



Cpl. Feti Pronaj of the Kosovo army takes part in the land navigation portion of a recent Warrior Leader Course at the 7th Army NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr, Germany. Pronaj was one of three students from Kosovo attending the academy, which almost always hosts international students during its WLC cycles. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Cadre Ensures U.S. Army's Oldest NCO Academy Is Relevant As Ever

By Clifford Kyle Jones — NCO Journal

The U.S. Army's oldest — and largest — NCO Academy isn't in the U.S. at all.

Its history is only one of the things that make the 7th Army NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr, Germany, special: Each of the academy's Warrior Leader Courses — which can accommodate as many as 324 students — are almost guaranteed to include some soldiers from outside the United States Army.

The international flavor of training and operations permeates many aspects of U.S. Army Europe activity, but the exposure to allied countries' soldiers can be especially beneficial to the new U.S. noncommissioned officers being trained at the 7th Army NCO Academy, which will mark 66 years of NCO education in October.

"I think it brings an understanding of different militaries and different cultures," Sgt. 1st Class Joe Parmley

said of the inclusion of international students in each cycle of WLC. Parmley has taught three cycles at the 7th Army NCO Academy. "They (foreign soldiers) seem to integrate quite easily, so the soldier part is not difficult.

"The American Soldiers get a lot of different views of how things work in different militaries," he continued. "It gives them a chance to work with some international soldiers so that when the time comes for them to actually work in combat or in a field environment with international soldiers, it will help them out."

Staff Sgt. Jed Villavecencio, another instructor at the NCO Academy, agrees that including soldiers from allied armies broadens the WLC experience for U.S. Soldiers.

"They give a lot of good input from their point of view looking at the American Army, and they also give us a lot of history about their military, which is



Staff Sgt. Travis Andersen leads a class for WLC students in Bravo Company at the 7th Army NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr, Germany. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

very helpful to us,” he said. “Working with other countries out here also helps these students get familiar with other cultures.”

For the academy’s commandant, Command Sgt. Maj. Wardell Jefferson, the addition of international students contributes to the academy’s mission, which is never far from his mind.

“We have a very important role in leader development,” he said. “These young Soldiers, they’re in the early stages of becoming noncommissioned officers, and we have the opportunity to mold them and show them what right looks like.”

Jefferson noted that he hadn’t worked with international soldiers until he was deployed, but his WLC students get the chance to interact with multinational forces throughout their 22 days at the academy. They’re able to learn how other armies operate, and how those armies handle such diverse subjects as branch training and sexual harassment, Jefferson said. And most importantly, he said, students get a real sense of the cultural side of combat situations and they’re able to build relationships that will last their whole careers with some of the top soldiers of foreign armies.

“Some of these soldiers may become the sergeant major of their armies,” Jefferson said.

It’s not just students who gain from the experience with international students. Villavecencio has learned things as an instructor, as well.

“I’ve learned a lot about their countries, their methods of doing things, like land navigation for example,” he said. “Some of their methods are slightly different. I’ve also picked up some good leadership tips from international students. A student I had from the Netherlands was a sergeant first class, so he had quite a bit of leadership experience before he got here. I learn a lot from the students as well as them learning from each other.”

But the first lesson that comes to Villavecencio’s mind? “I’ve learned patience,” he says quickly and then laughs.

The language and cultural barriers can be tough for the U.S. students and cadre, at first. It’s tough for the international students, as well. But ultimately overcoming those challenges enriches the learning experience for all involved.

Another instructor, Staff Sgt. Susan Francis, acknowledges that teaching foreign students “is always a challenge because of the miscommunications” that are possible.

Therefore, she said, the academy is careful to place its international students with its most experienced small group leaders. Francis has been at the academy for two years and has led three international students in her groups. In some cases, she was able to provide an additional lesson to those students. Many of the United States’ allies in Europe and elsewhere don’t have as many women serving in their militaries as the U.S. does. Francis said that one of her recent students, a member of the

Slovenian army, told her that he had never encountered a woman working as an instructor during his service.

“He said it was a different experience but it was a good experience,” she said. “That made my day. At least I know I’m doing something right.”

Sgt. 1st Class James Messer, also an instructor, said that’s just one example of the “culture shock” foreign service members can experience during their time at WLC. Many differences are minor. For instance, he said, some foreign armies don’t have dress uniforms, especially at the early levels of the noncommissioned officer ranks. He said some of the Slovenian students who came through during a recent cycle explained that they wouldn’t be issued dress uniforms until they were promoted to the sergeant first class rank or higher. Even orders to march can sometimes cause confusion.

