

The Making of a Warrant Officer

Candidates take first steps toward new career

by WO1 T. Alan Moore

FORT RUCKER, Ala. (Army News Service, Jan. 9, 2001) -- With his chin resting on his fist, Warrant Officer Candidate Karl Perkins sat at a table contemplating what was about to happen. He had checked and rechecked his list of required items. All of his gear, properly stenciled with his last name, was packed and ready to go. At any minute, he would meet the cadre of the 1st Warrant Officer Company -- the training, advising and counseling officers that would control his every waking moment for the next six weeks.

The mood among the candidates of Class 01-03, all 72 of them, was a blend of nervous giddiness, and anxiety with a hint of dread. The tension was undeniable. If any were eager to begin training, it was only because they were eager to finish.

"There is anxiety, of course," said Perkins. "But it's a good anxiety, a good stress. I just keep telling myself this is the very first step in a new beginning."

In preparation for the move from being "Snowbirds" at the Headquarters Company where they inprocessed, to becoming full resident-candidates at the 1st Warrant Officer Company, the class leadership devised a good plan. They had already been briefed that they would have to carry their bags from the HHC building to the barracks across the street at 1st WOC.

The class leadership decided to stockpile all their equipment into a single room near the hallway entrance, in the hopes of saving time and sweat later when the TAC officers would no doubt be demanding that things happen more quickly. The HHC executive officer, CW3 Michael Ellis, discovered that the candidates had transferred the bags without permission and ordered that each be returned to its original room.

The candidates tried to keep positive as they scurried to "undo" all the work they had just put into prepositioning their equipment.

Move Out

The move began when the TAC team leader, CW2 Ira Brown, ordered the class leader to hold an accountability formation. From that point on, the candidates have no class colors, they are not allowed to carry a guidon, drink caffeine, phone home, talk during meals or even call cadence. Until otherwise earned, a candidate has no rights at all.

Brown, a no-nonsense TAC Officer, has little patience for anything that isn't within the standards of the WOC Guide -- the candidates' bible and survival manual. Within the first 15 minutes, he dismissed six or seven class leaders for various displays of incompetence or for violations of the regulations.

"I'm in the hiring and firing business today," Brown told the candidates. "Who is going to step up and lead this class? How about you, candidate," he said pointing to an unsuspecting troop in the first rank. "You're my new class leader."

As soon as the candidate opened his mouth with, "Sir, yes sir," he was wrong.

Brown let him off with a correction, "How about sounding off with, 'Sir, candidate your last name.' I'm pretty sure that's what the WOC Guide says. I don't know though I could be wrong."

He wasn't of course, but he had made his point.

After a series of routine questions: anyone on profile? Does any one not want to be here? Any one in a relationship with an enlisted soldier? Brown then handed the class leader a written order to read aloud. In general, the order directed a move within one hour. Then it went into specifics -- candidates would carry one bag at a time -- in the left hand so that it would still be possible to salute each officer they encountered along the way. Somewhere in the order it was mentioned that all personnel items would be displayed in accordance with the WOC Guide and that before bedtime a ROC would be displayed.

"Does anyone not understand these instructions," the class leader asked.

When no one spoke up, it was evident to the TAC team that the class, without really even knowing what a ROC (room occupancy card) was, had agreed to a mission they didn't fully understand. It was perhaps their first lesson as a class, a mistake for which they may later have to explain.

Exhausted from the move, the candidates spent the first night organizing their wall locker displays and wondering what tomorrow -- the first official training day toward becoming a warrant officer -- would bring.

Warrant candidates begin with stress evaluation

On day one, the wake-up call was led by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Christopher Dodd, commander of the 1st Warrant Officer Company.

About half a dozen of his Training, Advising and Counseling officers, or TAC officers, all in PT attire, waited at the bottom of the stairs for the clock to tick it's way to 0430. Upstairs, 72 candidates, snug in their bunks, were blissfully unaware that the wake-up committee was assembling.

