

Academy evolution

Establishing the legacy of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

By Sgt. Maj. Larry Lane

The capstone for the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES), a school for sergeants major and command sergeants major, was an idea that had been talked about throughout the mid-1960s. However, it would be a simple phone call in the fall of 1971 that would be the first step in establishing the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA).

Oddly enough, an officer was the initial driving force behind the Academy. One morning, Gen. Ralph Haines, commander of the U.S. Army Continental Command (CONARC), contacted his old friend, Command Sgt. Maj. William G. Bainbridge, the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Pacific Command (USARPAC). Haines and Bainbridge had worked together at USARPAC. CONARC handled training the

force and planning operations before the command was split into the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command and the U.S. Army Forces Command in 1973. Haines wanted to send future sergeants major and command sergeants major back to school, to train them to assist their commanders at their next higher level of responsibility.

Haines chose Col. Karl Morton, his own executive officer, to be the Academy's first commandant and Bainbridge as its first command sergeant major. With only two of the staff members identified and no resources earmarked for the academy, the two began the tough mission of getting the Academy up and running. Authorized by the Department of Army General Order 98 on July 18, 1972, the Academy's two founders shared an ambitious goal of beginning the first sergeants major course on Jan. 15, 1973.

1 First discussions about establishing a multi-level NCO education system



3 July 1967 - Enlisted grade structure study proposes educational system which becomes NCO Education System (NCOES)

5 May 1971 - First basic-level courses offered in NCOES



7 January 1973 - Sergeants Major Course (SMC) Class One begins as six-month course; ULTIMA Spouses' Association forms

2 1964, 1965, 1966, 1970 - Various plans for "Senior NCO Academy" shelved



4 February 1969 - Gen. Bruce Palmer, Jr., Vice-Chief of Staff of the Army, approves NCOES concept

6 July 1972 - U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) established at Biggs Army Airfield, Fort Bliss, Texas



8 August 1974 - First nonresident SMC class begins

“My goal was to make sure the Academy was oriented toward training noncommissioned officers at the senior level,” explained Bainbridge.

Bainbridge, who would later become the fifth Sergeant Major of the Army, wanted to provide the most senior NCOs with a set of common skills. “Not MOS (military occupational specialty), but to operate in any field at any level with any of the services.”

To design a curriculum that would answer this requirement, Morton and Bainbridge met with a committee at Fort Bliss, Texas, the future site of the Academy.

The committee was comprised of 10 command sergeants major from the major Army commands and 13 military and civilian educators, including instructors from the Army War College and the Command and General Staff College. Other committee members were from unique Army schools like the Armor and Signal schools.

After two weeks, the committee decided on seven courses of instruction: leadership, world affairs, human relations, military management, military organizations, operations and college electives that the students would study at a local college.

Of the subjects the committee chose, world affairs was the most controversial. A number of officers questioned why enlisted soldiers needed to learn about world affairs, since most of their careers were often spent in operational and tactical environments. The common mindset was that only officers should be concerned with the “big picture” and enlisted soldiers should focus on training.

Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, then Chief of Staff of the Army, eventually decided the matter. Abrams had a close relationship with senior NCOs; he said the study of world affairs made sense.

Bainbridge theorized that Abrams thought there’s “nothing wrong with smart sergeants.” Bainbridge wrote in his autobiography, *Top Sergeant*. “After all, the Army is a tool of the government, and if it sends soldiers overseas, as it did recently in the Persian Gulf, and they understand why they have to go, there’s no question in my mind they’re going to be better soldiers for it. It’s just good common sense.”

With the concept and curriculum decided, the next key steps to establishing the Academy was identifying facilities, administrative staff, faculty and the students themselves.

Trials and tribulations, no personnel, working and trying to get the building started, Bainbridge said, were just some of the challenges facing the newly formed staff and faculty.

The initial facilities were a collection of buildings taken over from the Defense Language Institute, that had closed its doors on Biggs Army Airfield, an annex of Fort Bliss.

The buildings took some work to get ready, and some buildings were still undergoing renovation when the first course started.

“In our [Learning Resource Center] (LRC), all the references were in boxes. When a student came in and asked for this or that, the staffers would say, ‘that’s in box 71.’” Bainbridge recalled. Today, the LRC offers some of the latest technology for conducting research.

The original administrative staff and some of the teaching staff was generously provided by CONARC. The initial staff approved for the Academy was 120, comprised of 47 officers, one warrant officer, 40 enlisted soldiers and 32 civilians.

While the initial vision was for an Academy with a teaching staff of all senior sergeants major, the reality was that very few senior enlisted soldiers had the education to write lesson plans or fill an instructor’s position at that level.

Officers filled the majority of the teaching positions for the first few classes. As more senior NCOs acquired higher levels of civilian education, these numbers shifted toward a predominantly enlisted faculty.

