

TRUE TO THE CORPS

Atterbury shows the new face of warrant officer training

BY SGT. ROBERT G. COOPER III
CRIER STAFF WRITER

Adaptive technical expert, combat leader, advisor and professional: these are a few of the words that describe the Army's Warrant Officer Corps. As a highly trained individual who assumes the role of teacher and administrator among a vast array of Army operations, the warrant officer is crucial to maintaining, leading and managing a system of success for many military departments.

As such, the need for warrant officers across the board has continued its upward progression and created a greater need to train these elite specialists.

Answering the call to teach were the National Guard Bureau and Command Chief Warrant Officers from various states. Last year, they tailored the Army's rigid indoctrination of the Warrant Officer Corps into readily available training for Reserve Components.

In September 2006, Indiana set a landmark throughout the corps' history by graduating 119 warrant officer candidates during the first Warrant Officer Candidate School-Reserve Component. This year, the program continued its training, graduating 108 candidates on Aug. 4 at the Indiana War Memorial in Indianapolis. But it's not stopping here; as a result of last year's successes, the program has grown considerably.

Prior to 2006, the only way to receive warrant officer training was to attend a five-week course at Fort Rucker, Ala., making it infeasible for traditional National Guard and Reserve Soldiers to attend. The WOCS-RC program customized the training into something more practical: one weekend a month for five months of on-the-job training, followed by a two-week leadership course.

"The Warrant Officer Candidate School is important because it is the only way to assess and appoint warrant officers," said Chief Warrant Officer Frank T. Vaughn, Command Chief Warrant Officer of the Indiana National Guard.

"Unlike commissioned officers, we have no direct appointment process," he said. "It needs to be earned. This program is unique in that it allows for Reserve and National Guard members more flexible opportunities to complete this necessary training with the same high standards of Fort Rucker. It gives them a chance to become what they aspire to become without compromising their careers or families."

Tough training for technical experts

Both this year's and last year's two-week training phases were held at the Indiana Military Academy at Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center. Later this September, Fort McClellan, Ala., is scheduled to begin offering the final phase training, as well, and plans to graduate another 120 candidates.

Chief Warrant Officer Chris Jennings, the senior Training, Advising, Counseling (TAC) officer for Indiana's training, explained the importance of the two-week course:

"The focus of training is to develop a more rounded leader, somebody who can make the right decision and stand by it," he said. "As a warrant officer, you can't micromanage; you need to step back, evaluate how things are going." The course, which tests the physical and mental capabilities of each individual candidate, stresses leadership and task prioritizing. In addition to classroom education, candidates also receive weapons and urban combat training, conduct land navigation missions, operate and maintain

forward operating bases in hostile environments and perform squad tactical exercises that form them into a cohesive fighting team.

Following graduation, the candidate will then go on to complete the Warrant Officer Basic Course, which varies depending on the individual's occupational specialty. Jennings said that the two-week course prepares them for what lies in store. They still have some growing and learning to do when they leave here, but our job is to get them postured right so they are ready," he said. Warrant Officer Candidate Paul Kawashiri of the California National Guard said that he was challenged constantly throughout the two weeks.

"We trained in a very stressful environment," he said. "You don't know what will happen next, and you have to think on your feet. You had to make a decision, right or wrong, and stick with it. This was one of the most challenging leadership schools I've been to." Kawashiri said that the school has shaped him into what the Warrant Officer Corps demands from each person within its ranks.

"It helped me to identify the weaker points in my leadership abilities and improve them," he said. "I've been in 14 years, been deployed and managed small teams. This class has helped me gain more confidence than any of that."

The need to grow

Although the history of the Warrant Officer Corps dates back to 1918, when the first warrant officers served as mine planters with the Coast Artillery, the WOCS program was created in 1985. Despite the ability to train and appoint warrant officers, strength numbers across the board are low. On the National Guard level, reports as of July 2007 show that the Warrant Officer Corps stands at 67 percent strength nationally, with approximately 6,661 warrant officers assigned.

Vaughn said the primary reason for the low numbers is the high standards needed to become a warrant officer. But another reason is because many of those who are qualified are vying for open slots at Fort Rucker. Now that the Reserve Components have more venues in which to receive the training, strength numbers are expected to increase.

"The word is spreading, Jennings said. "We've almost doubled our number of candidates from last year because of (Fort McClellan). Fort Rucker has seen our success. We're becoming the standard for all participating states."

"The timing was correct for this venue," Vaughn said. "Next year will be our accreditation year. We hope TRADOC (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command) signs off on it, meaning that we are performing at their standards."

The WOCS-RC is receiving high marks from Fort Rucker. Col. Mark T. Jones, commandant for the Warrant Officer Career Center there, praised the accomplishments of the program.

"This program is more than necessary," he said. "Where the Army is right now, we could not be doing this any other way." Jones went on to exemplify Indiana's training capabilities:

"How Indiana and Camp Atterbury are allowing other states to come in and train at our standards is without peer," he said. "Chief Vaughn, along with (Indiana Adjutant General) Maj. Gen. Umbarger and (Indiana Joint Force Land Component Commander) Brig. Gen Tooley, deserves a ton of credit for ensuring that these officers are produced at such a high caliber. I've been there to watch how they train and prepare them, and I told them, 'How you get there may differ, but the standard is not compromised.'

"This program is very powerful and very positive, and I like to see more states step up and see the importance of this program," Jones added.

Twenty-one states have participated in the WOCS-RC program by sending their candidates through the course.

"Will other states get involved? Hopefully," Jones said. "But Indiana is leading the pack."



Warrant Officer Candidates Henry Storm, left, and Todd Garrepy maneuver a wooden plank into position during the Leadership Reaction Course June 27 at Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center. The course tests candidates' ability to function as a team while presented with various obstacles. During this scenario, the candidates must get their team and supplies from one side of a sandbox to the other without touching the sand.