



Sgt. 1st Class Thaddeus Martin, a tactical NCO at the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School at West Point, N.Y., inspects new cadet candidates on their reception day in July 2013. (Photo by John Pellino)

NCOs Begin New School Year as Staff — and Students — at West Point Prep

Michael L. Lewis

NCO Journal

As students nationwide prepare to return to school this month, two groups of NCOs are also preparing to start another year as staff members and students at the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School at West Point, N.Y., commonly known as West Point Prep.

There, prior-enlisted Soldiers and recent high school graduates develop their study, military and athletic skills as cadet candidates before going “down the hill” — to the other side of the West Point campus — to begin their

journey toward becoming commissioned officers. And guiding these aspiring students are the school’s complement of NCOs.

“NCOs have a huge impact here,” said Sgt. 1st Class Tristan Ruark, a tactical NCO at West Point Prep. “The day-to-day contact we have, the legacy of these NCOs, will be passed down the ‘Long Gray Line’ and out into the Army when these young men and women become officers.”

The school has its origins in President Woodrow Wilson’s 1916 authorization of appointments to West Point for

enlisted Soldiers. From then until just after World War II, various programs operated in locations as varied as Fort Snelling, Minn., and in-theater in Langres, France, to prepare candidates for admission and graduation at the U.S.

Today, the school is no longer exclusively for enlisted Soldiers. Most of its student body are recent high school graduates who typically need to boost their academic skills before starting West Point's notoriously tough

curriculum. A typical day at the prep school is filled with math, English, study skills and military science classes, plus up to three hours of physical training and team sports, which are often coached by NCOs. Cadet candidates who graduate from the year-long program enter West Point as freshmen cadets — "plebes." Proof that candidates leave well prepared is in the numbers: Since 1951, West Point Prep graduates have comprised 11 percent of the academy's Corps of Cadets, yet have held 25 percent of the senior leadership positions.



As a West Point cadet (left) leads a lesson teaching new West Point Prep students how to salute correctly, Martin (background) checks for deficiencies. (Photo courtesy U.S. Military Academy)

A Different Role For NCOs

Because of West Point's unique time-honored traditions, how NCOs there perform their customary roles of training, coaching and mentoring is unlike anywhere else in the Army. Cadets and cadet candidates operate their own chain of command and are the ones immediately responsible for student training and correction rather than the NCOs on staff.

"When I first arrived, I think the biggest shocker to me was that we weren't the trainers anymore," said Sgt. 1st Class Kristy Armstrong, who completed her tenure as the school's first sergeant earlier this year. "Everywhere else in the Army, NCOs are the trainers. But when we get here, we're told, 'Here is your cadet leadership, and they're going to train the cadet candidates.'"

Because older West Point cadets are the primary trainers at both the academy and the prep school, and that duty is designed as a learning experience for them, NCO staff members take a back seat during training events.

"During marksmanship training, for example, we give the cadets the overview of what we want the cadet candidates to know. But when we go to the range, we're on the sidelines. We step back instead of being the subject-mat-

Military Academy. These ad hoc programs were consolidated at Stewart Army Air Field just north of West Point at Newburgh, N.Y., in 1946. The school then moved to Fort Belvoir, Va., in 1957, and to Fort Monmouth, N.J., in 1975, before settling at the West Point installation in 2011 as a result of the Base Realignment and Closure process.

ter experts and the ones who validate the training as accurate and correct, because that's not our role here."

That doesn't mean they stop showing what right looks like, however, Ruark said.

"We still are making sure that the cadet candidates are maintaining the standards," he said. "But it's when there are problems that the [cadet candidate] chain of command can't take care of, that's when we step in. And we're always helping guide them and mold them."

That caring for Soldiers — a hallmark of NCO leadership — is just done differently at the school than in regular Army units, said Sgt. 1st Class Thaddeus Martin, also a tac NCO at West Point Prep.

"It's the same message getting across, we just do it differently here," he said. "You still have to know your Soldiers, get that standard out there and enforce that standard. If we do that, everything else just falls into line."

Almost all the NCOs on staff at the prep school were prepared for the job through previous stints as drill sergeants or platoon sergeants, Armstrong said.

"But this job really doesn't compare to being a drill sergeant, because being a drill sergeant, you do everything. Everything falls on you," she said. "Here, you're more of a mentor. In my opinion, I'd say platoon sergeant would be the best preparation."

"Having been a drill sergeant helps a little bit as far as the task management piece of things and because everything here has to be so structured," Martin said. "As a drill sergeant, you do things every single day the same way, with the same schedule. It's kind of the same thing here."

But perhaps the biggest impact the NCOs at the prep school have on their students is simply exemplifying the value of NCOs in the Army, Ruark said.

"Having NCOs here, [the cadet candidates] get a good introduction to what the role of the NCO is," he said. "They get to see different aspects of what NCOs do every day — not only the expertise part and the experience part, but also that we take care of Soldiers. We do that so officers have the time to accomplish their mission and do all the things they need to do. Eventually, if we stay in the Army long enough, these guys are going to come back to us as officers themselves, and we're going to be part of that journey."

