



Students in the Warrior Leader Course at the Staff Sgt. Todd R. Cornell NCO Academy march to lunch at a dining facility at Fort McCoy, Wis. The academy has broken ground on their own dining facility.

Fort McCoy NCO Academy Trains ‘Today’s Leaders’ for Army Reserve

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

NCO Journal

Tucked into rural Wisconsin, neighboring Amish farms and a few small towns is an NCO academy quietly going about the business of creating the future NCO leaders for the U.S. Army Reserve.

Serving mostly U.S. Army Reserve and Active Guard Reserve Soldiers, the Staff Sgt. Todd R. Cornell NCO Academy at Fort McCoy, Wis., may not be the most well-known of the Army’s 34 NCO academies, but the leaders there are determined to make it one of the best.

Sgt. Daniel Mcgee, a 37F psychological operations specialist with the 318th Psychological Operations Company, an Army Reserve unit in St. Louis, Mo., said the Warrior Leader Course at the academy was helping him reset and get in the proper mindset for an NCO.

“This course has really opened my eyes to things I’ve been doing wrong as a leader, or things I didn’t know before,” Mcgee said. “For example, we are being taught how to properly write a recommendation for an award,

and what exactly an NCO should be to his or her junior Soldiers. I have already, in six days of classes, learned a lot of things that I'm doing wrong, and a lot of things that I'm doing right, and how to adjust to fix those things I'm doing wrong. It's like a reset. You get so used to coming in one weekend a month that you forget a lot of those small things that they go over in basic training, and you learn about, but you don't really completely understand them."

Army Reserve

Though active-duty Army Soldiers, as well as Active Guard Reserve and National Guard Soldiers, attend classes at Fort McCoy NCO Academy, the majority of the students are part of the Army Reserve, while all of the instructors are part of the Active Guard Reserve.

Serving and instructing Soldiers in the Army Reserve presents bonuses and challenges to the academy. One of the bonuses is the variety of talent and skills that Reserve Soldiers bring from their civilian careers.

"Reserve NCOs come with two identities," said 1st Sgt. Reginald Jefferson, the first sergeant of the academy. "They have professional lives in the civilian sector. When they bring their experience in the civilian sector, incorporating that with their military instruction, it brings real life to the training that they receive. They can share those experiences with their classmates. It helps develop the Soldier 360 degrees. By a Reserve Soldier having a civilian profession, they give added value to their training."

The various skill sets can add up to some unique solutions to military problems, Mcgee said.

"An advantage of having people who work in the civilian world is that you have people from a bunch of different backgrounds with expertise in different things — from financial planning, to carpentry, to corrections officers, police officers, just a multitude of different backgrounds," Mcgee said. "You bring all that together, and it really helps you as a unit to think outside the box for ways to achieve things."

Sgt. 1st Class Nicholas Stevens, a senior small group leader at the academy, said he stresses to the students who come through that they should use their different and varied skills to the advantage of the team and the Army.

"One of the best things about the Reserves is that you can take all of these different experiences and bring them all to the table, so you have a more dynamic unit once you build that cohesion with the group," Stevens said. "Everybody shares their own experiences. I stress to them to come together as a team and help the group, because not everybody is going to be at that tactical level. But at the same time, the tactical guys aren't going to know the paperwork. There are so many different aspects to being a quality noncommissioned officer that you can't just pinpoint one. You have to know the whole spectrum."

And that military training can have a positive effect on a Soldier's civilian career, as well, said Sgt. David Frasher, a WLC student and a 92Y supply sergeant with the 1st Battalion, 334th regiment, an Army Reserve unit in Milwaukee, Wis. Frasher is a corrections officer at a county jail in his civilian career.

"A lot of the values that the Army gives us really follow over into my civilian job," Frasher said. "Basically, what I'm doing as a corrections officer is leading inmates' day-to-day lives. In that, you kind of become a mentor to them. Not every person who goes to jail is bad, necessarily. You take a lot of what you learn as an NCO to that profession."

Soldier Role

But putting on the Army uniform only a few times a month has its disadvantages, as well.

"The Reserve Soldiers do not perform their military functions as often as they would like, because of their civilian careers, but leaders within the Army Reserve ensure their Soldiers are properly trained," Jefferson said.

Stevens said that it can take Reserve Soldiers a little extra time to get back in the swing of things. "Sometimes you have to reinforce or reinstate some of the standards that you would think wouldn't even be thought of, just muscle memory, but for the most part, after they get their mind right, they are good to go," Stevens said.

