

Students at Fort Sill NCO Academy Test Their Skills During Live Fire Exercise

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Field artillery Soldiers attending the Advanced Leader Course at the NCO Academy at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, don't just worry about tests at the end of the course. They feel the boom of a cannon and smell its smoke as they demonstrate their expertise and leadership skills during a live fire exercise.

Soldiers in all field artillery and air defense artillery career management fields come through the NCO Academy, but those with military occupational specialties directly involved in the operation of howitzers – including 13B cannon crewmembers, 13M multiple launch rocket system crewmembers, 13P MLRS operations/fire direction specialists and 13D field artillery automated tactical data system specialists – have the added advantage of hands-on training in that live fire environment.



“Throughout the course, we touch on all the things they will need to be howitzer section chiefs,” said Sgt. 1st Class Craig Dalen, senior small group leader, master gunner and NCO in charge of the ALC live fire exercise. “They learn the doctrine in their classes. Then the live fire is what we call the capstone or the culminating event of the class, where they put everything they have learned into firing the howitzers safely and accurately and are then able to go back to their unit and spread the knowledge to other NCOs in their battery.”

The live fire is a great opportunity for the students, Dalen said, especially for those who work outside of their MOS.

“We get such a diverse group of NCOs who come here, and they are not necessarily in a section chief position,” said 1st Sgt. Antonio Morris, ALC first sergeant. “Some of them are working in training rooms or administration jobs, some are recruiters, some are drill sergeants, NCOs with various duty assignments across the globe. One of the major benefits is that when they come here, they get that training they have been missing. This is their opportunity to get reacquainted with what they will be doing on the line. It is definitely a plus – they get up-to-date on their training, up-to-speed with their peers, then go back out to the force and are better able to groom their section or that lieutenant who is with them. They will be better at their jobs when they leave here.”

Throughout the five-week course, NCOs’ leadership skills are evaluated. Students take turns leading formations and physical training and acting as section chiefs, who are responsible for prepping the guns and ensuring the others know the crew drills. The section chief is the one to give the OK, saying, yes, they have the capability to fire.

“I want students to come out of this course knowing Army doctrine,” Dalen said. “Every unit has its own standard operating procedures, but here they learn the base and core elements of field artillery by the manual. They learn what right looks like, what a real crew drill is. Their unit will dictate how they do it, but there are certain things by manual that

they are not supposed to change. And the students get a better grasp of what really is safe and unsafe, authorized and not authorized.”

The culminating event

Fort Sill’s is the only NCO academy in the Army that provides a live fire exercise. It is important, Morris said, because the skills required in field artillery are perishable. To solidify the lessons learned throughout the course and ensure NCOs are prepared for combat, the students need to get out there and actually do what will be required of them, he said.

“This is the culminating event,” Morris said. “Everything they learn over the first five weeks they take that out to a field environment and put into action. The dry fire missions, the rehearsals, the crew drills, they all lead up to the live fire. It’s like ending with an exclamation mark.”



During the live fire, students fire 155 mm rounds and 105 mm rounds and utilize all three artillery pieces used in Army units: the M777 howitzer, the M119 howitzer – both degraded and digital – and the M109 Paladin self-propelled howitzer. The instructors try to ensure each NCO works with the howitzer on which he or she is least familiar.

Every crew has a loader, or “No. 1 man,” a gunner and a section chief. Depending on the howitzer a crew is working on, there may also be an assistant gunner, an ammunition crew and a driver. After every two or three rounds, the students rotate through the positions so each has the opportunity to act in a leadership role.

“The live fire is very valuable to this course because as things upgrade and change, we have to adapt with them,” said Sgt. Benjamin Murray, a student in the course. “It’s better to do things hands-on rather than just out of a book, because there are things you won’t understand completely until you actually see it and see how it’s done.

“And, it will make it easy for us to PCS to another unit with a different piece because we will have a better understanding of what it is that they do and how their crew drills and everything are run. If I have only worked on one piece, I may go to a new place and their lowest-ranking Soldier knows more than I do about how to do the crew drills. That just doesn’t reflect well. So having this course, being able to jump on each piece, it helps us out and keeps us up-to-date.”

Sgt. Jose Medina, another student, agreed.

“If you don’t know the gun, how are you going to be in charge of that section and teach your Soldiers?”

NCOs in officer roles

In addition to the benefit of hands-on practice, the live fire gives instructors a way to gauge the effectiveness of the course, Morris explained. How do they know the training is working? Are the students learning all of the lessons they need to be prepared for combat? It is easy to sit in class and take tests, Morris said, but that is not what will be required of them in the field.

“We find out how effective our curriculum is by how well the NCOs do at the live fire,” Morris said. “The live fire is not a graduation requirement, but it is a test. It tells us what is working well. Based on their performance, we adjust the curriculum if needed.”

Morris said he is proud of his NCO instructors and how they have taken charge of the course and live fire. In a combat situation, as well as in any other live fire training scenario, officers would be present to verify calculations, ensure safety and give the OK to fire. At the ALC live fire, however, NCOs fill those roles.

“It is definitely an eye opener, because you never get to see this anywhere else where it is all NCOs fulfilling those roles,” Morris said. “It is a testament to the knowledge that these NCOs have. They are the trainer, the evaluator, the overseer. They are facilitating it.”

“The benefit of having all NCOs is that the Soldiers are getting it from guys who have been there, who have done what they are doing,” Dalen said. “And it also shows they are learning from true professionals. It shows the students and the Army as a whole that NCOs are more than capable of executing fire missions and anything else we would have to do if need be.”