet Isaac A. Minor, a student at the University of Virginia’s College at Wise.

“They were treated the same, just like everyone else,” said Staff Sgt. Zilvinas Lapelis, a senior instructor. “It’s amazing because [Col. Minor] is a leader and his son is just another Soldier, following in his father’s footsteps.”

“The big picture is [Soldiers] following leadership’s footsteps. It’s imperative. As a leader, you have to be air-assault qualified if you are going to expect your Soldiers to go to Air Assault School. ... We expect [leaders] to come here and earn the coveted Air Assault Badge.”

Back to school

With the drawing down of forces in Afghanistan comes a renewed focus on the 10 toughest days in the Army at the Sabalauski Air Assault School and on what an air assault Soldier is.

“I have only been here for about a year, but I have seen the changes in the Soldiers’ state of mind from, ‘It’s just Air Assault School’ to ‘We need to really train for this,’” said Sgt. 1st Class Richard Santana, a senior instructor. “I have heard, ‘It’s just another badge,’ and that’s how a lot of people look at it.”

“We emphasize the basic structures now, the discipline, the need for this air assault course or even the badge. Now, people are actually trying to train up for it versus just being told, ‘Go.’”

As leaders encourage their Soldiers to undergo air-assault training, instructors are seeing more Soldiers eager to be a part of the legacy of the 101st Airborne Division. Growth is evident around the school, instructors said.

“Four years ago, we only had two air assault training teams here,” Lapelis said. “Now, we have four. We are producing over 3,000 Soldiers annually who earn their coveted Air Assault Badges. So on a daily basis,



Pvt. Nathan Purdy, center, B Company, 526th Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, tests his Swiss seat technique while rappelling at the Sabalauski Air Assault School at Fort Campbell, Ky. (Photo by Sgt. Keith Rogers, U.S. Army)

when all four teams are active at the same time, we have almost 1,000 Soldiers on the school grounds.”

“What I try to preach to these students is to take advantage of us in your own backyard because a lot of other units in other places do not have these advantages,” Davenport said. “You are given an opportunity to go to Air Assault School and earn something that not everybody in the Army has.

“The training here is mission-essential, but it is something you take with you throughout the rest of your military career. ... You depend on those Soldiers who have that fortitude, attention to detail and discipline, who you can lean on when times get tough. You know they are going to carry out the mission to make sure it’s a success. That’s what I think this schoolhouse teaches: success in the future and dependability.”

School of life

Enduring the school’s mental and physical challenges will prove valuable throughout a Soldier’s military career, instructors say.

“How you train is how you fight,” Lapelis said. “If you don’t know what the right thing is and you’re constantly doing something that’s not right, that can possibly hurt someone. You keep doing that long enough, it becomes muscle memory. In garrison, it is forgiving. Downrange, it is unforgiving.”

“It’s the relationships you develop and the things you can take with you,” Davenport said. “Attention to detail and looking at things in a different light as far as safety — you’re always looking out for that guy beside you or thinking ahead. All those things will make you successful later on in life.

“Some people will never do an air assault operation in their life. Some people will never sling-load equipment. Some people will never fast-rope or rappel out of an aircraft. But it’s those experiences that you can take with you — that you can overcome obstacles and you can actually succeed.”

However, some of those obstacles students face during the training can ultimately lead to a Soldier’s undoing at the school.

“We had 214 [Soldiers start the course] recently,” Davenport said. “I made it a point to tell the 162 at the end of [Day 0], ‘Do you realize what you did? Out of 214, you are what remains. That should make some type of fire burn in you that you can do this. Today, you are better than [those who did not make it]. Continue to be better; finish strong.’”



Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) practice sling-load operations at the Sabalauski Air Assault School at Fort Campbell, Ky. The course helps Soldiers further develop physical and mental discipline as they learn sling-load operations, rappelling and fast-rope techniques. (Photo by Spc. Jennifer Andersson, U.S. Army)

Soldiers who fail to complete the training often try again. Instructors said they see many familiar faces in class.

