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## Adaptive leaders, critical thinkers and the MCoE noncommissioned officers academy student leader development program

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*Staff Sgt. Shannon Knorr, Headquarters and Headquarters Company 1st Battalion, 211th Aviation Regiment, and 1st Sgt. Bryan Smethurst, first sergeant HHC 1-211 AR of the Utah National Guard, conduct an end-of-tour counseling session in Kunduz province, Afghanistan, on Nov. 18, 2012.*

*(Photo by Sgt. Duncan Brennan)*

The U.S. Army remains mired in a more than 15-year Global War on Terrorism. As such, it is a force filled with some of the most combat-experienced noncommissioned officers in the history of our military. After more than a decade of fighting a war on multiple fronts, through multiple operational and tactical environments, our maneuver noncommissioned officers have seen their tactical proficiency grow to unprecedented levels. In many cases, however, it has come at the expense of their technical proficiency. The Henry Caro Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort Benning, Georgia, is looking to mitigate that circumstance. The academy is at the forefront of assisting the operational force in developing these combat experienced warriors into the great leaders and noncommissioned officers of tomorrow.

At the heart of this leader development are the Infantry and Armor Advanced Leader Courses. Each ALC is designed to help NCOs focus on the technical and tactical leadership at the squad level, learn critical tasks, and develop leadership and skills to take back to their parent units as they take on one of the most important tasks in the Army: the squad leader position.

In the Armor Advanced Leader Course, the branch chief, 1st Sgt. Sean McCracken, has spearheaded a Student Leader Development Program (SLDP) that aims to develop adaptive leaders and critical thinking at the squad-leader level through discussion about the Army Leadership Requirements Model and lessons learned from the events in the book *Black Hearts* by Jim Frederick. McCracken gained first-hand knowledge of those events while deployed with the 101st Airborne Division in 2006.

“The SLDP was created after my first class here at the NCO Academy in the summer of 2016, when I realized that Armor ALC still primarily focused on tactical and technical skills as a cavalry scout or armor crewman,” McCracken said. “Though all these skills are critical to becoming a section/squad leader, there was something missing in the development of the overall leadership component of these NCOs attending ALC. Prior to the SLDP, a block of instruction existed on these topics in the course

program of instruction (POI), but a two-hour class on PowerPoint was not, in my opinion, doing the job. While I was assigned as a tactical NCO at West Point, the academy had a similar program. This program taught cadets what every graduate must be, know and do to truly embody a leader of character. This program is where the idea to create SLDP came from. However, West Point has four years to accomplish this, and I only have seven weeks, so I chose one book, *Black Hearts*, which shows the students what the lack of standards, discipline and leadership can do to a unit. *Black Hearts* is also relatable to the students because it happened in the 2005-2006 timeframe and in a conflict many had been in.”

From the initial orientation, the 19D (cavalry scout) and 19K (M1 armor crewman) students of the Armor ALC course are introduced to the book. They are assigned the initial block of chapters to read by the end of week two, with the goal to begin weekly discussions of the book and portions of ADRP 6-22, *Army Leadership*. At the conclusion of the second week, discussions are scheduled for Thursday or Friday at the end of the day, broken down by MOS to facilitate a smaller group discussion.

“Right out of the gate, we are tackling real leadership issues from the book that we can relate to,” said Sgt. Joseph Grynowicz, attending Armor ALC from 4th Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. “We knew right away this was not going to be a normal Army class; this was going to be something unique. You could already see the class starting to get to know each other just from the discussions taking place.”

As the first discussion comes to a conclusion, you begin to see the first NCOs speak up about the initial failures in leadership in the book and how it relates to Army doctrine. When the students begin to leave the first discussion, you hear brief conversations about the book, even stories from the NCOs, and you see the seeds beginning to be planted.

“Once we really got into it, and began to see how it fit in with what we were learning as leaders here at ALC, it really drove home the differences between good and bad leadership in what we had already seen in our time in the Army,” said Sgt. Anthony McAmis, a cavalry scout ALC student from 2nd

Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. “You could really start to see the buy-in from the students with what we were doing.”

By the time the second discussion comes around, something interesting has happened with the group dynamic. McCracken no longer has to lead the group; instead, he facilitates the discussion. The discussions are active, and you hear confident stories from some of the experienced NCOs in the group who have been there or have had similar experiences with good and bad leadership in the Army. McCracken has become a respected mentor in the group, guiding the conversation and keeping it on track, always bringing them back around when they get off topic. Gone are the initial short discussions, and now students are engaging each other through the lessons of the book and through the correlations back to the Army Leadership manual.

“I didn’t know what to expect, but the informal setting with 1st Sgt. McCracken allowed us to really talk about things in a different environment, and it became something I looked forward to each week,” said Sgt. Justin Cooper, an M1 armor crewman student from 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Armored Division.

As the weeks go on, the successes and failures in the book are discussed and brought back to the Army Leadership Requirements Model. The course concludes with a 500-word writing assignment. In the assignment, the students have to select two characters from the book and compare and contrast the different leadership styles and the effects on their unit, encouraging critical thinking from the students who are relating their experiences to the discussions from the course.

The program has the goal of developing adaptive leaders and critical thinking at the squad-leader level, and it goes about accomplishing that mission in an environment where NCOs have the opportunity to wrestle with Army doctrine, learn from the book *Black Hearts* and participate in spirited discussions of a combat-experienced maneuver NCO Corps. The Student Leader Development Program is yet another tool helping to shape noncommissioned officers into the leaders of tomorrow.