

# Training Notes



## A HIGHER CALLING



*Training Curve is Steep at the Army Mountain Warfare School*

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Photos by Bob Rosenburgh

*SGT Eugene A. K. Patton descends down an ice-covered rocky outcrop.*

The global missions of the U.S. Army mean that Soldiers can, and often do, find themselves in a variety of challenging environments. If that terrain is steep and deep, as it is in the rugged peaks of Afghanistan or the crags of Kazakhstan, then special training is needed to make an ally of the ground instead of letting it be an impediment. That's where the Army Mountain Warfare School (AMWS) in Jericho, Vermont, comes in by providing the necessary higher education.

The mission of the AMWS is to train Soldiers in the specialized skills needed to operate in mountainous terrain, regardless of the weather or time of day or night.

"We don't focus on tactics," said CPT Christopher Ruggerio, the AMWS assistant operations officer, "but rather on how to move and survive under all conditions at higher elevations. Once that is mastered, the tactics a unit uses are developed around their increased capabilities."

Being able to use adverse terrain and weather to their advantage is truly a force multiplier.

"Our school is unique in the total force system," said CPT Ruggerio. Operated by the Vermont Army National Guard and commanded by LTC John J. Abeling, they provide training to all elements of the active Army and Reserve component, Army ROTC and West Point cadets, other branches of the armed forces, allied forces and civil agencies from around the country.

AMWS was established in 1983 and the program of instruction was approved by Training and Doctrine Command in 1986. "We've been accredited as a School of Excellence twice by the Infantry School," CPT Ruggerio added, "and in 2005 we achieved permanent member status in the International Association of Military Mountaineer Schools (IAMMS), a select group of highly trained military mountaineering schools from around the world." He said the member groups come from nations such as Italy, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and Austria. The application process took six years, and AMWS is the only member from the United States. "We even hosted the IAMMS conference here in 2005."

AMWS is a part of the Ethan Allen Firing Range, an 11,000 acre facility started in 1926 and which is the primary training area for the Vermont National Guard. Also, about 40 minutes away from Ethan Allen, is Smuggler's Notch. "It's a ski resort," CPT Ruggerio explained, "but on the backside is the Notch Pass, which the state allows us to use as a secondary training area." At Smuggler's Notch,

the AMWS students complete a challenging three-day mountain walk that puts all their newly-learned skills to the test.

The school offers Level 1 and Level 2 mountaineer training. At Level 1, students must complete the summer and the winter Military Mountaineer courses to be awarded the Skill Qualification Identifier – Echo. The Ram’s Head Badge identifies the accomplishment.

“Level 2 is our Assault Climber’s Course,” said CPT Ruggerio, “This is the advanced course for mountaineer leaders and subject matter experts, like a jumpmaster or master gunner would be in other disciplines.”

Level 2 climbers are responsible for inspecting and training mountaineering in their own units, ensuring safety and keeping an eye out for potential problems with their troops’ equipment or other needs. They are the commander’s expert and advisor for anything having to do with mountaineering skills and tasks and supervise Level 1 mountaineers.

The AMWS can also provide mobile training teams (MTTs) which deploy to remote locations and teach mountaineering skills off-site. “We get calls for on-site, off-



*Soldiers strap on snowshoes before moving out on a AMWS mission.*

site, CONUS and OCONUS teams from all over,” he said, “wherever we’re needed.” The school offers both summer and winter courses, since the different seasons present unique challenges given the same location.

“For obvious reasons, like the snow and ice and cold in the winter, you need to use different climbing techniques and equipment,” he continued. “You use your ice axe and crampons to climb, and in the summer you’re rock climbing using your hands and feet.”

AMWS also teaches avalanche rescue techniques, and the mountaineering techniques are designed to be effective beyond the wooded hills of Vermont.

“The mountains in Afghanistan have very few trees, so we also teach Soldiers to engineer anchoring systems using the natural terrain and equipment on hand,” CPT Ruggerio said.

While in Afghanistan as part of an MTT, a team of AMWS instructors wrote the SOPs for high angle/high altitude recovery and well-cache recovery.

“The enemy was hiding weapons caches in wells — some of them were even booby-trapped,

and we developed techniques of how to go down into those wells and recover the caches,” CPT Ruggerio said. AMWS dedicates its time and resources to not only training Soldiers but finding out what is relevant and working in the field to help Soldiers and commanders accomplish their mission.

