

Tactical NCOs Help Forge Officer, NCO Relationship at U.S. Military Academy

By Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy Bunkley - U.S. Military Academy Public Affairs

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Building the relationship between officers and NCOs is important to the Army. The process starts at the U.S. Military Academy, where Tactical Noncommissioned Officers, or TAC NCOs, are assigned to each cadet company.

“The officer and NCO relationship truly matters, and building that relationship has to start here at USMA,” said Command Sgt. Maj. David M. Clark, the 18th command sergeant major of the U.S. Military Academy. “The TAC NCOs here are an integral part of the shaping and molding (of) the Army’s future officers.”

The TAC NCO is the senior NCO within the cadet company of roughly 125 cadets and serves as one of the essential leader developers at the TAC team level. The other member of the TAC Team, the TAC officer, serves as the legal company commander of the cadet company and works closely with the NCO to establish the proper command climate within their respective companies.

Additionally, the TAC NCO assists the TAC officer with his or her responsibilities, and the team usually divides the workload. The TAC officer focuses on the development of the cadet officers, also known as the first class cadets, or seniors. The TAC NCO’s primary focus is the development of cadets holding the NCO ranks, which are the second and third class cadets, or the juniors and sophomores, respectively.

First Sgt. William Coultrey, U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School first sergeant and a former TAC NCO, said there seems to be a misconception among the field force about taking a position at USMA.

“Some people think this may be a break from the force assignment, and it most certainly isn’t,” Coultrey said. “You are a two-person team, managing 125-plus cadets on a daily basis, and when those cadets graduate from West Point, they become leaders of leaders.”

The duty description of the TAC NCOs states that they are expected to counsel, train and develop cadet corporals and sergeants on all aspects of Army operations, from company to brigade level. They are also expected to teach and supervise drill and ceremony, monitor and conduct military training, and inspect company areas and formations.





Sgt. 1st Class Stuart Corlett, Tactical NCO, 1st Regiment, Company E, inspects a cadet company prior to conducting drill and ceremony rehearsal for a regimental review on Oct. 6, 2015. The TAC NCO is expected to teach and supervise drill and ceremony, along with their other numerous duties, while assigned at the U.S. Military Academy. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy Bunkley)

The ultimate goal of the TAC NCO is to assist in the overall development of the cadets so that they are prepared to assume the position of platoon leader upon graduation from the academy. The NCO does this by assisting each cadet in balancing and integrating the requirements of the academic, physical, military and character development programs.

"It's such a professional environment," said Sgt. 1st Class Sara Bradley, TAC NCO, C Company, 4th Regiment, U.S. Corps of Cadets. "Being around such professional officers and noncommissioned officers makes you want to be better.

"You're supposed to be top in your branch to get here anyway, and now you are with the top," Bradley said. "You're around a bunch of professionals, expected to be at your absolute best, and it pushes you past what you're used to."

Bradley said the exposure cadets get by interacting with a senior NCO gives them the opportunity to experience a type of leadership they could encounter when they enter the regular Army and reach their first units. The TAC NCO is usually the first senior NCO the cadets will have the opportunity to interact with, and it is the job of that NCO to figure out the best way to engage with the cadets while in the position, Bradley said.

"I feel like I have given the cadets an example of what their platoon sergeant could be like when they head out into the Army upon graduation," Bradley said. "I try to set a high standard even though all NCOs are different, and I hope I give them a good understanding of what an NCO is and what the NCO role is within the unit."

Professional development

Although the majority of the NCOs' time is spent developing cadets, Command Sgt. Maj. Dawn Rippelmeyer, the 23rd command sergeant major of the U.S. Corps of Cadets, said the leadership has not forgotten about NCO professional development.

"We want to make sure that our NCOs don't lose contact with the operational Army," Rippelmeyer said. "Although we have a graduating class of cadets each year, we also have a group of NCOs who PCS back out into the force, and we have to make sure that they are prepared to take on those senior NCO roles."