“We see them when they come through — ‘Oh you were here last class or two classes ago,’” Davenport said. “We see where they are progressively getting better, but they are just having a hard time, whether it’s academics or physical. But it’s a learning tool. They know what to expect; they know what is expected of them.

“We had a Day 0 student who had been through this course eight times, but yesterday was the student’s day [to succeed]. ... It was the determination of this student who did not give up that will stick with her for the rest of her life. She is going to look back and say, ‘I can do this.’”

“They can come back as many times as they want,” McBride said. “I will keep helping them through it.”

Long hours

Instructors at the Sabalauski Air Assault School take their jobs as mentors seriously and exhibit a passion to help the students and school by taking on a grueling schedule, particularly if students need extra assistance.

"If I have a [candidate who wants to work as an instructor] say, 'Oh, I'm just going to teach my class and go home,' it doesn't work that way," chief instructor McBride said. "[What] I am looking for is an instructor who says, 'Hey, I belong in the best division in the world, and there is a problem in my unit — they don't have enough air-assault qualified individuals. I'm here to fix that.' Absolutely, I want to see that drive and determination for the students."

Davenport agreed. Teaching at the Air Assault School is not the best place to go to get out of doing another job.

"This is a 24-hour-a-day, it's-always-on-your-mind job," he said. "You're always involved. You need to be flexible with things that are going on. It's a huge mentorship role. Huge."

"You're constantly trying to adapt to the situation," Santana said. "So there's really no time for you to relax, especially when you have a lot of civilian priorities as well, like I go to college. It's tough, and it's just constant. Every 10 days, you train these Soldiers from Day 0 to Day 10. You get them to where you want them to be, and then they graduate. They're gone; then you start all over."

Hard training

The Air Assault School is widely known for the difficulty of the course, and instructors acknowledge it is not for the faint of heart.

"It is constant training, constant," McBride said. "Every minute of the student's time is managed. We give them every opportunity to succeed through directional guidance. ... It's so vital that we as instructors have the best period of instruction for the students, so that when they earn that badge and go to their units, they still have the knowledge to be a vital asset. The training is intense — from the physical training to the knowledge and in a short period of time."

"It's not just going to Air Assault School to get smoked and get more physical training," Davenport said. "It's coming down here to earn a badge that a lot of people will never have the opportunity to achieve in a lifetime."

McBride said the value of air assault training was made apparent to him while on a recent deployment to Afghanistan. McBride was asked to assist a unit in rigging an A-22 cargo bag, something he hadn't done for years since attending the Air Assault School.

"I had an entire platoon full of air-assault qualified privates, specialists, E-5s, E-6s who said, 'Hey platoon sergeant, we've got this,'" McBride said. "That's the value of this training. That's what made me proud to be in this division, and that's why I love working here at this schoolhouse — because I have that impact on thousands of Soldiers in this division."

The training is difficult, but it isn't designed to be impossible to accomplish, Lapelis said.

"It's extremely feasible. But it's up to that Soldier, up to that individual, to apply that effort, that dedication," he said.

Instructors point to another recent graduate who garnered national media attention for his successful completion of the grueling course. Sgt. 1st Class Greg Robinson, a combat engineer with A Company, 2nd Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, lost a portion of his lower right leg during a mission in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in October 2006. Robinson became the first Soldier with an amputated limb and prosthetic to graduate from the Sabalauski Air Assault School in April 2013.

"He is an amputee," Lapelis said. "[But he faced the] same standard, same grueling tasks. He got through the school. ... [Robinson] executed every obstacle to the standard, conducted his 2-mile run, 6-mile [road marches], 12-mile [road marches]. He's living proof that anyone can get through the school. It is possible.

"It takes a lot of heart, a lot of dedication, a lot of intestinal fortitude. That shows right there that throughout not just the Army, but the military overall, that it can be done. You just have to apply yourself." ■



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