At precisely 0430, the wake up crew followed Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ira Brown, the TAC team leader for Class 2001-03, as he ascended the stairwell. Carrying a bullhorn, a clipboard and a class roster, Brown tiptoed into the long hallway and engaged the siren on the bullhorn. An ear-piercing wail shattered the silence of slumber and filled the air with instant chaos and urgency. The siren's scream jarred the candidates to the realization of training day 1 -- stress day.

"Get up! Get Up," the TACs barked. "Get on the wall!"

Sleepy heads stumbled from their beds. Each weary body, fueled by a sudden burst of adrenaline, appeared to move 10 times faster than the brain. The candidates lined themselves on the wall outside their rooms. Ideally, the candidates would all come to the rigid position of attention -- every head, rump, and heel touching the wall, in accordance with the Warrant Officer Candidates' Guide. That didn't happen.

The day's objective and subjective assessments of the candidates have begun. Brown writes notes on his clipboard. As the team of TAC officers walked up and down the hallway, very few of them were given the greeting of the day. Candidates, not three feet from the commander, failing to give him the courtesy of the greeting of the day?

Unbelievable.

Time is wasting -- 0440

The members of the class were given six minutes to brush their teeth, perform personal hygiene and change into PT shirts, BDU pants and running shoes. All watches and jewelry would be secured in the wall lockers, it was ordered. Furthermore, every candidate would report back on the wall with their military identification card in their right back pocket and each would wear their dog tags and carry a full canteen of water.

Brown is notorious for issuing detailed orders and demanding that a list of actions to be taken immediately. It's all part of evaluating whether or not candidates listen to what they're being asked to do, whether or not they pay attention to detail, he said. He and the TAC team are trying to stress out the candidates. It was working.

"We deliberately put too many tasks on them because we want to see how they prioritize, how they deal with those demands," Brown admits. "The first two weeks of training are very high stress, some of that comes from the TAC officers, most of it comes from the candidates not living up to the standards."

Most of these candidates have impeccable records as NCOs, they were solid performers in their field or else they wouldn't have been selected to be a WOC. But, Brown is quick to point out, the demands upon an officer are very different, making it possible that a few stellar NCOs might make substandard officers. That's where subjective evaluations come into play at the WOCS.

"Times up, why are you not already on the wall," asked a TAC officer who had been watching the clock. The candidates scurried into position, but it was too late.

Several candidates came out of their rooms wearing a canteen on their pistol belts. That was not what the TAC officers wanted to see, they specifically said candidates would "carry a full canteen of water."

This was failure to follow instructions.

Only 15 minutes into the first day of training and already things were not going very well.

First Formation -- 0451

The candidates were trying to get themselves into a formation for accountability. The class first sergeant called for the count, but he botched the command of execution.

To make matters worse, the squad leaders accepted the incorrect command and began to report any way.

Another red mark on the class record.

When the class PT officer displayed some difficulty in extending the formation for stretching and warm-up exercises, the senior TAC officer, CW3 Norbert Schmidt took over.

"You know it's a sad day when I have to take over this formation because you don't know what the regulations say about drill and ceremony," he told the candidates.

Moving out -- 0509

Eventually, the candidates lined in three ranks set out on the first day of physical training. A mile down the road, they gathered on a baseball field for countless push-ups, sit-ups and grass drills.

After more than an hour and a half of intense PT led by the TAC officers, they ran back to the company area. Just when the candidates were convinced it was over for the day, the TAC team took them on a one-mile jaunt to the infamous "pit." The pit is a red clay depression about the size of a football field, where candidates did more exercises with rifles and still more grass drills -- roll left, get up, get down, roll right. When the candidates started to get tired, the TAC team was relentless in applying the stress.

"How can you come to an officer producing school in such sad physical condition," asked a TAC officer.

What may seem like hazing to an outsider is anything but, said CW2 Aaron Graff, a TAC officer who is on the first training day for the 50th time. "Absolutely not," he said. "Everything we do here is a tool for evaluating these candidates. In order to really assess their leadership ability, we have to put them in stressful situations. We can't shoot live rounds at them, but to get an understanding of how they might perform in combat, we look at how they perform when they are physically, mentally and emotionally tired."

