NCOs' role in JROTC/ROTC

Photo by Sgt. Michael Behlin

Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Loos, a maintenance management NCO with the 3rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary), describes his experiences in Haiti and in the Army to students of the North Bullitt High School JROTC in Shepherdsville, Ky., on Thursday, April 15. Loos, along with several other 3rd ESC Soldiers, spoke to the students as part of a community outreach project to increase awareness of the command's mission in Haiti.

By Spc. Samuel J. Phillips

The U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps and the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps share more than a name. Both play an equally valuable part in developing our nation's young people. While JROTC teaches high school students to become more disciplined, successful and productive members of society, ROTC trains college students to become the strong, independent leaders our military needs.

One of the biggest similarities between the two programs is their use of noncommissioned officers. Both programs take full advantage of the boundless experience and knowledge found within the NCO Corps.

JROTC was established in 1916 with the passage of the National Defense Act. The law authorized the loan of federal military equipment and the assignment of active-duty military personnel as high school instructors.

There were only six JROTC units at its inception, and these units were considered primarily as a tool to identify enlisted recruits and officer candidates. However, this was not the intended goal of JROTC. Rather, as Title 10 of the U.S. Code states, "The purpose of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps is to instill in students in United States secondary educational institutions the value of citizenship, service to the United States, personal responsibility and a sense of accomplishment."

The program, which now falls under the U.S. Army Cadet Command headquartered at Fort Monroe, Va., has come a long way since 1916, switching from active-duty instructors to retirees and expanding from six units to 1,645 schools throughout every state in the nation and American schools overseas. Overall, more than 4,000 JROTC instructors teach about 281,000 cadets.

Photo by Molly Hayden

Kyle Jackson, 16, traverses his way across a wire as his team looks on during an exercise at the Leaders' Reaction Course at Camp Kasserine in Grafenwöhr, Germany, as part of the 10-day Cadet Leadership Challenge for JROTC cadets.

These instructors, many who are retired NCOs, are the key factor in the success of JROTC, said Command Sgt. Maj. Hershel L. Turner, USACC command sergeant major.

"These dedicated men and women feel like they still have a lot to contribute to their community and country," Turner said, "they are a valuable tool in molding our future genarations."

"I have always wanted to work with young people," said retired Sgt. Maj. James B. Yarbrough, a JROTC instructor at MacArthur Senior High School in Lawton, Okla. "This is the perfect opportunity for me to be able to coach and mentor students, and it's based off of what I've been doing for 26 years. You can't beat being able to share the experiences you had during your military life with someone who is still growing and maturing."

Those life experiences, coupled with a curriculum of ethics, citizenship, communications, leadership, life skills and other subjects, are taught within a strong military structure that instills in each student discipline and order. It is a learning environment like no other.

JROTC cadets break for lunch during their rigorous schedule at Camp Kasserine in Grafenwöhr, Germany. The cadets dined on meals ready-to-eat, a first and surprisingly pleasant experience for most.

Photo by Molly Hayden

"The (JROTC) class was the best class I have ever taken," said Ben H. Davis, a senior at MacArthur and a JROTC cadet major. "You have to deal with many different situations and people giving you the ability to better interact with society. The class also gives you firsthand experience in leadership by putting you in position where you have to take charge."

JROTC instructors' tutelage also extends outside the classroom.

"We hold our cadets accountable for all of their actions, including what they do outside of school," said retired 1st Sgt. Michael J. Romaka, a JROTC instructor at Lawton Senior High School in Lawton. "We give them opportunities to become involved with various community services that allow them to be productive members of their community and give them a sense of pride and accomplishment."

The students say they feel good about the services they provide to their neighborhoods.

"We go out to elementary schools and give lessons about the evils of gangs, drugs, alcohol, bullies and dropping out of school," said Kori Hughes, a senior at Lawton and a JROTC cadet captain. "It is a source of pride for me to be able to have an effect on a young person's life."

After graduation, students who participate in the JROTC program are left better prepared to face the world, whether or not they enter the military, Romaka said. The skills they learn in the program give them confidence and an edge over their competition.

"I can use what I learned in JROTC no matter where I go in life," said Desmond Caldwell, a junior at Lawton and a JROTC cadet sergeant first class.

"The best feeling you can get is when you see one of your former cadets go on to be successful in what they do, especially when they tell you that JROTC is what got them started in the right direction," Romaka said.

ROTC was established in 1916 to provide leadership and military training at colleges and universities across the country. Today, it is the largest source of commissioned officers in the U.S. military.

Currently, there are more than 20,000 cadets enrolled in 273 host programs that involve more than 1,100 partner and affiliate schools. The program produces about 60 percent of second lieutenants who join the active Army, Army Reserve and Army National Guard. In addition, more than 40 percent of current active-duty general officers were commissioned through ROTC.

Like JROTC, ROTC's success is largely due to its instructors, mostly comprised of senior active-duty and retired NCOs.

"The NCO instructors are invaluable to the [ROTC] program," said Maj. Rod Boles, professor of military science at Cameron University in Lawton. "I will never forget my instructors and what they taught me while I was in the program, and I wouldn't be the officer I am today without their guidance."

Some might ask why NCOs are training our future officers. The answer is really quite simple.

"Senior NCOs know what is required of an officer," said 2nd Lt. Nicholas Vondeburgh, a former sergeant and a graduate of the University of Texas at El Paso ROTC program. "These NCOs have worked with a lot of young officers in their careers and know exactly what the officer's role is within the unit. They know when and what actions the officers need to take to be proficient as young leaders."

On the other side of the coin, having NCOs as instructors in ROTC allows would-be officers to build a strong understanding of the roles NCOs play within a unit.

"We are able to share our experiences with cadets and give them an idea of how NCOs are best utilized within their units," said retired Master Sgt. Marreio Shepherd, a military science instructor at Cameron. "We are able to teach them that for a unit to be successful, both NCOs and officers need to work together as a team."

The training

1st Lt. Brendan Curran, aide de camp to Brig. Gen. Kurt S. Story, U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command deputy commanding general for operations, gives the main command brief at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., to visiting ROTC cadets from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

Photo by Michael Kahl

Photo by Allan Zdarsky

Army ROTC cadets attending the Leader Development and Assessment Course at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., mark their maps at a checkpoint during land navigation training.

cadets receive from these personal experiences is coupled with a vigorous academic curriculum that includes leadership development, Army customs and traditions, military operations and tactics, communications, weapons training, and various other classes to mold them into knowledgeable leaders ready to hit the ground running when they get to their first unit.

"Without the NCO instructors in ROTC, that initial relationship and respect between NCO and officer would not be instilled in our young leaders," Turner said.

"I take great pride in the fact that I'm training the future leaders of the Army," said Sgt. 1st Class Shannon Krey, a military science instructor at Cameron. "Even if they decide not to make the Army their career, I know that I have instilled in them the knowledge to be successful."

"One of the greatest feelings you can have is when a cadet receives their commission and thanks you for guiding them in the right direction," said Master Sgt. Robert Held, the senior military science instructor at UTEP. "It gives you a sense of accomplishment because you know that the young officers who you trained are going to go on to do great things for the Army."

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Army ROTC cadets attending the Leader Development and Assessment Course at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., finish their field exercise with a 10-kilometer road march.

Photo by Allan Zdarsky