As he went through WLC, Sgt. Anthony Sejaan, a 91H track vehicle repairer with the 402nd Cyber Company, an Army Reserve unit in Des Moines, Iowa, said his fellow Reserve Soldiers helped him and others get past some of the Army basics they had fallen behind on or forgotten during their time away from Soldier life.

"Sometimes it won't come back to me," Sejaan said. "Like, when we were doing drill and ceremony this week, I could not remember the rear march, something I haven't done since basic training. I had to watch someone three or four times until it came back to me, because I don't do that on a regular basis."

Students who come to the school have to "flip the switch" and jump into their Soldier role after spending time in their civilian role, said Sgt. 1st Class Jason Boyles, the WLC course manager at the academy.

"The biggest challenge I see is, they don't wear the uniform every day," Boyles said. "So though they might be a CEO in the civilian world, when they come here, they are not that same authority figure. Or they might be a squad leader here, but in the civilian world, they work for someone else and have no authority. A majority of the time, their civilian professions are totally different from their Army profession. Because they don't wear the uniform every day, they may not get the chance to practice everything that is required to be a leader of Soldiers."

Because of limited personnel, Reserve and Active Guard Reserve Soldiers are called on to fill many roles.



Students in the Battle Staff Course at the Staff Sgt. Todd R. Cornell NCO Academy in Fort McCoy, Wis., work on a practical exercise related to the Command Post of the Future (CPOF). (Photos by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

So a Reserve Soldier can be asked to be an expert in a variety of areas, said Sgt. 1st Class Jason Jenkins, an Advanced Leader Course-Common Core facilitator at the academy. Being an ALC facilitator may be his main duty, but he takes on a lot more. (Editor's note: As of Oct. 1, the Army has transitioned from ALC-CC to Structured Self-Development II.)

"Four of the additional duties I have are: Master Resiliency Trainer, the unit prevention leader, the public affairs/social media officer, and also the operational security manager," Jenkins said. "Those four things allow me to cover down on those silos whenever the Army requires."

Staff Sgt. Derrick Randle, a senior supply sergeant with the 319th Expeditionary Signal Battalion out of Sacramento, Calif., was at the academy taking the Battle Staff NCO Course. He said the need to step into many roles meant Reserve Soldiers have to ignore the Army axiom to "stay in your lane."

"Some of the Reserve units do a lot of work because they are understaffed," Randle said. "In the active component, you have 100 people in your company every day. At a Reserve unit, our staff is about 10 peo-

ple. Only on the weekend is when you have those 100 people. You still have physical training. You still have to meet those demands of the U.S. Army. You still have to meet every training demand that active duty meets, and you have to do it in half the time. You have to apply yourself that much more.

"You can't just be in your lane, doing supply," Randle said. "I have to do a little bit of admin. I have to do a little bit of training. You have to be well-versed in every field. It teaches you that. Coming into the Reserves, you can't just stay in your lane. You have to get inside of everybody's lane, so that you can make sure that we all work together to get to our common goal."

NCO Leadership

NCOs who lead these once-a-month Reserve Soldiers still have to stay involved with their Soldiers' lives and problems. So these NCOs use a variety of methods, both modern and time-tested, to stay in touch with their Soldiers and make sure missions get accomplished.

Master Sgt. Jeremy Nixon, a 38B civil affairs specialist with the 490th Civil Affairs Battalion, a Reserve

unit in Grand Prairie, Texas, was at the academy attending the Battle Staff course. He said being an NCO for Reserve Soldiers involves staying in contact as much as possible.

“The Army wants you to be responsible for your Soldiers all the time, whether you’re on-duty or not,” Nixon said. “We always make sure that, even though we don’t see them every day, we are still in contact with our Soldiers, whether it’s to remind them about certain things coming up for drill or battle assembly, or maybe just because you want to make sure that things are going OK for them.”

As a Reserve NCO, you may have Soldiers spread out over a large distance, Stevens said.

“When I was an Army Reserve Platoon Sergeant, I had Soldiers from four different states,” Stevens said. “It’s a big challenge to contact and show your genuine concern for your Soldiers because you are just calling them on the phone and not having that [in-person] contact. Being a platoon sergeant, a squad leader, something like that, at a Reserve unit, you really have to show your genuine care for your Soldiers and show them the proper way to do things with the time you do have with them.”

Because it can be difficult to keep up with Army requirements when putting on the uniform only once a month, it’s important to also provide your Soldiers with a plan of action, Jenkins said.