The stress, the PT, the confusion, everything, right down to the bullhorn wake-up call is all part of the master plan to assess candidates, said Brown.

"We are looking for leaders who are accountable and responsible for their actions and decisions," he said. "If you've never had to deal with this type of chaos and function in spite of it, then you don't know how you will handle the situation. How you handle that defines your character as a leader. "

After over four miles of running, two hours of grass drills, nobody quit. It appears that at least for now, all 72 candidates, though they were stressed, exhausted and perhaps even overwhelmed, still wanted to be warrant officers. It was 0700.

Candidates' day filled with decisions, consequences

The life of a warrant officer candidate is about decisions and consequences, accountability and responsibility. It's about multi-tasking, coping with stress and time management.

For most candidates, simply getting through each day is a small victory and a baby step toward the silver bar with a little black dot. Considering all the demands thrust upon them, a typical day in the life of a warrant officer candidate feels like drinking from a fire hose.

Training Day 9

0535 -- Warrant Officer Candidate Joshua Kinnee had exactly seven minutes to get off on the right foot. The moment he heard the wake up call, he flipped on the light, jumped out of bed and began the scramble.

"You try to prep as much as you can the night before," said Kinnee. "But right now we aren't allowed to 'pre-flight' our uniforms and such, so there is only so much you can do."

Within that seven-minute window each candidate has to make their bed, put on the appropriate physical training attire, which changes in accordance with the morning forecast, grab a PT cap, gloves, PT mat and a full canteen of water. During this time the candidates must also brush their teeth, a seemingly simple task complicated by 70 people crowding around a dozen sinks. Candidates must ensure their personal area is secured and their wall lockers open and inspection-ready.

0542 -- All three classes of candidates formed for accountability. Class 2001-03 was late. The class leadership would have to answer for this foul up later.

0552 -- The class members began their warm-up and stretching exercises.

0600 -- The company reformed to salute the flag.

0601 -- Class 2001-03 conducted physical training in the company area. This day was a particularly special for PT, because members of the senior class conducted a 4.2-mile victory run to celebrate their last day as candidates.

0655 -- The junior classes lined both sides of the road leading to the company area to applaud the senior class members as they finish their run. For the candidates of class 2001-03, high-fiving the seniors was proof that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

0705 -- The class has been shortchanged five minutes of personal hygiene time because the company commander wanted to recognize eight senior candidates for earning a perfect score on their final PT test. The lost time is critical because they all must also shower within 30 minutes, another simple task complicated by 70 people and six shower stalls.

The candidates had to shave, get into uniform, turn in laundry, exchange their bed linen, collect all the books, handouts and manuals they will need for academic training, clean the latrines and buff the hall.

"It's pandemonium, mayhem," said Kinnee. "People are going all different directions."

Actually it was an orchestrated chaos. Candidate William Howell, as a class platoon leader, had the responsibility for motivating the candidates in his section to complete the mission.

"The reality is you will do some things well, some not so well and some not at all," he said. "Never in my 13 years in the Army did I think I'd ever say this, but I wish I had more time to shine my boots. You find yourself stressing over trivial things, like whether or not your flip flops are aligned properly."

0728 -- With common areas clean, the class moved out the door.

0735 -- The class conducted a uniform inspection.

0745 -- Moved to the dining facility for breakfast. Disciplined dining was the rule -- no talking, wipe your mouth after each bite, eyes front and sit at the position of attention.

0820 --The class moved to the General Studies Branch, where they spent the day in an academic environment. The subjects for the day ranged from how to conduct a military briefing to counseling subordinates.

"In some ways going to the GSB is a break," said Candidate Ilicia Kirby, the lone female of the class. "It's stressful in a different way. You still have to be on your Ps and Qs every second. All the tests are closed book and that's stressful, you have to study or you could be eliminated for academic reasons and that is stressful as well."

1230 -- Lunch.

