



USASMA Accreditation Team...

## Accredit Check

By SSG David Abrams

**T**he dozens of Noncommissioned Officer academies scattered across the globe are designed to train and prepare soldiers to become top-notch leaders in today's Army. Though diverse in cadre, geography and resources, each NCO academy should adhere to Army-wide standards. Who, then, polices these academies? Who ensures the training standard is the same for the PLDC in Korea as it is for the one at Ft. Knox?

That sometimes thankless task falls to a small group of sergeants major from the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy's Directorate of Evaluation and Standardization who leave Ft. Bliss, TX, up to a dozen times each year to inspect the Army's Primary Leadership Development Courses and Basic and Advanced NCO Courses.

A visit from the DOES Accreditation Team is enough to make most academy

commandants and instructors start shaking in their combat boots, but SGM Dwight Humphrey says there is nothing for academies to worry about...as long as they're performing to standard.

"Contrary to popular belief, the accreditation process *is* a friendly affair," he says. "We don't go in with the mindset to tell them this is wrong or that is wrong. We sincerely want to help them get accredited and to do that we suggest better ways of doing things."

At the start of each Accreditation Team visit, the NCO academy is given a pre-briefing, partly to explain what the team will be examining and partly to calm some jittery nerves.

"We're here to ensure your academy is teaching in accordance with the program of instruction as established by the proponents, regulations and guidelines," Humphrey tells a group of NCOs from the Henry Caro NCO Academy at Ft. Benning, GA. "When we do these

SSG John Riley, Ft. Benning BNCOC Operations Sergeant, explains the school's developmental counseling records to SGM Steve Jenkins from USASMA's Accreditation Team.

evaluations, it's a working environment."

Within minutes, the Accreditation Team is at work in a small, fluorescent-lit classroom at the Ft. Benning academy—poring over student academic evaluation reports, Army Physical Fitness Test scores, training schedules, lesson plans and student counseling records from recent classes. Surrounded by stacks of accordion files, manilla folders and three-ring binders, SGM Frank Berta says, "We really try to protect the student. In other words, are AERs and academic drops being done properly? Is the academy developing leaders like it's supposed to be doing?"

The USASMA team accredits three types of academies: Forces Command, Training and Doctrine Command and Reserve Component. Each of the Army's NCO academies can expect a visit from the Accreditation Team about once every three years. After spending nearly a week at each installation, the team makes one of three recommendations: accreditation, non-accreditation or withhold accreditation. This last classification, Berta points out, is when "we think the academy can fix the problem in 60 days. If we get a letter from them in that time saying the problem's been taken care of, then we send them a certificate of accreditation."

A rating of non-accreditation is, of course, much more serious and could result in the academy closing its doors. If, after its initial visit, the Accreditation Team non-accredits an academy, that training center then has six months to repair whatever is wrong with its system before the USASMA team pays another visit. "If they fail that inspection, then they're taken off the Army Training Requirements and Resources System," Berta says. "However, I don't think that's ever happened."

The primary purpose of the Accreditation Team, he adds, is to ensure academies:

- teach students the right tasks to the right standards;
- use qualified SGLs;

- have all equipment, supplies and facilities required by regulation and POIs;
- provide an atmosphere conducive to learning.

On the whole, the level of instruction at the Army's NCO academies is on the upswing, Humphrey says. "Academies are, across the board, energetic, dedicated and believe in providing a high quality standard in training. You see it from the students on up to the commandant and his or her higher headquarters. You see it in the conduct of training, the facilities, the school environment and the small group leaders. Since coming to this job four years ago, I've seen continuous improvement."

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If team members *do* find shortcomings or discrepancies, they work with the local cadre to correct them on the spot.

"You can't be thin-skinned in this business," says CSM Willie Wells, commandant of the Henry Caro NCO Academy which sees more than 3,000 students pass through its doors each year. "If they tell me something is wrong, I have to drive on and fix it. In that way, I see the accreditation process as an assistance visit. They are constantly providing me with feedback and they'll always go back to the regs to show us where we're wrong. They're here to not only make my academy better but also help improve the Army as a whole. They make sure we're all on the same sheet of music by synchronizing all the academies throughout the Army."

Wells says he has only one suggestion for the Accreditation Team: pay more visits. "My recommendation — and I raised it at the Worldwide NCO Education System Conference last year — is that when a commandant takes over an academy *that's* when the team should come in. It would really help me, as a commandant, to get set straight on the right path from the beginning. As it is now, with accreditation visits spaced

three years apart, you might have a commandant come in for two years then leave without ever once having to go through this process."

In addition to sifting through reams of paperwork during the visits, the Accreditation Team also evaluates classes in progress and inspects field training exercise sites. "We have to make sure the FTX site is conducive to training, i.e. the geographical location, foliage, facilities, and so on," says SGM Curtiss Garner. "We also have to make sure there *is* a site. Sometimes, they'll tell us they've got a great FTX location but it turns out there's really nothing there at all."

If there are no PLDC, BNCOC or ANCOC classes in session, the team asks the cadre to either give an in-depth briefing on their method and content of instruction or conduct a mock, studentless training session so the team can evaluate the quality of teaching at the academy.

However, it's the paperwork that really points up any documented problems. "We don't have enough time to go down to the nuts and bolts during each visit," Berta says. "So, we look for trends."

One trend which, until recently, plagued nearly all NCO academies was developmental counseling.

"Apart from FM 22-100 identifying the nine leadership competencies, there's really nothing out there that specifically tells academies how to conduct developmental counseling," Humphrey says. "So, the Accreditation Team evaluators came up with a better and simpler method — a counseling sheet that

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identifies those competencies and has a place for the SGLs to note their observations of how the student performs as the class goes along."

The USASMA team members are not the only visitors to Ft. Benning during "Accreditation Week." A group of senior NCOs from Ft. Polk's NCO Academy is also on hand to observe the observers.

"We've got our own accreditation coming up in six months and this is a way for us to see first-hand what we need to tighten up on and where we need to do some fine-tuning to our own program," says MSG Keith Smith, chief of training

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at the Ft. Polk NCO Academy. "I'd recommend to anyone facing an accreditation to go visit another NCO academy ahead of time. It eliminates the need to burn the midnight oil, working day and night at the last minute to make sure everything's squared away.

"I don't look on an accreditation visit as a harassment," he adds. "This is more like quality control. We need to know if we're doing the right thing at our academy. If we're not, then we're going down."

This is not the first time Smith has had a close encounter with an inspection of this type. He went through a similar accreditation process while stationed at Ft. Leonardwood, MO, nine years ago. "We probably worried about it more than we should have because we passed with flying colors," he says, recalling that accreditation. "We knew we were doing the right thing, but there's always something in the back of your mind that wonders if there's something you missed."

Smith — and other NCO academy cadre — can rest assured: USASMA's Accreditation Team will leave no stones unturned to keep the Army's training up to standard. ■

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*Abrams is senior journalist for The NCO Journal.*