

# WORLD'S TOP NCOs *experience* AMERICAN LIFE



Italian Sgt. Maj. Matea Luca, a student at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, explores the operation of a historic wet stone grinder in Johnson City, Texas.

Story and photos by Spc. David M. Gafford

**M**ilitary representatives from various countries around the world on a road trip to San Antonio is not a sight you see every day. Warrant Officer 1 Wee Giap Chua of Singapore, a passenger in the van, flipped through the static on the radio until he found “Don’t Stop Believin” by Journey. As the song echoed through the van, senior enlisted personnel from such places as the Netherlands, Afghanistan and Germany began singing the lyrics together. As the tune faded, they peered at road signs to see how much farther they had to go.

The international students of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy’s Class 61 visited San Antonio from March 26 to 31 to better understand culture, customs and traditions in the United States. Later in May, they visited Colorado and Washington, D.C., to further their education of American life.

The students visited several places in Texas to experience America, including the Alamo, the factory where the world’s Toyota Tundras are made, the Texas Capitol and Johnson City, the birthplace of President Lyndon B. Johnson. They also visited San Antonio’s famous Riverwalk and other cultural and historic landmarks in Texas’ heartland.

The first stop on the trip was the Alamo.

“The Alamo plays such a significant part in our history. It’s a good learning experience for the soldiers,” said Joyce Stophel, the field studies program manager for USASMA’s International Military Student Office.

A tour guide spoke of the brave “Texians,” what the group called themselves before becoming part of the United States. The Texians in 1836 held off Mexican troops during a 13-day siege before succumbing to the onslaught. The battle inspired many Texians in their quest for independence, which ended with



the defeat of the Mexican army at the Battle of San Jacinto near present-day Houston.

“If you want to be free, you have to fight. You may die, but the next generation will be free,” said Master Sgt. Kaba Tsirekidze of the Republic of Georgia.

While at the Alamo, the students learned about Davy Crockett, the famous American folk hero, frontiersman, Soldier and politician.

“Something that the students see in the whole battle is the determination and the bravery with which young Americans fought for their freedom,” said Michael Huffman, director of IMSO.

As the tour guide led the students through the historic building, representatives from Singapore, Georgia, Canada and many parts of Africa said they were intrigued by the story.

“A sergeant major in any army should know about other countries’ history,” said Master Sgt. Oyunbold Daribish of Mongolia. “In the military, history plays a big role.”

The next day, the students visited the world’s only Toyota Tundra plant. The students toured the factory to see how the pickup truck is made and to learn about the history of the company.

“We took the students here to introduce them into our industry,” Huffman said. “A lot of international students don’t realize that we produce foreign companies’ products in the U.S. It gives the students exposure to the free-market system and our trade agreements with other countries.”

“Visiting Toyota was impressive because we could see how

Jeffrey Peppers, a retired U.S. Army Soldier and Alamo tour guide, speaks to the international students of USASMA’s Class 61 during their visit to the San Antonio landmark.

technology is developing. My son was very excited to see how they build cars,” Daribish said.

At the next stop, the students visited the Texas state Capitol in Austin. There, they met with Rep. Joe Pickett, who represents east El Paso in the Texas House of Representatives. Pickett, a 16-year veteran of the House, showed the students around his legendary office, which is decorated like a movie theater with posters of movies that were filmed in El Paso. He spoke to the students about the history of Texas and shared some interesting facts, too. He also thanked the students for their service and for being allies to the United States.

“He helps educate the students on the state government and how it functions. He familiarizes the students with the state legislative process,” Huffman said.

The last day of the trip, the students visited Johnson City, Texas, President Johnson’s home.

They went through a tour of the Lyndon B. Johnson Museum and then watched two documentaries covering the life of Johnson and his wife, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird” Johnson.

“A lot of times when international [students] think about America, they think about New York City; they think about Washington, D.C.; they think of a metropolitan area. This shows

them the foundation of America,” Huffman said.

The students then walked across the street to Johnson’s boy-hood home, which still has all of the furniture and appliances the home had when Johnson lived there.

