

## YEAR OF THE NCO

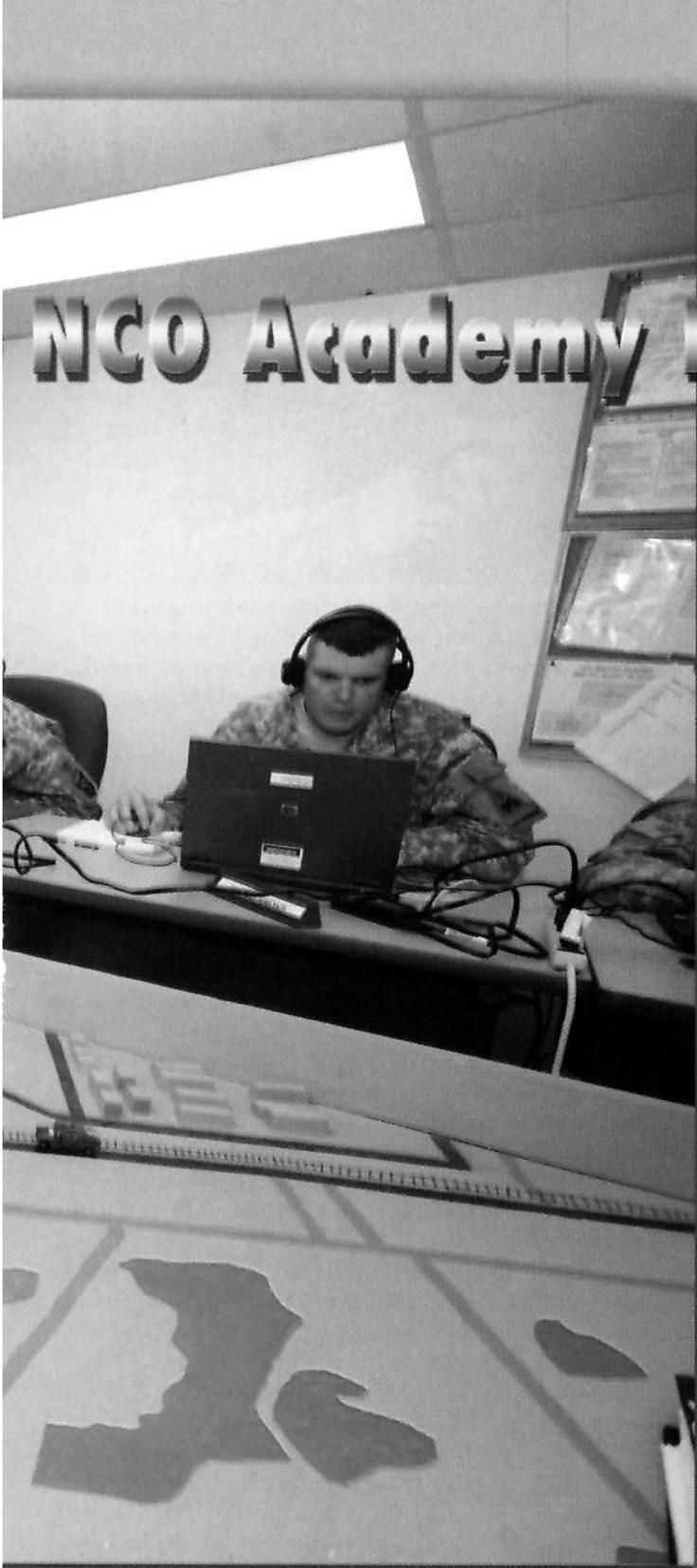
# Producing Professionals: The



*Students at the U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort Knox, Ky., participate in a command-and-control exercise, reacting to a decision-making scenario designed to expand their battlefield perspective.*

**T**he Army promotes soldiers to be noncommissioned officers. The mission at the U.S. Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy, Fort Knox, Ky., is to help mold them into professionals, and it is leading the way in making curriculum changes that the Army needs to educate NCO leaders, broaden their perspectives and expand their roles.

Given the nature of combat the Army has faced in Iraq,



# NCO Academy Revamped

**Text and Photographs**

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warrior, what is sometimes called the 'pentathlon NCO,'" said CSM Ray Edgar, the academy's commandant. "We are really getting after the adaptive leader concept—not just addressing the NCO in combat, but all the principles and important tasks necessary for the full NCO."

