

The Man Behind the Curtain:  
The End of the Noncommissioned Officer Academy Years

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### Abstract

The United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy (now the SSG Todd R. Cornell Noncommissioned Academy at Fort McCoy) provides Soldiers in the Regular Army, the United States Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard training in Noncommissioned Officer Education System courses that include the Warrior Leader Course (WLC) and the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course (BNCOC) Phase 1 (common core). The academy also facilitates a number of functional courses including the First Sergeant Course and the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course. After serving as a Small Group Leader and Senior Small Group Leader at the academy, I was assigned as the BNCOC Course Manager from April 2005 through July 2006.

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Ramblings in the Army Times have downplayed the importance of noncommissioned officer education by regarding assignments to training institutions as breaks from the combat zone.

The publication continued on to suggest noncommissioned officers were hiding out in school houses to avoid deployments in its May 4, 2009 cover story “Deployment Fairness. New Rules Mean No More Hiding At Schools, Recruiting, Drill Duty”. Having been assigned as a Small Group Leader, Senior Small Group Leader, and Course Manager for various noncommissioned officer education courses, I can attest that nothing is farther from the truth.

In April of 2005 I was selected to become the BNCOC Course Manager at the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort McCoy (now the SSG Todd R. Cornell Noncommissioned Academy at Fort McCoy). Having instructed the Primary Leader Development Course (PLDC), the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course (BNCOC) Phase 1 (common core), the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course (ANCOC) Phase 1 (common core), and the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course (BSNOC), I was intimately familiar with the inner workings of the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) and the accreditation process for noncommissioned officer academies. Those noncommissioned officers engaged in NCOES during this time period will recall numerous challenges as noncommissioned officer academies took the first steps toward the still ongoing transformation of NCOES. The Primary Leader Development Course had just transitioned into the Warrior Leader Course, the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course had eliminated its common core resident phase, and NCOES was initiating automation in the classrooms. Those academies manned solely by Active Guard Reserve (AGR) Soldiers, like the United States Army

Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort McCoy, faced the added challenges of maintaining unit strength during a historic push for detailed recruiters.

In 2005, the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy provided training in a variety of courses to Soldiers in the Regular Army, the United States Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard. Noncommissioned Officer Education System courses taught included the Warrior Leader Course and the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course Phase 1 (common core). The academy also facilitated a number of functional courses including the First Sergeant Course, the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course, the Total Army Instructor Training Course, and the Small Group Instructor Training Course. With the elimination of a resident common core phase of the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course and an Army-wide backlog of Soldiers requiring the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, a bold decision was made to double the student load for the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course. The objective of the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course Phase 1 (common core) was to train junior noncommissioned officers in leadership skills, the conduct of performance-oriented training, and the duties and responsibilities of a noncommissioned officer. The course was non-MOS specific and strived to produce a more battle competent noncommissioned officer who is skilled in his or her role as squad/section leader, trainer, evaluator, and counselor.

As I assumed the role of BNCOC Course Manager, instructor shortages would become a major obstacle that would not be overcome during my time at Fort McCoy. This was not unique to the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course. Both the Warrior Leader Course and the Functional Branch struggled with to maintain a pool of qualified Small Group Leaders. The United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy had eight BNCOC Small Group Leader positions but, at no time, had more than six certified small group leaders assigned.

Recruiting to fill available positions seemed futile. Despite the traditionally high promotion rates within the academies, few AGR Soldiers wanted to work in the three army Reserve noncommissioned officer academies. Ironically, the reputation the academies had for long work hours and little time off was a huge detractor. Army Reserve AGR job fairs also proved fruitless. Unwilling to sugar-coat the realities to life at the academy, potential AGR Soldiers were impressed with what we did but had no interest in the work hours. At a job fair in Dallas, Texas, I recall one reservist indicating he “could go to Iraq or Afghanistan and work those hours and get a combat patch out of it.” We had considerable good fortune recruiting regular Army noncommissioned officers who were near their ETS date. Unfortunately, after working their transition for countless months, the accessions team at the Human Resources Command would inevitably tag them to become Detailed Recruiters. Consequently, each cycle of the two BNCOC Senior Small Group Leaders would assume the added responsibility for facilitating a platoon of BNCOC students in addition to their Senior Small Group Leader duties.