The next stop on the trip was the pioneer family settlement located on the Johnson ranch. Here, students toured homes, barns and farmland set up as it was when Johnson lived there. The international visitors saw the way these farmers lived, including how they made everything, from soap to sausage.

“My family lives in a city, so my kids are not exposed to a countryside environment. That was a good experience for them to see how ranch life was like,” Daribish said.

The final stop was the “Little White House,” a place on Johnson’s ranch where he spent much of his time running the country when away from Washington. This attraction not only had an old Air Force One presidential plane but also an Oval Office-style podium and backdrop. A garage housed many of Johnson’s classic cars. Nearby was a large house where Johnson and his wife lived and where Lady Bird Johnson lived after Johnson’s death.

“He spent so much time actually running the office of the presidency from his home. That highlights the modesty of his lifestyle and that he was well-rooted,” Huffman said.

By visiting these locations in Johnson City, the students were able to experience the life of the former president in a personal way, Huffman said. They saw where he grew up, where he enjoyed walks with his wife and where he did business as the president of the United States.

“He started his career as a teacher in a very poor environment, saw how education was vital in poor societies, and then took those experiences to the capital and helped develop those great programs in education and for society,” Daribish said.

“He played a major role in civil rights. He saw families that were poor, and they didn’t get an education. He wanted to change that,” Stophel said.

The trip was full of similar learning experiences for the inter-



*Celebrating 20 Years 1991 - 2011*

## What does being the 'backbone of the Army' mean for NCOs?

*Editor's Note: This piece originally appeared in the Spring 1997 edition of The NCO Journal.*

By Sgt. 1st Class Cornell Swanier

The NCO Creed has many attributes I can identify with. Quite a few could be highlighted for discussion, but none can be debated.

There is, however, one attribute that rises above the others. When this attribute is viewed and understood by the men and women who wear this uniform, it should produce a renewed excellence toward duty and an acute awareness of one's self. That attribute states: The NCO is the "backbone of the Army."

What is a backbone? I envision a spinal column where the different vertebrae join together, enclosing and protecting the spinal cord. I see many vertebrae, regardless of size or position, working together for that common goal of protection. Whether twisting, turning or bending, each vertebra performs its task to the fullest of its ability. And here we are, varying in rank and job title, working together as one. Knowing that, we depend on each other to execute our duties to the best of our abilities.

So when the twists, turns and bends come in our individual lives, in our sections or in our units, we will still be able to stand.

The word "backbone" symbolizes a strength that is rarely seen, not often talked about, but always present.

The backbone, the foundation, the NCO, has a groundwork not laid with mortar or cement, but with a strong sense of pride. The backbone is pride that weathers the elements of change, a pride that turns a task into a job of excellence, a pride, though encompassed by hard stripes, still has a heart of compassion. That compassion reaches our fellow comrades, inspiring them to be the best they can be. The backbone is a pride that goes on from sunup to sundown and from sundown to sunup. It shelters and blankets a nation.

That pride, that compassion, that strength of character, is the infallible proof you are the backbone of the Army.

*Cornell Swanier retired from the Army as a first sergeant and currently lives in Atlanta, Ga. He is the executive director of the Ketia4Kidz Foundation, a charity for the children of active-duty military personnel. The foundation was started by his daughter, Ketia Swanier, who is a guard for the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury.*



Above: Forces Sgt. Major Raphael Oa of Papua New Guinea reads a display during a tour in Johnson City, Texas.

Left: Texas Rep. Joe Pickett speaks to the international students of USASMA's Class 61 during their visit to the Texas Capitol.

national students of Class 61. During their visit to central Texas, the students not only learned about American life, but they also learned about its rich history.

"I hope that the San Antonio trip added to their understanding of the vast diversity of America as a country, because they will be comparing it to the Colorado and D.C. trips," said Master Sgt. David Tookmanian, who will be a student of Class 62 at USASMA.

"I hope that from this trip the students receive a better understanding of our way of life," Huffman said. "So, when they're working with Americans in any theater of operations, they understand us. By understanding someone, you help break down barriers." 

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