

Preparing to wear the diamond: What it takes to complete the First Sergeant Course

By Master Sgt. Matthew J. West

The position of first sergeant is one of the most honored and sought after positions in the NCO Corps. Only those that have outstanding leadership qualities, the highest moral and ethical values, integrity, dedication to duty, military occupational skill proficiency, outstanding personal appearance and military bearing and the physical toughness required are selected for this prestigious position, according to Sgt. Maj. Christopher Adams, Chief of the First Sergeant Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas. Because of its importance, the Army Chief of Staff made it mandatory for all first-time first sergeants to attend the First Sergeant Course (FSC). The intensive three-week course focuses on six major training areas: unit personnel management and administration; leadership, discipline and morale; logistics; maintenance and security; physical fitness; and operations and training management.

The current policy states that all active-duty Soldiers selected to serve in first sergeant positions must attend FSC within six months of assuming these duties. Reserve Component First Sergeants will attend either the Resident FSC or the FSC-RC within a one-year window beginning six months prior to assuming the position.

The course is divided into two phases: The students complete the Phase I coursework via correspondence courses. Phase I contains 31 self-study lessons, approximately 58.5 hours of instruction. Once they finish the coursework, the students take a proctored exam. All students must complete Phase I before enrolling in Phase II.

Phase II consists of 104 hours of programmed instruction, spanning three weeks, that gives the students everything they need to know in order wear the “diamond,” Adams said. Phase II is conducted either as a resident course at USASMA; Fort McCoy, Wis.; Leesburg Training Center, S.C.; Camp Williams, Utah; or Fort Indiantown Gap, Penn., or through video tele-training (VTT) at various sites Army-wide.

The classes are set up and taught in small-group settings. The small-group leaders instruct the students, but the students often add to the instruction by sharing their experiences and interacting with each other.

Whether the Soldier takes Phase II through the resident course or at a VTT site, preparation is the key to their success. “Soldiers selected to attend the FSC should prepare themselves both physically and mentally for the course,” said Adams.

Those attending the resident course at the Academy should keep in mind that Fort Bliss is located in the Franklin Mountains of El Paso. The region is considered a desert environment and is also approximately 3,700 feet above sea level, Adams





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Soldiers can complete the First Sergeant Course, Phase II instruction, via the Academy's video teletraining capabilities. Right, physical fitness is an important part of the First Sergeant Course. Besides passing the APFT, resident students also take part in the First Sergeant Course Challenge, an intense competition that includes chin-ups, a sand-bag race and the rope climb.

explained. This is probably a significantly different climate for most students. The elevation plays a big role during the record Army Physical Fitness Test; students on average lose approximately a minute to a minute and a half off of their run times.

"If you are close to your minimum run time, you should probably conduct pre-training before attending the course," Adams said. The students take the APFT on the third day of the course, which doesn't allow them much time to get acclimated, Adams said. Soldiers with temporary profiles that prevent them from taking the APFT will not be enrolled. Those Soldiers with permanent profiles will be tested within the limits of their profiles, he said.

In addition to the APFT, all students weigh-in during in-processing and those found outside the authorized allowable standard are taped in accordance with AR 600-9.

Mental preparation is just as important as physical preparation, Adams said. "The students must be able to conduct

research, locate key information in regulations and understand Army systems. All of these are vital to succeeding in the course," he said. To prepare for the course, see the accompanying list of regulations and field manuals, which provides a comprehensive – but not all encompassing – list, Adams said. The students will use several other regulations and manuals during the course, but understanding those key regulations will help the students' ensure their success.

In addition to comprehending Army publications, battle-focused training is a big part of the course so the



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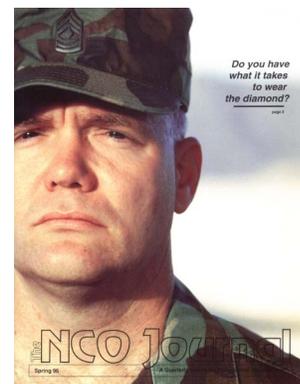
students should be familiar with their units' Mission Essential Task Lists (METL) before attending the course, he said.

On average, the FSC graduates 700 students annually.

While the basics of the course remain the same, the course material is constantly changing to reflect the latest lessons learned, tactics, techniques and procedures.

Soldiers scheduled to attend the course who have questions or comments, may contact the Chief/Senior Instructor at DSN 978-8205/8479 or Commercial (915) 568-8205/8479. Students may also e-mail questions or comments to the FSC cadre at ATSS-BBF-FSC@bliss.army.mil.

Editor's note: Master Sgt. Matthew J. West is an Infantryman with Airborne Ranger experience and more than 20 years service in the Army. He is a graduate of the Sergeant Major Course, Class 54, assigned to 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Benning, Ga. He is a former First Sergeant Course instructor and has served in every leadership position from Team Leader to Operations Sergeant Major. This article appeared originally in the Spring 1996 NCO Journal.



Must-have reference materials

AR 27-10; AR 600-20; AR 623-205; AR 600-9; AR 350-1; AR 350-17; all Supply Management regulations; FM 22-100; FM 3-0; ARTEP 7-8 MTP.

The USASMA Web site, located at <http://usasma.bliss.army.mil/FSC/Pubs.htm>, provides a list all of the references students will use during the course.