“You have to provide that mentorship and let them know that they have to stay physically fit, competent in their duties, always be in a state of ready to deploy,” Jenkins said. “And it’s not just a matter of telling them that, because anyone can tell you that. You have to give them a course of action and make sure they understand they have to stick with the course of action in order to always be at the ready.”

Randle said he uses modern technology to make sure he stays connected with his Soldiers.

“A Soldier may not check his Army email, but they will check their Facebook,” Randle said. “So you have to get involved with things that interest them. We text them. We use apps where they have to show they ran or exercised.”

And when that once-a-month weekend comes around, NCOs have to be well-organized, prepared and professional.

“When they come in on the weekend, those two days are critical,” Randle said. “You have to use those two days well. You have to put out all the information they need to know, so that by the time they leave, you have everything you need from them, and they have all the information that they needed to know. You have to be well-prepared when that weekend comes. As an NCO, you have to be on your game when it comes to your Soldiers, otherwise it will fall by the wayside.”

Top-Notch Facilities

A new barracks was constructed this year at the academy that can house up to 244 students. Students in the academy’s Battle Staff NCO Course, Small Group Instructor Course and Army Basic Instructor Course will fill the barracks while classes are in session. A new project to build a dining facility within the multi-acre academy has begun, which will allow the academy to be totally self-sufficient and reduce student requirements to leave the campus, Jefferson said.

“At this facility, we have the ability to train 160 WLC students at any given time, as well as 64 Battle Staff students,” Jefferson said. “We have some state-of-the-art facilities for our Soldiers. Our newly built barracks provides the academy with 122 additional rooms to house Soldiers. They are two-man rooms, so we can house 244 Battle Staff Course, Army Basic Instructor Course and Small Group Instructor Course students. In a separate facility, we are able to house 160 Warrior Leader Course students. We have state-of-the-art Internet connections here. The amount of funding that the Department of Defense has allocated for this institution is unbelievable, but well worth it as we prepare tomorrow’s leaders to take on the responsibility of our nation’s defense.”

The academy, which falls under the command of the 83rd U.S. Army Reserve Readiness Training Center at Fort Knox, Ky., is busy creating the next generation of Army leaders, Jefferson said.

“The very first day that these Soldiers walk through the door, they are perceived to be tomorrow’s leaders,” Jefferson said. “On the very last day, I will classify them as today’s leaders. What I would like to instill in them is professionalism and to build true leaders of Soldiers. I want them to understand that our country will always be at war at sometime or other, so they need to remain tactically and technically proficient at all times.”

Cpl. Danny Eng, an 88M motor transport operator in the 724th Transportation Company, an Army Reserve unit in Bartonville, Ill., said as soon as he arrived at the academy, he felt the importance and respect of being one of “tomorrow’s leaders” that Jefferson spoke about.

“The overall atmosphere here is good,” Eng said. “It’s really nice to feel like you are respected for your rank and what they are training you to become. I feel like [the instructors and staff] are easily approachable. They are very knowledgeable. They highly motivate the students.”

Sejaan said the academy’s WLC was exceeding his expectations.

“Coming into it, I thought it was just going to be a ‘check-the-block’ Army training. But I came here, and I’m actually learning a lot about leadership,” Sejaan said. “[Drill and Ceremony] has always been a problem for me. But luckily, I had a lot of Soldiers in my class who helped me, so I passed it, no problem. The Army writing style was another tough point for me. I

overthought it; it's a lot simpler than I thought it was. We're learning a lot of leadership skills. They put you in random leadership positions on different days, just to see how you can handle it."

The academy is working hard to make sure young Soldiers know the right way to do things in the Army, Boyles said.

"We teach them leadership," Boyles said. "We teach them what right looks like. We teach them how the Army is supposed to operate, as opposed to how people think the Army operates. We teach tactical, technical proficiencies and the relentless pursuit of excellence.

"We're changing the Army one Soldier at a time, not just the Reserves, but the Reserves, National Guard and active duty. We receive all components," Boyles said.

Leading, teaching and mentoring Soldiers is what every NCO academy is about, and the NCOs of the Staff Sgt. Todd R. Cornell NCO Academy are proud of the work they are doing, every day, to make sure NCO leadership stays strong.

Staff Sgt. April Lucas, a team leader for ALC-Common Core distributed learning at the academy, said the academy's work is being noticed by active duty, Reserve and National Guard Soldiers.

"We're strong NCOs," Lucas said. "We have strong leadership. We cover down and take care of each other, and that's what I love about being here at the NCO academy. It's a symbol that NCOs can maintain. We're the strong backbone of the Army, and we're running this academy." ■



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