1330 -- Class leaders met with the TAC team for leadership assessment and counseling. Kinnee, as a squad leader, got an unsatisfactory for the day. With only three months in the Army, he was not surprised.

"You make the decisions, you live with the consequences," he said. "I'm progressing, but I still get unsatisfactory because we were not hitting our marks as a team yet."

1430-1830 -- More academics, followed by another counseling session with the TAC team.

1830 -- Dinner with a side of disciplined dining.

1915-2015 -- Personal time. During this hour, candidates had to shine their boots, account for all their display items, write disciplinary memos if required, and prepare for the next day's round of evaluations.

"You have to think out exactly what you're going to do the next day," said Howell. "That's how you make it here -- a mental war game, fight the battle in your head."

2015-2115 -- Mandatory study time. Each candidate sat quietly at their desk, with wall lockers closed, focusing solely on academic material.

2115-2215 -- Common area cleanup. Cleaned the latrine, buffed the floors, emptied the trash.

2215-2245 -- Personal hygiene time.

2245 -- Lights out. In about seven hours, they will start the day all over again with the seven-minute scramble.

Academics focus on core of Corps

Training Day -- 16 of 30

Exhausted, a warrant officer candidate in the back of the classroom succumbs to the Sandman and drifts, ever so gently... His head sways and then dips forward.

With a jolt he is awake again, trying to focus his tired eyes on the Powerpoint presentation. He shifts in his tiny, rump-numbing seat, as if that were the culprit that lured him into snooze mode in the first place. Dosing off in class is a major no-no. A deep breath, a drink of water -- it's so hard to combat the sleep monster.

It's not the instructor's fault, because the class is interesting and important. It's just that candidates are inundated with so much information to absorb, digest and recite. Without caffeine rights, the soda and coffee drinking privilege candidates earn in time, he has to rely on sheer determination to stay awake and pay attention.

Much of a candidate's day is spent in an academic setting at the General Studies Branch in the Warrant Officer Career Center. It behooves every candidate to glean as much information from the instructor as possible. The six-week course is designed to test the candidates and at the same time provide them with a basic foundation on which to build their careers, said CW5 Thomas Flynn, deputy commandant of the WOCC.

Between 1,200 and 1,500 candidates attend WOCS every year; almost 90 percent of them graduate the course, said Flynn.

"Becoming a warrant officer is not for everybody," he said. "We're looking for soldiers with a sound technical background who want to be challenged in different ways than they were as NCOs. We want people who want to learn to influence others through their actions and deeds rather than by the rank on their shoulder."

The Army Warrant Officer Corps is comprised of over 25,000 men and women of the active Army and reserve components. With candidates from 15 branches and 59 MOSs in the Warrant Officer Corps, all attending the same training, there is not a lot of commonality among the MOSs. What IS common is physical training, drill and ceremony, uniform issues and a common core of general academics.

"The course has evolved," Flynn said. "Just as it is different than when I went through this course in 1970-71, it is different in 2000 than it was in 1996. The premise is still the same. We don't focus on specific technical aspects of each warrant officer MOS. Rather we are primarily concerned with the officership side -- teaching the core values of every warrant officer."

The General Studies Branch is continually updating the program, said CW4 Christopher Dodd, commander of the 1st Warrant Officer Company.

"I think the course is better academically than ever before," Dodd said. "People who make it this far in the selection process have proven leadership traits, but we have to test them to determine if they are ready to take that quantum leap into the officer corps."

To direct candidates down the pathway of becoming an officer, the WOCC instructors give hands on and classroom instruction on command structure, writing in the Army style, counseling subordinates, writing an operations order, the history of the warrant officer corps, problem solving process and officer etiquette to name a few.

Some of the curriculum is mandatory instruction directed by the Training and Doctrine Command, some of it is specific to the WOCC. All of it is testable. Fail a test once and the candidate will retest probably the same day, a second failure is grounds for dismissal.

"All the tests are closed book tests too," said Candidate Ilicia Kirby. "That's something that I'm not used to because things were done differently at the NCO Academy. You really have to study. You could be eliminated from the course for academic reasons."