NCOs have various opportunities to develop at USMA.

“An opportunity that we are extremely proud to offer here is the Benavidez Leader Development Program,” Rippelmeyer said.

The BLDP is a three-week program that allows TAC NCOs to learn some of the same skills their officer counterparts receive when they attend the Eisenhower Leader Development Program. The first week of the course is at USMA, where the NCOs focus on learning study skills and critical thinking. The next three weeks of the course are at Columbia University in New York City, where the focus shifts to leadership, supervision, executive coaching, organizational psychology and organizational dynamics.

Upon completion of the program, NCOs receive 10 graduate credits if they have completed their bachelor’s degree or 12 undergraduate credits if they have not. Rippelmeyer said that this is the pilot year and that the intent of the program is to allow every TAC NCO assigned to West Point the opportunity to participate.

USCC and USMA also have a Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Program in place, which focuses on better preparing senior NCOs at West Point to take on greater roles of responsibility when they leave.

“We have a great NCOPD program focused on leadership and administrative skills an NCO should know, in order to help them be a better first sergeant,” Rippelmeyer said.



Tactical NCOs and Tactical Officers, lead the U.S. Military Academy Class of 2015 as they march to their graduation ceremony at Michie Stadium at West Point, May 23, 2015. Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff served as the commencement speaker for West Point’s 217th graduating class. (U.S. Army photo by John Pellino)

The NCO Fusion Forum, overseen by Clark, and the USCC NCOPD Program, overseen by Rippelmeyer, focus on bringing the strategic Army perspective to senior NCOs at West Point, while providing them with the knowledge of what a first sergeant is expected to manage and be an expert on when in the field.

“We are looking for NCOs who have a desire to develop leaders, those who will really get after being involved and truly engage with the cadet chain of command,” Rippelmeyer said.

Rippelmeyer reviews every applicant’s packet and said there are certain prerequisites that the command requires its NCOs to possess. The applicant should be in the rank of staff sergeant (promotable), with platoon sergeant time, or sergeant first class, having completed drill

sergeant duty, platoon sergeant time or both.

The applicant should have served nine to 14 years of active-duty military service at the time of application and must have a strong desire to serve in a critical and career progressive assignment, while also possessing strong physical fitness attributes and communication skills. Not every MOS is eligible to serve in a TAC NCO billet, but the position is open to the following specialties: 11B infantryman, 21B combat engineer, 21C bridge crewmember, 13B cannon crewmember, 14S air and missile defense crewmember, 14T Patriot launching station enhanced operator, 19D cavalry scout, 19K M1 armor crewman, 25U signal support systems specialist, 91X maintenance supervisor, 88M motor transport operator, 91E allied trades specialist, 92A automated logistical specialist, 31B military police, 88N transportation management coordinator and 15P aviation operations specialist.

TAC NCO positions may become available at any time, but it's best to start actively pursuing the position once interested NCOs have successfully completed or are close to completing their platoon sergeant time, Rippelmeyer said.

She added that NCOs should work closely with their career branch assignment manager to get the specifics on when the position will be available and if it coincides with their projected PCS timeframe.

All nomination packets are sent directly to the USCC command sergeant major and should include the following documents: a letter stating the NCO's desire to be assigned as a TAC NCO, a letter of recommendation from the NCO's commander, a letter of recommendation from the NCO's battalion commander or command sergeant major, the applicant's last NCOER, and the current version of the NCO's Enlisted Record Brief.

"If you're looking for an experience where you can have a big effect on the Army... definitely look into this," Rippelmeyer said. "It is extremely rewarding to see these cadets go from civilian, to someone you would want as your platoon leader, being a part of your company... because you see greatness."

For more information on the program and to find out how to file a nomination packet, visit the U.S. Military Academy website at www.usma.edu (www.usma.edu), or contact the office of the U.S. Corps of Cadets command sergeant major at 845-938-4601.