That journey includes developing a healthy understanding of the officer-NCO relationship early on and learning to value NCOs as an indispensable resource, Armstrong said.

"Officers are the planners, and they're a lot better at it than most of us are; they have more experience in that," she said. "But they don't have more experience in the implementation piece — the actual, no-kidding, breaking it down to the lowest level possible, like when we are training our team leaders and squad leaders to actually go outside the wire. That lieutenant is not training them; it's the senior NCO who's training those squad leaders.

... We have all this knowledge, combat experience and leadership experience that shouldn't be ignored because of the rank we wear."

That the students will take this knowledge with them to West Point and onward into their Army careers is an immense responsibility, Ruark said.

"We develop and mentor, and try to set these guys up the best we can," he said. "If they do make it into the academy, then hopefully they'll take some of what we've given them and give it back to their classmates and to the Army."

On the other hand, the NCOs said their experience in training future officers will also make them better senior NCOs.

"It's going to help me be a true first sergeant of a company, because I've been able to step back," Armstrong said. "I won't just jump off the handle as my first instinct, but look to see what the actual problem is."

"After this assignment, I think I'll be a better planner," Martin said. "NCOs, we usually execute. But we've planned so much in the past two years, it's going to give me a foundation for years to come."

"A little bit of it as well is working in close proximity with high-level leaders like field-grade officers," Ruark said. "Learning how to work with them in this environment will definitely transfer to when you become a first sergeant or you're in operations and you're going to battalion-level meetings."

Understanding how officers are trained will also be an asset, Ruark said.

"It definitely is a unique experience to see what goes on to produce the officers who are going to take charge of us," he said.

From Soldier to Student

For the West Point Prep students who've transitioned from being enlisted Soldiers to being students on the path toward being commissioned as officers, life at the school takes much adjusting.

"It could be that you're prior-service, but have been out of high school too long," Armstrong said. "The Army wants to make sure that you can adapt back into the classroom environment."

Prior-service cadet candidates must trade their lives of relative autonomy and responsibility to start over at the lowest rung of West Point's student leadership structure. But for one candidate, it was an opportunity that he couldn't pass on.

"The Army is something I love, and I thought that if I really wanted to make a step up, the positives really outweighed the negatives exponentially," said Cadet Candidate Samuel Crump, who was a sergeant when he enrolled in the school last year and is now a West Point plebe. "If I really wanted to take my career to the next level, I realized this was something I had to look into."

At first, Crump said he chafed a bit at cadet leaders calling the shots, having come from a position where that was his job.

“I was pulled out of a mobilization to come here,” he said. “I was a training NCO, and I was training my Soldiers, making sure everything was good to go. We were so gung-ho, ready for that mission. Then this happened. It was definitely an interesting transition.”

But Crump and his fellow prior-service students quickly realized they still were able to positively impact their colleagues. Though informal, that mentorship was no less impactful, Armstrong said.

“[Students with prior service] are definitely used as internal leadership,” she said. “To not use the knowledge that they have to bring to the table would be silly on our part. Their peer leadership is definitely a necessity according to the way this place is set up.”

Helping others understand the different roles of officers and NCOs was a common theme, said then-Cadet Candidate Matthew Seyfried, who was a private first class when he enrolled in the school and is now a first-year cadet at West Point.

“The prior-service [cadet candidates] try to help the non-priors differentiate the roles of the tac officer and the tac NCO,” he said. “It’s probably one of the biggest things for them, because they don’t have any experience with NCOs before coming here. So, I think that’s one of the biggest reasons they bring enlisted

Soldiers here, to show how enlisted life is so they have a well-rounded base.”

Crump said one of the hardest things to do — amid the trials and frustrations of what will be for them a five-year stay at West Point — is to remain focused on the ultimate long-term objective for every West Point Prep student: becoming a commissioned U.S. Army officer.

“The system they have in place accomplishes its goal. The goal is to get people down the hill, and that’s what they’re doing,” he said. “Now is the time you need to evolve so you can fit into the West Point mold. That way, when you go down the hill, everything’s going to go smooth for you. That’s the ultimate goal — stay on the glide path and graduate.”

Seyfried agreed.

“If you just remember the end state — I’m going back to the Army and I’m going to have a different impact there and perform a different role in a different way — and stay excited about it, you’ll be able to keep that positive mentality even on those days when you wish you could just go back to doing what it was you were doing before,” he said.

But Crump said they wouldn’t forget their roots as enlisted Soldiers and NCOs.

“After all, I’m not here to be Sgt. Crump,” he said. “I’m here on a long transition to become 2nd Lt. Crump. Then one day perhaps, when I’m Maj. Crump and he’s Maj. Seyfried, we’ll be able to look at doctrine differently and influence the enlisted side and give them what they need.” ■



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