Both classes are 14 days in length, and CPT Ruggerio said they only take 60 students per class due to the student/instructor ratio and the size of our facilities.

“We teach fundamental mobility and survivability skills and how to move through mountainous terrain,” he said. “We also teach how to use adverse weather conditions and terrain to your advantage, so you don’t even need to be at altitude to use these basic skills.”

Since 1999, the average graduation rate for Level 1 students has been 86 percent. About 36 percent of the students are from the Reserve component, while the active duty slice averages 27 percent, of which about 65 percent are Special Operations Soldiers, and Army ROTC makes up another 35 percent. Other students come from organizations such as the FBI, U.S. Navy, Air Force, Canadian Mounties, law enforcement, allied forces, etc. The school is funded primarily by the National Guard Bureau, with non-Army students being



*AMWS students move single file to help pack the snow as they descend a steep hill into a valley below.*

funded by their parent organizations.

“We graduated 431 students from the course last year,” he said, “and there were 60 ROTC slots in the summer course and 60 in the winter course.”

Cadet Manuel Orozco, a Green to Gold Scholarship cadet from Florida State University, has completed two tours in Iraq, one in Bosnia and one in Kosovo as an enlisted Soldier. Already a graduate of the Summer Mountaineering Course, he jumped at the chance to complete his SQI requirement with the winter course.

“I’ve been to multiple service schools, but this one is different from all the others,” he said. “All the new skills I’ve learned can be used in Afghanistan or other mountainous terrain, and in combat that knowledge will keep my men alive.”

Cadet Shelby Vance Williams from the University of Central Oklahoma agreed. “I can see this benefiting a lot,” he said, “with all the different types of terrain we’re fighting in, the effects of weather on weapons and movement and so many other things encountered in higher terrain.”

He said the training has additional advantages. “Just the discipline and the pace will make other things seem easier. Plus, this is a harsher terrain than almost anything you’ll see elsewhere, so it really prepares you.”

Cadet William Klein from Central Washington University heard about the school when he was a freshman. “I didn’t think I’d get a chance to come because they just had one slot to fill every two years,” he said, “but this year they had an extra one and I couldn’t pass it up.” He said one of his favorite parts of the school is learning all the different rope systems and knots. “I plan to branch Aviation and if I ever crash in a remote area, the skills I learn here could save my life.”

Because of their advanced expertise and the rigor of training, AMWS has only 12 summer and 12 winter slots for Level 2 Assault Climber students. Graduation percentages, however, are nearly 100 percent because a Level 2 student is generally highly capable, experienced, and motivated from the start.



*When not skiing, snowshoeing, rappelling or climbing from point to point, students at the school are transported and supplied by a small fleet of tracked Small Unit Support Vehicles (SUSVs).*



*The AMWS teaches fundamental mobility and survival skills.*

“What makes us so good is our instructors,” CPT Ruggerio summarized. AMWS is a National Guard facility and, as such, much of the staff may spend their entire careers teaching the courses. The levels of expertise developed in that time are impressive. The instructors may also frequently be deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan on MTTs or volunteer for expeditions to places such as Mounts Everest and McKinley.

SSG Tyler Williamson, from Fox Company 51st Long Range Surveillance Company at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, said the AMWS provides the Army with a priceless service. As a veteran of mountain warfare in Afghanistan, he sees a clear advantage for Soldiers who complete the course.

“We’re trying to facilitate our operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and I’m here to get the right training to do it,” he said. Williamson explained that fighting the enemy in his own backyard requires special expertise. “I think this helps close the gap,” he said. “We have the technology advantage and with schools like this, we can move better and engage in high-angle operations. When I get back, I’ll help set up our mountain section, refit and retrain them and hopefully get more Soldiers up here.”

He said his unit wants to enroll more of their troops in the summer and winter courses. “The Army needs to put an emphasis on mountain warfare and on this school, and the word needs to get out throughout the Army about what’s available here.”

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**Bob Rosenburgh** retired January 31 after serving 10 years as Public Affairs Officer for Western Region, U.S. Army Cadet Command at Fort Lewis, Washington. A Vietnam veteran, he finished an Army career in Armor, Aviation and Public Affairs as a SFC. Bob is a Noble Patron of Armor, a Washington General, and long-time member of the American Society of Aviation Artists and the Armor Association. He is also the designer of the U.S. Army Public Affairs insignia and author of the book *Snake Driver! Cobras in Vietnam*.

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