With only six weeks to mold candidates into the basic image of the Warrant Officer Corps, the program must be well-scripted. Everything, therefore, has a purpose, every academic test, every class, everything is designed to allow the cadre to peel away the layers of a candidate, much like an onion, to see what is at their core, said Dodd.

Senior WOC phase opens door to mentorship

The "Golden Dragons" started Warrant Officer Candidate School with 72 troops and on training day 21, the 67 that remain reached a major milestone in their endeavor to become officers.

Having passed every subjective and objective evaluation thus far, the candidates have been promoted to the senior phase of training.

That means they will likely have a different relationship with their Training, Advising and Counseling officers than they had in their initial days at the WOCS.

"There is a myth that the TAC officers are just a bunch of screamers - drill sergeants, and that WOCS is like basic training," said Deputy Commandant of the Warrant Officer Career Center CW5 Thomas Flynn, an aviator. "The reality of the program is rather intense in the beginning, but we direct candidates down the pathway we need them to go. Once they're headed in the right direction, we pull back some."

The TAC officers, who all volunteered for the program, were each hand-picked from a variety of MOSs. Each has a common standard and they all share the values of the corps.

"Drill sergeants and TAC officers are not the same - even when you discover that your TAC officer, CW2 James Ramey, was your drill sergeant in 1992," said WO1 Norm Armstrong, a flight student who graduated WOCS last spring.

"I didn't even have to see him. I heard his voice and I knew immediately it was him," said Armstrong, recalling his first day as a WOC. "He's a lot more quiet now, more reserved. He has been a mentor for

me during two major turning points in my life - the day I became a soldier and the day, eight years later, when I became an officer."

"During WOCS there really isn't as much time for mentoring as you would like," said Ramey, a food services technician working as a TAC officer.

"In the senior phase, we have more opportunities for mentorship," he said. "We try to bring in senior warrant officers to talk with the candidates and help set them up for success in their basic course, which comes after WOCS."

While drill sergeants are known for spouting orders and shouting commands, TAC officers rarely order anything more than answers to questions. Ceaseless questions designed to expose self-doubt in candidates - Is that what the regulation says? Are you asking me or telling me? Are you sure? If you're not confident, how can you expect others to be confident in you?

"We do ask a lot of rhetorical questions to get the wheels in their mind turning," said CW2 Monique Harvey, a traffic analysis technician and TAC officer at the WOCS.

"The TAC team counsels and mentors the candidates throughout the entire course," she added. "The candidates don't always recognize it as mentoring because it comes in various forms - sometimes as class discussions or individual assessments or through spot corrections, which are quite routine here," she said. "The mentoring is more career-oriented in the senior phase."

"In the senior phase, candidates are getting close to graduation and they begin to see the light at the end of the tunnel. That's when they need mentoring the most," said CW2 Bruce Whiteside, a unit maintenance technician serving as a TAC officer. "That's where trouble can start. Sometimes they have their eyes on the prize, so to speak, and they might slip up or have a relapse," he said.

Whiteside said mentorship is the best part of being a leader. He likened it to parenthood.

"If you raise them too easy, they will be soft leaders so you have to raise them hard and teach them what to do when things get tough, so they will know what to do. You can be firm and still be a mentor at the same time."

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(NOTE: Today there are more than 25,000 Army warrant officers in the Army. If you think the way of the warrant might be right for you, the U.S Army Recruiting Command is the best place to begin your quest to become a warrant officer. Their web site has all the details and application procedures a soldier would need <http://www.usarec.army.mil/hq/warrant>. WO1 T. Alan Moore, a former enlisted journalist, is a student pilot attending flight school at Fort Rucker, Ala.)

(Editor's note: This is a multi-part series on the making of a warrant officer. All warrant officer candidates, regardless of their specialty, attend the Warrant Officer Candidate School at Fort Rucker, Ala. The Army News Service followed the members of WOCS Class 2001-03 through their six-week course of instruction with weekly articles.)

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