



At a Fort McCoy, Wis., demolition range, students in the 89B ammunition specialist course watch a powder bag fire from a 105mm HE round. The students were learning how to dispose of the black powder after it's turned into an ammunition supply point. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

# Ammunition Specialists Keep Warriors' Weapons Stocked

*By Jonathan (Jay) Koester*

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**A** U.S. Army unit can have the biggest and baddest guns, grenade launchers and tanks, but without a steady supply of ammunition, all those weapons won't do Soldiers a bit of good. That's where the NCOs trained as 89B ammunition specialists come in.

Much of that training, especially for Reserve and National Guard Soldiers, happens at Fort McCoy, Wis., where, last year, instructors taught seven classes of about 25 students each the ins and outs of ammunition control and supply.

The 89B course at Fort McCoy is taught in two, 14-day phases. Because Reserve and National Guard Soldiers have civilian careers and responsibilities to get back to, those Soldiers taking both phases go for

28 straight days, with no days off. There's no such thing as a weekend at this school.

The 89B course manager at Fort McCoy, Sgt. 1st Class Douglas Dobitz, said the training and learning they pack into those 28 days is impressive.

"Active-duty Soldiers would probably be surprised at the level of training we give to our Soldiers," Dobitz said. "We really put the time and effort into getting the material across. The biggest challenge is that our people are older, they've got a civilian job they have to worry about, they have a family they have to worry about, and then they come out here for a month, from all over the country. But when they leave here, I'm confident they can do this job."





Staff Sgt. Justin Creswell, left, an 89B course instructor at Fort McCoy, Wis., helps Spc. Scott Harris tie a girth hitch with an extra turn to connect a transmission line to the main line before a demolition blast. The class spent the day at a demolition range learning how to safely do demolition blasts. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

## Variety of Training

There are a surprising number of skills — from forklift driving to hooking up sling loads onto helicopters — that ammunition specialists must master to do their jobs safely and effectively. One of the first things students are required to do is memorize all of the different types of ammunition used by the Army and be able to name each by sight.

“You have to be able to identify all these rounds,” Dobitz said. “Artillery is probably the biggest one that we do; mortars are kind of in with that. Then there are hand grenades, mines, rockets, pyrotechnics and demolition material. Memorizing all that is probably the biggest concern with the students. We always get a few who panic over that, so usually after class, I’ll stay for a couple of hours and show them how I tried to memorize them.”

In addition to classroom work, the ammunition specialist course at Fort McCoy uses three ranges to complete instruction: a demolition range, a sling load range and a firefighting range.

“If there is a fire at an ammunition supply point (ASP), you don’t always have enough fire extinguishers,” Dobitz said. “It can spread so fast that we actually teach them how to fight it by hand. We go down to the fire range, break out some straw and burn it, and they have to put it out.”

At the sling load range, Army Reserve pilots from B Company, 7-158 Aviation Regiment, fly up helicopters for two days from Olathe, Kansas, and students get to practice hooking up sling loads to the helicopters during both day- and night-time training.

Then, there is every NCO’s favorite: blowing stuff up at the demolition field. The students spend a day out in the field learning how to safely set off different charges.

“We do a big chunk of demo just because it’s so dangerous, and they have to be able to set this stuff up themselves,” Dobitz said.

Perhaps less exciting, but no less important, is the training on how to drive a forklift. Much of the way ammunition moves is by forklift, Dobitz said.

“We teach them how to operate forklifts, how to PMCS (perform preventive maintenance checks and services) them, because once they are an 89B, they’re in the forklift a lot,” Dobitz said. “We try to give them as much ‘stick time’ as we possibly can. Although our bay can only hold 8, we carry 12 forklifts at a time because they break down quite a bit, especially with students using them. Students don’t necessarily know how to operate them real well, so they make mistakes. So the forklifts are in for repair quite often.”



“We also use this building, especially in the winter, to do what’s called preservation packaging,” Dobitz said. “That’s where we teach the students how to re-purpose old ammo boxes. They re-paint them and re-stencil them.”

The class even uses Wisconsin’s brutal winter weather as a teaching tool, showing students how to keep ammunition stored safely for the long-term, no matter the weather.

“Dealing with weather is part of it, so we teach them that when these ammo boxes deteriorate, you have to get those rounds out of there and into a different box,” Dobitz said. “The ASP here turns in every piece of wood there is, and the Army repurposes it all.”

### Challenges of Reserve and National Guard

All of the students in the 89B course at Fort McCoy are noncommissioned officers who are re-classing. They are almost all Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers, though a few active-duty Soldiers have taken the course.

