



Distance learning students will graduate in less than half the time as before, credentialing and educating them to compete for key vacant positions. DL and resident students receive the same doctrinal instruction, warfighting exercises, and academic rigor, ensuring that every graduate, regardless of modality, is equally prepared to serve as a senior enlisted leader. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Jacob Nunnenkamp)

Transforming the Sergeants Major Course: Building Senior Enlisted Leaders for Multidomain Operations

By Sgt. Maj. Lisa Walker & Sgt. Maj. Jennifer Fulkerson

Sergeants Major Course

The Sergeants Major Course (SMC) has long been the pinnacle of enlisted professional military education, preparing senior noncommissioned officers to lead in complex operational environments. Historically, the distance learning (DL) version of the Sergeants Major Course encompassed three phases spanning nearly two years, creating a prolonged and segmented educational experience. Beginning with

Class 77, the Sergeants Major Course is undertaking a major redesign: DL students will now complete the course in 10 months, following a curriculum that mirrors the resident program. The redesign aims to unify professional military education (PME), elevate graduation prestige, and deliver rigorous education, preparing future sergeants major to operate in multidomain environments.

From Three Phases to Ten Months: Unifying PME

The previous DL program often created gaps in continuity and delayed the readiness of master sergeants seeking promotion (NCOLCoE, 2024). DL students progressed at a slower pace than resident peers, reducing the pipeline of qualified sergeants major. Research also highlighted disparities in graduation rates between the different programs, noting that many distance learners struggled to maintain momentum and complete the course on time (Campbell, 2021). These delays not only affected individual career progression but also limited the Army's ability to quickly fill critical senior enlisted billets.



The Sergeants Major Course (SMC) has long been the pinnacle of enlisted professional military education, preparing senior noncommissioned officers to lead in complex operational environments. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Maj. Valerie Sturdivant)

By contrast, the redesigned curriculum will eliminate these disparities. DL students will now progress at the same pace as resident peers, ensuring unified outcomes and accelerating readiness across the entire Army. DL students will graduate in less than half the time as before, credentialing and educating them to compete for key vacant positions. DL and resident students receive the same doctrinal instruction, warfighting exercises, and academic rigor, ensuring that every graduate, regardless of modality, is equally prepared to serve as a senior enlisted leader.

This change reflects the Army's recognition that PME must evolve to meet the demands of modern warfighting. As Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer (2024) emphasized, "combat doesn't care" if leaders are only veneer ready; readiness must be tangible, concrete, and stubborn. The redesigned curriculum embodies this principle by demanding discipline, critical thought, and warfighting focus from every student.

Reserve and Guard Challenge: Reinforcing Adaptability

Army Reserve and National Guard Soldiers often balance the demands of their civilian lives with the requirements of military service, and the redesign of the SMC DL program further intensifies this challenge. The shortened timeline will require students to dedicate concentrated effort within a compressed period, managing the mission alongside personal responsibilities. This challenge is not a limitation but a strength. It enables Reserve and Guard peers to sharpen their discipline, prioritize warfighting education, and develop resilience that mirrors the operational

demands placed on senior enlisted leaders (RAND Corporation, 2024).

Reserve component Soldiers have already proven their ability to juggle multiple responsibilities while serving the nation. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly half of all U.S. troops deployed came from the Compo 2 and Compo 3 units, with the Army National Guard alone contributing more than 259,000 deployments to Iraq (National Guard Bureau, 2012). These Soldiers were asked to balance civilian obligations with combat service. They were asked to demonstrate resilience and toughness.

By completing the same rigorous curriculum as resident students, Reserve and Guard Soldiers continue to be asked to meet the standard while managing multiple responsibilities, reinforcing the adaptability and discipline that define the NCO Corps (Cerre, 2021).

A More Rigorous Curriculum: Preparing Leaders for Multidomain Operations

The new curriculum will raise student performance demands. Across every block of instruction, faculty will require students to apply the principles of feasibility, suitability, and completeness in course-of-action development (Department of the Army, 2024). Students synchronize across warfighting functions, assess risk, and develop solutions that remain both feasible and adaptable. The operations process reinforces that leaders must visualize, describe, and direct operations in terms that reflect real-world conditions (Department of the Army, 2019).

The redesigned curriculum embodies this principle, requiring sergeants major to apply judgment under pressure and prepare for the complexities of multidomain operations. The Noncommissioned Officer Guide underscores the responsibility of sergeants major to unify staff efforts, provide honest feedback, and ensure that operations reflect reality rather than assumptions (Department of the Army, 2025). The SMC's new curriculum drives students to meet the standard, and PME shapes leaders who remain disciplined, adaptive, and ready for current and future fights.



During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly half of all U.S. troops deployed came from the Compo 2 and Compo 3 units, with the Army National Guard alone contributing more than 259,000 deployments to Iraq (National Guard Bureau, 2012). These Soldiers were asked to balance civilian obligations with combat service. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Douglas Roles)

Preparing for Multidomain Operations

The Army's senior enlisted leaders have consistently emphasized that PME must evolve to meet the demands of tomorrow's operational environment. As highlighted in the AUSA article, reforms across the NCO Corps are deliberately cutting non-warfighting content and threading instruction toward operational readiness (Dunn, 2025). The shortened timeline, increased academic demands, and integrated warfighting exercises challenge students to think deeper, synchronize across warfighting functions, and develop solutions that are both feasible and adaptable. In short, the SMC changes ensure that the next generation of sergeants major will graduate not just with a credential but with an enhanced level of applied confidence, discipline, and intellectual rigor necessary to lead Soldiers in multidomain operations.