To select students for the first class, the following criteria was developed: Soldiers would have to be a first sergeant or master sergeant with between 15 and 23 years of service. Soldiers would have to have a primary MOS score and general technical score of at least 100 points. And, of the soldiers selected, at least half of them would have had first sergeant duty. For the first class, the goal was to enroll 160 students. However, based on the lack of facilities, the leadership finally

10 October 1981 - First Sergeant Course (FSC) inaugurated at USASMA

11 July 1982 - USASMA becomes proponent for Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC); courses taught worldwide



14 January 1986 - First international students attend SMC

16 August 1988 - First Personnel and Logistics Course (P&LC) starts

9 June 1981 - NCO Museum opens on Biggs Field near Academy; USASMA becomes proponent for Advanced NCO Course (ANCOC) common core portion; courses taught worldwide



13 January 1986 - Operations and Intelligence Course (O&IC) starts at USASMA

12 October 1984 - USASMA becomes the proponent for common core portion of Basic NCO Course (BNCOC); courses taught worldwide



15 August 1987 - New Academy building complex completed

FY2002 USASMA statistics

Faculty

Enlisted assigned	227
Officers assigned	6
Civilians assigned	36

Students

Command Sgt. Maj. Course	288
CSM Spouses Course	111
Sgt. Maj. Course	624
Sgt. Maj. Course, NRC	526
First Sgt. Course	724
First Sgt. Course, VTT	242
Battle Staff Course	387
Battle Staff Course, VTT	601

decided on 105 NCOs who were chosen from throughout the active-duty Army, National Guard and Reserve forces.

The smaller class served as a manageable pilot class to stress test the new Academy and its new methods of instruction. "The small group" method would involve breaking the students into groups of 10 to 15 soldiers, with each group facilitated by a senior instructor. The small groups were designed to inspire soldiers to share their experiences with each other.

The first student, Master Sgt. Norman Anderson, reported Nov. 20, 1972 and was assigned what could be considered the first student project: breaking down the 105 students into 15 small groups. He strived for variety in MOSs, gender and ethnicity, educational background and staff experience. The more diverse the group, the more diverse experiences they would be able to share.

"The greatest asset that the Academy has ever had is the student body itself," Bainbridge explained, regarding the instructional approach. "The diversity of those people gets better every time. It is camaraderie of the student body and what you learn from one another. You learn a lot more from one another than you learn from the curriculum."

Anderson also established and illustrated the principle that the Academy staff still stresses today: the Academy belongs to the students. The curriculum and the Academy itself is forever evolving, often incorporating students' ideas for improvement. Morton and Bainbridge made their deadline, and the first six-month course began Jan. 15, 1973.

Today, the Academy hosts the Command Sergeant Major Course, the resident and nonresident Sergeants Major courses, the First Sergeant Course and the Battle Staff NCO Course. In addition, the Academy also takes a leading role in developing common core training programs used throughout the NCO Education System in NCO academies worldwide.

17 1988-1989 - USASMA hosts NCO Leader Development Task Force (NCOLD-TF)

19 January 1991 - O&IC and P&LC combined; first Battle Staff Course (BSC) begins

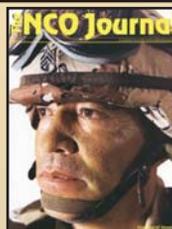
21 March 1995 - First Video Tele-training (VTT) of PLDC Course taught from USASMA to students in the Sinai



18 May 1989 - Command Sergeants Major Course (CSMC) inaugurated



20 January 1991 - USASMA publishes first issue of the NCO Journal



22 August 1995 - First nine-month SMC class begins



Initial USASMA statistics

Faculty	
Enlisted assigned	40
Officers assigned	47
Civilians assigned	32
Warrant officers assigned	1
Total	120



explained USASMA Command Sgt. Maj. Clifford West. “While we’re celebrating 30 years as a schoolhouse, we’re not just sitting on our thumbs,” West said. “If today’s NCO is terrific, tomorrow’s NCO must be a superstar. That’s a big challenge for us. I only have one word for that: Hooah!”

More initiatives are underway to bring further refinements to the Academy and, hence, to NCOES. These changes are the next step in the Academy’s – and the NCO Corps’ – evolution.

(Editor’s note: Sgt. Maj. Lane is the Public Affairs sergeant major for the Southern European Task Force, Vicenza, Italy. Sgt. 1st Class (Ret.) Phillip Tegmeier contributed to this story.)

Maintaining student interaction is the core of USASMA’s unique learning environment and is one of the challenges the Academy now faces as the faculty and staff expand the Academy’s course offerings through distance education.

“In order to support the Army Vision, we’re going to have to develop training programs that are more Web friendly and use Web technologies to provide more NCOs with training opportunities.”



23 August 1996 - Distance Learning (DL) mode for BSC inaugurated

25 October 1998 - BSC first offered in DL mode

27 October 2001 - First offering of Total Army Training System (TATS) version of FSC



24 June 1997 - Academy staff dedicates new classroom wing

26 January 2001 - Academy hosts first SMA nominative command sergeant major conference