“We’ll ask, ‘Hey, how do you guys march? Talk us through the commands that you give,’” Messer said. “And they’ll say, ‘We don’t march. We just get into a formation and we walk wherever we want to go.’”

However, the most important difference is what keeps the United States’ allies sending their service members through the NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr and NCO educational institutions around the world, up through the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy — the strength of the U.S. Army NCO Corps itself.

Many countries “don’t have their own formal NCO academy,” Messer said, “so they don’t have somewhere [soldiers] can go and they can learn all the basic things that they need to know so they can be noncommissioned officers. So when they come here and we are trying to show them what right looks like, it has a very big impact on them. And a lot of them need this school to get promoted back in their unit, as well.”

One of the academy’s most recent WLC cycles started in April with 256 students, including three corporals from the Kosovo army.

Cpl. Anbem Reshami had served with U.S. Soldiers recently during a mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He said they impressed upon him the value of WLC and encouraged him to attend the NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr if he could.

“It’s good training. Go and learn. People here can help you. They are very generous,” Reshami said U.S. Soldiers told him. “And it’s true!” he said.

Cpl. Binak Podrimçaku said, “On the first day, I thought it would be very, very hard. But over time, with the guys in class, I became accustomed to classes and understanding lessons. It’s a good experience to talk with American Soldiers, to learn together, to share opinions, etcetera.”

For an international student to attend WLC, he or she must be a fairly skilled English speaker, but some language barriers still exist. The Kosovo students found ways around that, though, sometimes even using hand gestures to get their point across when they had trouble communicating. And, Podrimçaku said, the instructors were meticulous in ensuring that every student understood their lessons.

“The instructors make sure everything is clear,” he said. “They ask again and again. This is a very good idea.”

The Kosovo soldiers said they have found that while many elements of their and the U.S. armies are the same, some of the differences are striking. The Kosovo army is much smaller than the United States’ so there are many structural differences, and units and positions common in the U.S. Army just don’t exist in Kosovo. But it was the U.S. Army’s Physical Readiness Training regimen that the Kosovo soldiers said they struggled most with. In Kosovo, physical training consists of more basic exercises, such as long runs. Mastering the full range of strength- and endurance-building exercises involved in PRT required a lot of practice, the corporals said.



Staff Sgt. Brian Sinclair tracks WLC students during land navigation instruction at a monitoring station at the 7th Army NCO Academy’s training area. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

“But we started to learn and when we go back (to Kosovo), we’ll begin to practice (PRT) in our country,” Podrimçaku said. “That’s what we are here for.”

The Kosovo soldiers were able to teach the U.S. Soldiers some lessons, too. The trio had just completed a training session on land navigation, and they said they were able to help some of their U.S. classmates with that portion of WLC as those skills are particularly emphasized in the Kosovo army.

“Sometimes they have one technique and we have another,” Po-drimçaku said. “But we share.”

Reshami was also able to share some information about the Kosovo army with his classmates. He was one of the team leaders in his squad, and as part of the curriculum at the NCO Academy, he was required to give an oral presentation. He chose to do his on Kosovo Security Forces.

“All of us, we’re just in awe,” said Sgt. Darren Cortez, a WLC student in Reshami’s squad. “We were like, ‘Tell us more.’”

The presentations are supposed to last five minutes, but Reshami’s group had so many questions and was so interested in the differences between the militaries that the corporal spoke for almost the whole hour of that class. And the discussion continued afterward, Cortez said.

“It’s really motivating to see other countries take the time to interact with us the way we take the time to interact with them, ...” Cortez said. “They do some things differently, but we’re learning from each other.”

Sgt. Andrew Keider was the other team leader in Reshami’s group, so they worked closely together.

“At first, the cultural differences make it so that you’re a little more distant, but that quickly changed — especially here, ...” Keider said. “When we all got to know each other, he fell right in. The only difference was he was wearing a different uniform.”

Keider, who has been deployed with international soldiers, said the bit of culture shock U.S. Soldiers experience in working with international students at the NCO Academy is a valuable experience, especially for those who haven’t deployed or otherwise met or worked with foreign nationals.

“It’s especially important when we go to combat, when we go to another nation, because it takes practice being culture-shocked without being defensive, ...” he said. “It makes the environment safer in the future wherever you go, if you can successfully make other people feel safer around you.”

