

FORUM & FEATURES



ANCOC: A Student's Viewpoint

STAFF SERGEANT MARK S. WAFLER

One of the many courses taught at the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning is the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course (ANCOC) for soldiers in the 11 series MOS. Currently, it is a ten-week course for NCOs in the ranks of staff sergeant, sergeant first class, and platoon sergeant who have been selected to attend by the Department of the Army.

The purpose of the course is to prepare these soldiers to serve as platoon sergeants in infantry units, or as assistant operations sergeants at the battalion level, and to introduce new and existing doctrine in an effort to standardize training in the Army today.

Recently, while attending ANCOC, I was asked if I would be interested in writing an article on the course itself, strictly from a student's point of view. I welcomed the opportunity to express my feelings on the good points and the bad points of the course and to voice my recommendations in a way other than the standard end-of-course critique sheets. At the same time, I feel I can offer advice to NCOs who are selected to attend future ANCOC classes.

Since an 11B MOS includes soldiers who perform a variety of tasks, our class covered the entire spectrum of possible jobs and experience. We had

soldiers who had never served in a TOE unit and others who had never served in anything but TOE units. We had combat veterans, those who wished they were combat veterans, and those who hoped they never would be. This wide variety of people and experience both helped and, at times, hindered the class. We did not all share the same ideas and viewpoints on the different subjects taught, but if a job was not represented by at least one NCO in our class, the chances are it did not exist in the infantry.

GETTING STARTED

Inprocessing, in any Army school, is always a difficult time. There are numerous introductions and briefings, and numerous forms to be filled out. Our class was no exception. I was surprised, though, at the smooth organization of the class into squads and platoons and at the establishment of the student chain of command. It was a well-thought-out plan.

The chain of command for our class was selected by rank and then by time in grade and did not change throughout the course. Some students thought the leadership positions should have

been rotated periodically as they are in many Army schools, but I believed that rotating the chain of command was not only unnecessary, it would have only made for confusion. The function of the chain was strictly administrative — such as checking the daily status of the class, making sure everyone received training schedules, and dispensing the mail — and once the people in the chain became comfortable with the routine of their positions, rotating would have served only to hinder the smooth operation of the class.

During the first two days, we received briefings from several people, ranging from the post sergeant major down to the chief of the advanced course, and the bulk of their briefings consisted of how to be relieved from the course for misconduct. The rules were laid down hard.

Our class as a whole did not think this type of briefing was necessary for senior noncommissioned officers, and as a result our attitude toward the course was not favorable for many weeks afterward. What we failed to realize at the time, though, was that those harsh words were directed not at the NCOs in the class who would conduct themselves in a professional manner, both on duty and off, but at those

few who would not. Spelling out the rules of conduct, therefore, seems to be a necessary evil.

For the first week our days began at 0500 with physical training. Since every student in the course eventually had to pass the Army Physical Readiness Test in accordance with Army standards for his age group, it was obvious to all of us that we were going to be tested at some time during the next ten weeks. In fact, we were tested on the very first Saturday after we signed in.

PHYSICAL TRAINING

The NCOs who passed this first PT test had their PT schedule changed to three times a week — on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Those who did not had PT on those three days plus remedial sessions on Tuesday and Thursday of the next week, and they were given another opportunity to pass the test on the second Saturday. The NCOs who did not pass the second test were scheduled for remedial PT for several more weeks before being tested again.

Most of the subjects taught were presented in the classrooms in Infantry Hall, with welcome breaks from this routine in the form of hands-on training at different ranges and training areas throughout Fort Benning. (I would have preferred more of the field environment than the classroom, because it seemed easier for me to grasp the subjects outdoors than indoors.)

One of the most difficult tasks I encountered during the course was making the adjustment back into an academic environment. Terms such as *pretest*, *post test*, *retest*, and *reclama* — words I had almost forgotten — were now part of my daily vocabulary. It was sometimes difficult to keep alert during the classroom instruction and to understand what was being presented. There were times when I felt like I was drowning in tasks, conditions, standards, and learning objectives, although it was comforting to find there were many others in this same category.

Our program of instruction (POI) began with an assortment of leadership classes and continued with subjects such as the Army maintenance system, battalion training management systems, NBC, military justice, communications, and tactics. We conducted hands-on training in weapons, demolitions, and the M47 Dragon. We installed hasty minefields and then retrieved the mines and went through a land navigation exercise.

The highlight of all the instruction we received was the field training exercises during the course. For four days we were involved in mechanized infantry tactics, both offensive and defensive, and conducted an exercise on small unit patrolling, complete with an airborne operation for those in the class who were on jump status in their parent units.

The best times were those days in the field, away from the monotony of the classroom. It was then that the members of my platoon really began to work and pull together and to develop a deep sense of camaraderie.

As far as the subjects were concerned, overall, most of the students I talked with thought too much time was spent on Skill Level 1, 2, and 3 tasks and not enough time on Skill Level 4 tasks. After all, most of the NCOs in the course had been training soldiers on Skill Level 1 through 3 tasks for years, and this instruction to them was not only insulting but a waste of valuable time. My recommendation would be to include in the course a nontestable period of instruction on certain Skill Level 1, 2, and 3 tasks for familiarization and to spend more time on the Skill Level 4 tasks. Perhaps when a revised POI is introduced this spring, there will be some changes in this portion of the course. [NOTE: There will be. See the INFANTRY News section of this issue.]