"What I want to produce is an NCO who is a functional member of his leadership team, working with his officer. That will make both a better soldier and a better officer," CSM Edgar explained. "I want NCOs who step to the forefront, so we are teaching them *how* to think, not *what* to think."

The Army's strategic emphasis in revamping the Non-commissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) is to expand NCOs' direct participation in staff and command functions, to communicate clearly on the same level with commissioned officers and to have the capability to fully take over their jobs if necessary, especially in combat situations, while still maintaining traditional NCO roles and functions. To that end, NCOs must appreciate the frames of reference and approaches that commissioned officers employ so that they will be able to understand a situation from the same perspective as a commissioned officer and contribute within an expanded range of activities. It is not that the Army is trying to turn NCOs into officers; it is simply a matter of having leaders with a common perspective and understanding. As an NCO moves up in rank and responsibility, those things become more important, and as an NCO moves through the series of NCOES courses during his or her career, those advanced elements will carry greater emphasis.

"We can quickly become obsolete if we don't communicate effectively with officers," CSM Edgar explained. "And we are acknowledging that the NCO's role is expanding. We're not compromising ourselves as NCOs. We can be stern disciplinarians *and* effective communicators."

Much is being incorporated into what was called the advanced NCO leadership course, which, for infantry, armor and cavalry NCOs, is now called the maneuver senior

Afghanistan and other parts of the world, more has been asked of NCOs in recent times, and even more is likely to be asked in the future.

"We have to make them adaptive," said 1SG Tim Metheny, deputy commandant of the Fort Knox academy. "An NCO today has to be adaptive and multifunctional—a hybrid warrior."

"NCO education is being geared to produce that hybrid

*Students issue orders over a simulated command network.*



leader course. To prepare NCOs to assume positions one or two levels above their rank, some elements of the first sergeants' course and Sergeants Major Academy are being pushed down to that course. The Sergeants Major Academy curriculum will adapt to better correspond to the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) curriculum, and the Sergeants Major Academy will eventually relocate to the CGSC's home at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., to strengthen the bonds between the two courses.

The Fort Knox NCO Academy, located at the Army's Armor/Cavalry Center, and the NCO academy at the Infantry Center, Fort Benning, Ga., hosted the primary tests for curriculum shifts outside the Sergeants Major Academy. The changes developed there will be adapted and incorporated at the rest of the Army's NCO academies.

**W**hile changing a course is an elaborate task, the Fort Knox academy had the maneuver senior leader course requirements completed 12 months ahead of schedule and the advanced leader course ready nine months early.

In general, the maneuver senior leader course uses situational training and discussions as teaching methods—rather than rote learning and testing—to advance adaptive leadership. As the information load and complexity were increased by about half, the course time was shortened from the previous advanced NCO-course length (10 to 13 weeks) to a seven-week course.

"The result is that the NCOs attending the course are challenged," CSM Edgar said. "The response from them has been positive. These guys tell me that this is all worthwhile and that they are very satisfied. The students get a vote."

*CSM Ray Edgar, commandant of the Fort Knox NCO Academy.*



To achieve this required shifting of the mind-set and culture within the academy cadre, excluding those who could not or would not adapt, and bringing everyone into the project as a team. Only a cohesive unit could "fully execute the academy transformation," CSM Edgar said.

CSM Edgar, who took over as commandant in March 2008, said he had to make the cadre and civilian instructors "understand the impact that this could have—that this was a one-time chance to make an impact on the Armor and Cavalry branches."

"As instructors, the first thing we needed was credibility," CSM Edgar said. "Now we have about 95 percent combat veterans, which makes each of them credible and relevant to the student population—they can talk to a guy who's had three combat tours."

"Ultimately," CSM Edgar added, "what allowed us to make this transformation was taking ownership as an academy and individually. Each first sergeant and instructor took individual ownership and stepped up. And I have to be thankful for the command autonomy we were given: All this was NCO built, NCO run, NCO taught and with NCOs responsible."

Since most combat arms NCOs in service today have combat experience, a hurdle is making them understand the benefit of institutional training, according to the commandant.

"Many of them come here with the attitude of 'I don't need this. I've done it all.'" CSM Edgar said. "We have to show them that there are more skills necessary to be an NCO than kicking down doors. We have to sell them on this because experience in an operational environment is not a substitute for institutional learning. And we can never rest. Everybody here understands that this requires constant refinement."

"Nobody had to sell me on how important this is," CSM Edgar said. "Intellect is the most important thing our NCOs bring to the fight." ★