Sgt. 1st Class Sheniko Taylor of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 50th Regional Support Group, Florida Army National Guard, traveled to

Wisconsin for the course when she needed to re-class after her unit was reorganized. She was a 42A human resources specialist during her entire Army career and was a little nervous upon getting her first, up-close look at the combat side.

“Now, I get to see a whole different side and see how valuable 89Bs are to war missions,” Taylor said. “Before I got here, I was really nervous because I didn’t know what to expect, what we were going to be doing, what the class dynamic would be. I really didn’t think there would be a lot of females in this [military occupational specialty], so it was great when I got here to see that it is diverse. It’s not all males; there are females in the MOS, so that makes it better.”

Taylor said some of her nervousness vanished as soon as she met the instructor for her course, Sgt. 1st Class Jeanne Ondrejka.

“For me, to see Sgt. Ondrejka up there, to see a female in this MOS, it let me know it’s going to be all right,” Taylor said. “She can do it; I can do it. So from a female perspective, to see another female teaching this MOS is awesome.”

Ondrejka said her main challenge is being able to teach students like Taylor, who have no experience, as well as those who do have experience. She said her



Sgt. 1st Class Jeanne Ondrejka, an 89B course instructor, teaches students about the blasting cap initiators and transmission lines that will be used to set off a blast. The hands-on instruction helps calm nerves before the blast, Ondrejka said. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)





To show the power of blasting caps, and the need for safety around them, 89B course instructors blew up some fruit with blasting caps at the end of the day at the demolition field at Fort McCoy, Wis. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester / NCO Journal)

goal as an instructor is to pass along her knowledge before she retires from the Army.

“I try to make this class as real-world as possible,” Ondrejka said. “In Phase 2, we get out and do forklift operations, move ammunition around and document all the paperwork that needs to be done to maintain stock-control records.”

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Hagen of Joint Force Headquarters, Nebraska Army National Guard, had been a 92G food service specialist until he saw an 89B opening in a unit getting ready to deploy. That’s when he decided to give it a shot.

“The first couple days, it was a lot of information,” he said. “I was actually quite surprised. I didn’t realize how much there was out there to learn. It’s very interesting. It’s been one of the most interesting schools I’ve attended in my 21 years in the Army.

“The history stuff has been fascinating,” he said. “They go back as far as how the first grenade was made — which dates back to the Chinese — and then how things progressed through the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I and II, and how it’s developed to modern day. It’s a good history lesson on how it expanded through the years.”

One of the most difficult things about training in an MOS like 89B in the National Guard and Reserve is

the amount of time that can go by between a Soldier’s training and when that Soldier actually has to do the job in the field. After the course, a Reserve Soldier might go several years without handling ammunition, when suddenly his unit is called to deploy and he has to be on-point as the subject-matter expert.

“You don’t get a waiver to say, ‘Well, I haven’t used this in a year and a half,’” Hagen said. “You’re here. You hold the MOS. You’re required to know it. Let’s go.”

The instructors of the class attempt to ease that burden by making sure students know they can always call back to Fort McCoy for help, Dobitz said.

“We tell our students that they can contact us anytime and we will help them,” he said. “We just got a phone call a week ago. We had a student who was running an ASP for his unit, and they had issues. He knew the answer, but he couldn’t find it in the manual to show his lieutenant. So all three instructors, we stayed late that night, found what he needed in the manual, and took a picture of it and sent it to his smartphone. We know that there are challenges for the Guard and Reserve because they don’t do this every day. We try to be their support channel if they need it. I’ll probably have the same cellphone number for the rest of my life and still be getting calls when I’m 90 years old asking about this stuff.”

## Importance to the Army

Finding quality NCOs who can re-class into being an ammunition specialist is imperative to the Army's mission, Ondrejka said.

"89B is in high demand in the military," she said. "You can't fight without ordnance. It's an 89B who is issuing, maintaining and receiving ammunition to support the combat front lines."

Though there are a variety of duties required of ammunition specialists, Soldiers usually only see the work done at their local ASP, Dobitz said.

"Those in the 89B MOS, we actually control the

ASPs," he said. "We're the ones who get the Soldiers their bullets, their mortar rounds, their artillery rounds. And people don't always use all their ammunition, so they bring it back and we re-package it, re-condition it and get it ready to issue out again."

Just like NCOs are called the backbone of the Army, Hagen called ammunition specialists the backbone of the combat mission.

"You are crippled without them," he said. "It's kind of like the whole logistics field. If you don't have the backbone, you're crippled wherever you are." ■

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