As a student or casual observer of the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy it’s easy to be blind to the academies inner workings. Intense efforts were taken to camouflage staff shortages, deteriorating facilities, and issues such as out-dated material and the chaos of last minute program of instruction (POI) changes. With only three days between cycles to prepare, time was precious. In addition to providing support for the Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course’s CPX, mandatory training had to be completed, classrooms had to be prepared for the new cycle and every branch member had to rehearse. It was important that we provide each cycle of BNCOC students with a flawless demonstration of each of their performance evaluations. We believed that no Small Group Leader could properly evaluate a task they could not correctly execute themselves and that no student should be evaluated on a

task that had not been correctly demonstrated. In addition to regularly facilitating blocks of instruction for their peers, every member of the BNCOC branch spent hours rehearsing the conduct of physical training, performing drill and ceremonies, conducting risk assessments, and conducting an after action review.

All too quickly, opening night is upon us. The training schedule calls it inprocessing but every good trainer knows there is more to motivating the learning processing than knowledge. The best trainers are energized, animated and entertaining, 14 hours a day, for 14 days. For the Course Manager and Senior Small Group Leaders, every inprocessing session started with an internal prayer that personnel shortages would not make this the first cycle we would have to deny enrollment to Soldiers with reservations in the course. We could accomplish our mission with six Small Group Leaders but we seemed to be plagued by illness and injury. We pushed through cycle after cycle, facilitating classes with influenza and bronchitis, doing physical training with broken bones, and postponing surgeries until the holidays. We understood that we were members of a team; a team that believed so profoundly in the importance of its mission that it refused to fail.

For the remaining 13 days of each cycle, the staff of the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course would meet at 0430 for physical training and spend every hour with their students until study hall was complete; often after 1900. Cycles of the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course lasted a total of 14 days. They were followed by a 4-day special pass, three days of classroom preparation and inprocessing for the next student load. Some Small Group Leaders struggled to maintain the academy's operational tempo for more than a year. Even Senior Small Group Leaders indicated they had "hit the volunteer button" on Human Resource's Command's website to volunteer for deployment and "escape". More often, these Soldiers refrained from

volunteering for deployment because doing so would affect the ability of their current team to successfully accomplish its mission. Some noncommissioned officers downplay the importance of the Noncommissioned Officer Education System. This small group of noncommissioned officers believed in the importance of their mission to provide quality training to the future leaders of the United States Army.

I can find numerous lessons to be learned from my time at the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy. The first is the importance of considering NCOES missions when prioritizing vacancy fills within the Active Guard Reserve program. Deployments and recruiting must take precedence over training missions. However, if training institutions are being depleted of personnel to support these missions, student loads should be reevaluated. In turn, noncommissioned officer academies should not have student loads that require 100% of their positions be filled. Inevitably, a Small Group Leader will become ill, injured, or encounter a family emergency. Losing a Small Group Leader for a cycle should not limit the academy's ability to facilitate training for 100% of its projected student load. Further, NCOES experience should be considered when selecting and placing senior leadership within the academy. An academy that requires standardization cannot become the playground for free-thinkers and senior leaders who simply want to leave their mark on the organization. The final lesson derived from my time as BNCOC Course Manager at the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy at Fort McCoy is the importance of quality control and timeliness in the publishing of training materials. Receiving a POI change, days prior to the start of a cycle, plays havoc on already harried academy staff members. Program of instruction changes should be thoroughly reviewed prior to fielding and should be distributed with adequate

time for academies to implement.

### Conclusion

The Noncommissioned Officer Education System serves as the training ground for the backbone of America's Army. It provides the foundation for noncommissioned officer development at all levels. As we continue our efforts to win the global war on terrorism, let us not allow the notion of deployment equity to continue to downplay the important role of noncommissioned officers serving at Noncommissioned Officer Academies.