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Warrior Leader Course provides shared knowledge, experience to guide Soldiers' first steps as leaders

By **Sgt. Micah E. Clare**
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GRAFENWOEHR, Germany -- "Column left, march!"

On that command, 11 Soldiers marched straight into a ditch. A group of their peers watching from the sidelines howled with laughter.



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Soldiers attending the 7th Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy's Warrior Leader Course practice room-clearing procedures at their classroom building in Grafenwoehr, Germany, November 30. After a block of basic instruction from academy instructors, classes are often handed over to experienced students.

Spc. Richard Mata had given the wrong command during yet another after-duty-hours drill and ceremonies practice session. But after reforming his squad, and hearing out some marching tips from more experienced squadmates, he tried again and got it right. Practice, patience and teamwork paid off, earning Mata a "go" on his D&C evaluation the next day.

Mata, one of nearly 500 U.S. Army Europe Soldiers who attended the 7th Army

Noncommissioned Officer Academy's Warrior Leader Course here in November, said the course helped him and his fellow students discover that the best way NCOs learn about Army leadership is from each other.

“I’ve become more confident around my peers; they’re here to help me,” said Mata, a soft-spoken helicopter fueller from San Marcos, Texas, who is assigned to Company E, 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation. “This has made me more willing to conduct NCO tasks. I’ve learned that NCOs do what’s right because junior Soldiers will always remember what they see you doing, so when they mess up or act inappropriately it always reflects back on you and the rest of the NCO Corps.”

Required for all junior Soldiers’ promotion into the Army’s NCO ranks, WLC is most young troops’ first exposure to formal leadership training and their first real-world demonstration of the adage that leaders are made, not born. During the four-week course, the sergeants -- as all WLC students are called, regardless of actual rank -- return to an environment similar to basic training. But unlike basic, they focus on how to lead rather than how to follow.

The course provides student leaders with plenty of opportunities to practice their newfound skills in positions of responsibility: daily barracks inspections, cadenced marches to and from the dining facility, intense physical fitness training, heavy doses of classroom time, nightly staff duty shifts and a

four-day field exercise - all organized under a student leadership chain of command.

Today’s WLC looks a lot different than its Primary Leadership Development Course predecessor, explained Sgt. 1st Class Richard Marshall, a senior instructor at the 7th Army NCOA. A recent makeover of the course’s curriculum is just one indication of how the course has changed to fit the needs of the wartime Army.

Like many of his WLC colleagues, Mata said he often felt nervous about stepping up to take charge, but that the excellent NCOs who helped him along made him strive to be a leader.



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Soldiers attending the 7th Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy's Warrior Leader Course listen to a class on squad movement techniques given by one of their fellow classmates, an infantryman whose experience was called upon to enhance the classroom experience. The Nov. 10 class was part of the four-week students' WLC cycle at the academy in Grafenwoehr, Germany.

“WLC is all about synergy -- NCOs teaching NCOs,” said Marshall. “We, as instructors, are just here to facilitate their learning. No one can be taught leadership; they can only learn leadership styles from other leaders.”

“WLC is a constantly evolving course. There’s no comparison to what it’s been in the past. NCOs of today have completely different requirements than they did before the War on Terror,” he said.

As a result of that combination of constant evolution paired with shared knowledge and experience, Marshall said, the course has maintained the same standards, but now focuses more on warrior skills and combat abilities.

The 7th Army NCO Academy may be the Army’s oldest, added its commandant, Command Sgt. Maj. Hu Rhodes, but the collective energies of its staff and students keeps WLC fresh and current. The course will forever be changing based on the recommendations of those who become part of it, and every cycle will be a unique experience, he said.



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Sgt. Anthony Garcia, a multichannel transmission systems operator-maintainer from the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, busily prepares his wall locker for an inspection while attending the 7th Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy’s Warrior Leader Course in Grafenwoehr, Germany in November. All Students at the academy have to follow a strict inspection layout for their bunks, wall lockers, and drawers.

the course opened his eyes to the fact that the leadership styles he learned from his father and the 1/91st aren’t the only ways to lead.

“No one knows more about this course than the NCOs going through it,” Rhodes said.

“I know I’m going back to my unit a different NCO than I (was) when I left,” said Sgt. Donnie Bass, a cavalry scout from 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Bass, who grew up with a sergeant major father, said he arrived at WLC assuming he already knew everything the course had to teach. But he said he soon realized he was lacking in some paperwork skills, and that

“I’ve never spent much time around other MOSs (military occupations),” Bass said. “The Army is like a big engine that everybody should step back sometimes to see. It opens your mind to the fact that somebody else always knows something you don’t.”

As the weeks at the academy went by, several WLC students said, working closely with people with different backgrounds, personalities and levels of experience to tackle fast-moving, often stressful situations, day in and day out, took a lot of patience.

Spc. Francis Villanueva, a light-wheeled vehicle mechanic from Company B, 173rd Airborne Brigade Support Battalion, said he left his home in the Philippines for the new experiences he felt the Army had to offer. But he admitted that working with a team of new and diverse people can be trying at times.

“Working with people you aren’t used to can be difficult,” Villanueva said.

“There are so many different cultures, even among the different jobs in the Army. Sometimes these people can be hard to get along with. But in the end that doesn’t matter. Accomplishing the mission is the NCO’s first priority. You have to work together to get it done. With positive thinking, some self-control, and the broad-mindedness to see that people have different ways of coming to the same end, you can get things done,” he said.

That teamwork is an integral part of the WLC regimen, and pulling together and motivating each other during the course’s many squad competitions, team-graded field missions, and student leadership challenges is as vital a skill as any WLC teaches.

Sgt. Raphael Casanova, a military police officer with the 212th MP Company, 18th MP Brigade, said growing up in a big family in Puerto Rico taught him the value of teamwork and helped him be a more effective squad leader.

“I take teamwork seriously,” he said. “True leaders put everything they have into the group by getting to know their team members personally, and incorporate them by finding the best way to use their talents. When that one person in the group isn’t pulling his weight, it becomes everyone’s problem. You have to find what it takes to motivate them.”

Casanova said one of the most important discoveries made by WLC students in search of their own leadership styles is that Soldiers are influenced by respect -- not rank.

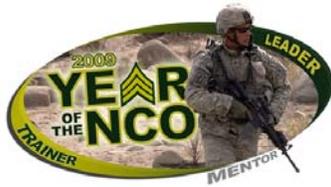
“While rank gives the guidance and procedures about who to follow, Soldiers will naturally want to follow someone who earns their respect,” he said.

“Good NCOs use their rank to help Soldiers,” said Sgt. William Case, an AH-64 Apache helicopter electrician/armament repair specialist from Company D, 2nd Battalion, 159th Aviation, quoting one of his senior NCO instructors after a class. “Poor ones use their rank for their own benefit.”

Case, a San Fernando Valley, Calif., native, said that quote taught him the need for leaders to be tactful. When challenged as a student platoon sergeant to dole out dreaded latrine cleaning duties or late-night staff duty shifts, he said, he had to learn to get his Soldiers to work together without using force or simply barking orders.

“It made me remember that I was once a junior Soldier, too, and I never liked getting told to do something my NCO wouldn’t do himself,” he said.

“Leadership isn’t about grade and rank, but about experiences,” said Spc. José Garcia, a 40-year-old former Colombian army soldier who is now a CH-47 Chinook helicopter repair team technician with Company D, 5th Battalion, 158th Aviation. “This is one experience I will forever build upon throughout my career as an NCO. Knowledge from more experienced people is one thing that is always OK to take for yourself.”



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