The cycles include international students, but the academy’s focus is on U.S. Soldiers and the U.S. Army’s goals, its commandant says. Its partnerships — naturally, considering the academy’s location — include a particularly deep one with Germany in which all that nation’s NCO academy students travel to the 7th Army NCO Academy as part of their language training.

The German NCO academy has a 20-week program made up of 10 weeks of language training and 10 weeks of warrior leader training. Part of the language training



A mobile training team from the 7th Army NCO Academy conducted a Warrior Leader Course in the Czech Republic recently. (Photo courtesy of 7th Army NCO Academy)

takes place at the 7th Army academy so the German soldiers can “interoperate with a bunch of different (English) dialects,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins, command sergeant major of the Joint Multinational Training Command, which the academy falls under.

“We don’t think we have dialects,” Huggins said and then chuckled. “But we do.”

In addition to the regular attendance of German NCOs, cadre from both academies visit each other and the academies are developing an instructor exchange program.

Jefferson heavily promotes such exchanges, but the academy also sometimes provides mobile training teams to allied countries.

“Our number one priority is to have students come to us, because it’s benefiting them, but it’s also going to benefit our students by having interactions with our partners,” Jefferson said. “But when needed, we will go out and do MTTs at different places.”

Even as a WLC cycle was taking place in April in Grafenwoehr, instructors from the 7th Army academy were in the Czech Republic training 45 junior enlisted soldiers from that nation’s army in a mobile WLC. It was the Czech Republic’s first WLC course on its soil, although Czech soldiers had previously attended the academy. Academy MTTs have visited many European countries, including Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Kosovo.

In many cases, those MTTs have been the start of the nations’ own NCO academies.

“We did an MTT for Romania last year, and it was our first time going there,” Jefferson said. “And they’re trying to mirror our program. They want to run WLC just like we run it in the U.S. Army, so we’re going there to assist them with certifying their instructors so they can start their own course” by the end of this year.

“That’s what we did with Kosovo as well,” Jefferson continued. “Kosovo came here. They brought 75 students. We trained them, certified some of them to be instructors, and they went back and stood up their own NCO academy with our assistance. Now we go back and we play their accreditation team. They don’t get a full-blown accreditation, but we go down there just to provide assistance, do observations and give them feedback.”

Another nation’s army standing up its own NCO academy shouldn’t mean an end to the interaction, Huggins said. Poland, for instance, has had its own NCO academy for years, but now, “they want to get back into the business of sending guys here,” Huggins said.

“Our [Program of Instruction] changes, it’s more fluid,” Huggins said. “In the other countries, what they start with is what they’ll maintain. One of the arguments I’ve had is ... you need to keep your people coming because if you don’t, I don’t get the cultural interoperation between my students and yours. We don’t learn anything if your guys are all getting trained in your country.”

Jefferson said, “The last contact we had with [Poland’s army] was late 2013, but now they’re ready to go.

“All the other countries, though, it’s annually, sometimes twice a year, we’re communicating, visiting, they’re coming here,” he said.

In helping to launch an NCO academy, Jefferson said, generally 50 or 75 soldiers from another country would train as trainers at the 7th Army NCO Academy, then a 7th Army MTT would visit the country to lead the instruction for the first cycle and then observe the second

cycle when that country’s instructors took the lead. Then come regular check-ins and updates.

It’s a process that mirrors Jefferson’s process with his instructors at the academy: training (conducted by himself and other senior cadre), a cycle of observation, then a cycle of assistance.

On the curriculum side, Jefferson makes sure that his students interact with educational material, so they’re not just hearing lessons, they’re living them. He incorporates regular essays and presentations, including real-life Army stories to reinforce the Army Values among his students.

“We have discussions on the Army Values every day,” Jefferson said. “We do them in the classroom. Usually, we’ll take a value and discuss it for three days and then on the third day, after the PRT session, the instructor will read a vignette from a Medal of Honor recipient or a Silver Star awardee and we’ll discuss how that individual displayed that value. Then we open it up to the students and ask how that value is displayed in their units or how it’s not displayed, ...

“It gives the students an understanding,” he explained. “It really teaches them the value. You can tell people a value all day, but unless they really dig into it and they start using examples and make them have a discussion about it, they’re not going to learn it.”

It’s just one of the many ways Jefferson and the rest of the 7th Army NCO Academy cadre ensures that the oldest of the U.S. Army’s NCO academies continues to be one of its best. ■



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