Elevating Prestige

The culmination of this demanding program is the SMC graduation ceremony, a prestigious milestone event attended by senior Army leaders, international partners, and families. With the new mirrored curriculum, resident and DL graduates will now celebrate this milestone together. This alignment elevates the ceremony's symbolic importance, ensuring that every graduate stands as part of a unified standard of excellence. For many sergeants major, graduation represents more than a credential.

It is recognition that they have endured a demanding curriculum designed to sharpen their leadership and prepare them for the future fight. The ceremony now embodies the professional standard described by Sgt. Maj. of the Army Weimer (2024), marking the transition into the Army's most senior enlisted ranks with leaders who are genuinely ready.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Sergeants Major Course represents a deliberate investment in the future of the NCO Corps. By moving from a three-phase, two-year DL program to a mirrored resident curriculum, the Army has unified PME, elevated the prestige of graduation, and delivered a rigorous education that prepares sergeants major for multidomain operations. Reserve and National Guard Soldiers have already demonstrated their ability to balance multiple responsibilities while serving the nation, contributing massively during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (National Guard Bureau, 2012; Cerre, 2021).

The redesigned curriculum challenges students in new ways, requiring concentrated effort within a compressed timeline, yet reinforcing the toughness and adaptability that define the NCO Corps. These changes reflect the Army's recognition that the demands placed on senior enlisted leaders are greater than ever before



The culmination of this demanding program is the SMC graduation ceremony, a prestigious milestone event attended by senior Army leaders, international partners, and families. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Staff Sgt. Joshua Smith)

and that only through rigorous, unified, and doctrinally grounded education can the NCO Corps continue to serve as the backbone of the Army.

As the Army faces increasingly complex threats, the responsibility now falls on every future sergeant major to embrace this transformation. The shortened curriculum is not simply an academic requirement; it is proving ground for leaders who must unify staff, enforce

standards, and drive readiness across the Total Army. The call is clear: approach this education with discipline, resilience, and commitment, and carry its lessons forward into the operational environment. By doing so, sergeants major will ensure the NCO Corps remains the backbone of the Army and continues to lead Soldiers to victory in the nation's wars. ■

References

- Campbell, J. L. (2021). *The challenges of distance learning*. NCO Journal. Army University Press. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/nco-journal/images/2021/February/Distance-Learning/Distance-Learning.pdf>
- Corre, M. (2021, July 5). *After wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, rethinking how National Guard members are deployed*. PBS NewsHour. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/after-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-rethinking-how-national-guard-members-are-deployed>
- Department of the Army. (2024). *Planning and orders production*. (FM 5-0) https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN44590-FM_5-0-001-WEB-3.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2019). *The operations process*. (ADP 5-0) https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN19349_ADAP%205-0%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2025). *The noncommissioned officer guide*. (TC 7-22.7) https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN44634-TC_7-22.7-000-WEB-2.pdf
- Dunn, L. (2025, October 14). *Changes coming to NCO professional military education*. Association of the United States Army. <https://www.ausa.org/news/changes-coming-nco-professional-military-education>
- National Guard Bureau. (2012, January 4). *The National Guard's contribution: 300,000 plus Iraq deployments*. <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/576180/the-national-guards-contribution-300000-plus-iraq-deployments/>
- NCOLCoE. (2024). *Sergeants Major Academy DL students*. U.S. Army. <https://www.ncoworldwide.army.mil/Academics/Sergeants-Major-Academy/DL-Students/>
- RAND Corporation. (2024). *Understanding and improving civilian employer experiences with Guard and Reserve duty* (Report No. RR-A852-1). RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA852-1.html
- Weimer, M. R. (2024, October 14). *Combat doesn't care: How ready are you?* NCO Journal. Army University Press. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Muddy-Boots/Combat-Doesnt-Care-Weimer/>

Sgt. Maj. Lisa Walker is an assistant professor for the Department of Army Operations at the Sergeants Major Course (SMC) with a background in combat medicine. She has served for 25 years and held a variety of leadership positions commensurate with her rank. Sgt. Maj. Walker has a bachelor's degree in health sciences and a master's degree in adult education with a certificate in distance education from Penn State University.

Sgt. Maj. Jennifer Fulkerson is an instructor for the Department of Army Operations at the Sergeants Major Course (SMC) with a background in military police. She has served for 26 years and held a variety of leadership positions commensurate with her rank in the Army National Guard. Sgt. Maj. Fulkerson has a bachelor's degree in mathematics and a secondary teaching certificate from Brescia University and two master's degrees, one in secondary guidance counseling from Western Kentucky University and one in adult education with a certificate in distance education from Penn State University.



<https://www.armypress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>
<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>
<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the U.S. Department of War.