Once we left the subject of *what* was taught and started talking about *how* it was taught and who taught it, opinions varied considerably. The subject being taught also played a big part in how well the instructor made his or her point. A boring subject with a good instructor was still a boring

class; the instructor simply made it easier to get through.

I think I can safely say for my class that the good instructors were great and the bad ones especially bad. Fortunately, we found few of the latter. Unfortunately, though, we seldom exercised the option of writing a statement on a class for submission up through the chain of command for action.

The final point that needs to be mentioned on the instructional portion of the course was the elapsed time between instruction and testing. It was not uncommon during the course for the testing on a subject to be several weeks after the subject had been taught. We should have organized ourselves into study halls or study sessions after hours or on weekends to a greater extent. We had plenty of time off and could have used it better by holding more study sessions. Those we did hold were invaluable in bridging the gap between the teaching and the testing.

ADVICE

On the basis of my experience in this course, I have some advice to offer to those NCOs who plan to attend ANCOG any time in the near future:

First, if you can find a copy, read "The Advanced NCO Course" in the January-February 1984 issue of INFANTRY, in which you will find official advice from the NCO Academy staff on what to bring with you to the course. Note especially the part about weight standards. If you are now overweight, make every effort to see that you can meet the weight standards by the time you report, or that you have with you your skin caliper tests.

In addition to the items listed in the article cited above, you will find there are other handy items you might want to bring:

- Highlighters, in several different shades if you can find them, to use in the classroom to mark important material.
- A good mechanical pencil with a fine point for map reading exercises

and land navigation. (When you're working with ten-digit grid coordinates, a fat-tipped pencil may make the difference between a right answer and a wrong one.)

- Tabs to use in marking manuals for quick reference. (These will make life much easier for you, especially during the maintenance exam.)

- A good straight-edge.

Probably the most important item, and one that you can't find in any PX or bookstore — is a good attitude. Without it, no matter how many notebooks and pencils you have, you may fail to accept what is presented. Resolve not to be turned off or insulted by the initial briefings in which the rules of the course are laid down. As the course progresses, you'll notice that those few NCOs who either didn't listen or just didn't care will start packing their bags to go home. Resolve, too, to take good notes and stay interested.

On the subject of physical fitness, make sure you can pass the PT test before you sign in, and if you cannot, you need to work on it on your off

time until you can. The cadre at ANCOC will give you every opportunity to pass the test before graduation, but you need to keep in mind that it is a requirement for graduation.

Next, do take advantage of your option to write specific statements about inadequate instructors and send your comments up through the chain of command. If a statement is in writing, most likely, action will be taken. (And don't hesitate to compliment the good instructors.)

For the most part, ANCOC is run by the NCOs in the class, and since the class is made up of senior noncommissioned officers, or those who will be shortly, this is only right. But don't assume from this that formations and inspections do not exist in the course. They do. Be prepared for daily accountability formations and for several in-ranks inspections, in both BDU and class "A" uniform. (If AR 670-1 has become a stranger to you lately, you would be wise to become reacquainted with it before you get to Benning.)

Overall, I was pleased that the

course did not live up to the awful war stories I had heard about it. It was well worth my time, and it opened my eyes in many areas. Granted, not everyone who attends the course comes into it with exactly the same experience level and not everyone will benefit from the course in the same way. But I don't think there was anyone in my class who could honestly say he did not learn anything from the course that he could take back to his unit.

With people like the post sergeant major, the School Brigade sergeant major, and all the NCO Academy cadre trying to make the course the best it can be, it is obvious that the advanced noncommissioned officer course can only get better for those who will attend it in the future — if their attitude is right from the day they sign in.

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Make the NCODP Work

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR ROY C. OWENS

Many of us in the Army talk about the Noncommissioned Officer Development Program (NCODP), but too few really understand what the program is intended to do.

Depending on who you talk to, an NCODP should do as little as to get a unit's NCOs together once a month for identity's sake, or as much as to plan every minute of training these NCOs need on any given subject.

Unfortunately, many leaders fall into this latter category — they believe their NCODP should be designed to

satisfy all of their NCO training needs. And too often they single out the technical skills their NCOs appear to be weak in. These might include such subjects as MOPP levels, land navigation, or current events.

But the fact that some NCOs have deficiencies in certain basic technical skills does not necessarily mean the NCODP is at fault; neither does it mean the NCODP should be used to try to correct those deficiencies. Unit commanders, as they always have, must simply provide time on their

training schedules for such individual training, just as they do for collective training.

But if the NCODP is not designed to substitute for individual or collective training, what is it designed to do? It is supposed to be used to improve a unit's efforts in teaching and maintaining those skills. It is also intended to support our service schools in their efforts to restore and develop the basic professional qualities historically and routinely found in the Army's noncommissioned officers — qualities