



The Engineer Small-Group Leader

By Major Chris A. Parks

I must admit that becoming a small-group leader (SGL) at the US Army Engineer School for the Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) was not my first assignment choice after command.¹ I wanted to serve as a recruiting battalion staff officer in my hometown, but that job was filled. So I accepted the challenge of becoming an SGL. My intent was to make a difference and give something back to our great Army that has done so many good things for me and my family.

The Learning Curve

As I progressed in the officer corps, I was given the impression that becoming an observer-controller at the National Training Center or an SGL at a schoolhouse was a tough and challenging job that would ensure special recognition in the eyes of promotion board members. But during my first few months in the job, I learned that there are many important assignments. However, one thing I can say about the captains who become SGLs is that they are true professionals who want to make a difference in the lives of future company commanders.

An SGL spends the majority of his time teaching and working with students. Approximately 321 instructor contact

hours are spent with the students in each class; this time does not include physical training, mentoring sessions with senior officers, formal events, or study sessions. As an SGL is assimilated into the job, the learning curve is steep. They have to relearn things they've forgotten and/or master the numerous changes to their craft.

Mentoring

After leaving command, I was still on fire to help mold and mentor soldiers, and becoming an SGL satisfied that thirst. Even though students are the same grade, they are not considered peers due to differences in their military experience and knowledge level. Mentoring is a mutual agreement between two parties. The students who want to be successful in command listen and pay attention to their SGLs.

Program of Instruction

The program of instruction for the students has been a challenge for every SGL. Because of the command push to get soldiers to divisional units, the US Army Training and Doctrine Command units have fewer personnel available to write and update instructional materials. The SGL

must write the instructional material for the changes in doctrinal principles, sometimes in the midst of a class or during the limited time between classes. The time between teaching students is normally spent taking leave or improving course materials.

Reserve Component

Reserve Component students spend an action-packed two weeks at the schoolhouse. Knowledge flows full throttle during their stay, and I found that their course was a refreshing change. The Reserve Component students came to the schoolhouse as sponges ready to listen and learn, absorbing blocks of instruction and tactics, techniques, and procedures with the intent to return and edify their home units. I know that I could not do what they do—serve two masters. They are professionals within their communities and warfighters for this great nation. I admire them. Their training requires working for two weeks straight, including weekends, and 15-hour days. But it's all worth it when they walk across the graduation stage, gleaming with the warrior spirit of confidence.

Students and Graduate Studies

Mentoring good students makes the SGL's job easy. Because everyone on the team is the same grade, the SGL isn't in the students' chain of command. An SGL has no administrative authority over the students. This means that he relies on the students to act professionally. If they are late or skip class, they receive a counseling statement. Sometimes students make it obvious that they came to the ECCC solely to attain their master's degree. I told my students that I appreciated the fact that they wanted to continue their education, but my primary concern was that they master the blocks of instruction I was teaching. The ECCC is a priority, and their degree is second. The graduate program is a privilege, not a right.

International Students

As an SGL, I worked with soldiers from Romania, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Macedonia, Portugal, Tunisia, France, Venezuela, and Egypt—just to name a few. These leaders are some of the best-of-the-best from their countries. They were extremely competent, dedicated, and willing to learn. I believe that the advantage of forming good relationships with these students is that we may work together again sometime, as part of a joint task force.

One of my roles was to ensure that our international students were always asked to share their experiences and opinions and were fully integrated into the team. I take my hat off to these patriarchs. I don't believe that I could accomplish their awesome task: listen to instruction in English, convert it into their native tongue, and then produce answers in English.

The Future

With the many changes coming to Army institutional learning—from drastic changes in how we fight as engineers, to distance learning—what will happen to the SGLs? Will they become a collection of interactive disks or an icon from the past? For the soldier's sake, I hope not. The SGL brings so much to the learning experience. During my two years as an SGL, every after-action review at the end of the course had the same comment—keep the SGL concept.

Although becoming an SGL was not my first choice, I accepted the assignment because I wanted to make a difference. I can truly say that I have no regrets. The assignment was challenging and rewarding. When I discussed this with some of my peers, they concurred with my sentiments and added that it is a great job to improve tactical skills.

In retrospect, I asked myself, Can an SGL make a difference? To answer that question, consider this: I was an SGL for 9 teams, with 15 future commanders in each team. Each commander takes command of a company with approximately 100 soldiers. Well, I'm sure that you can do the math. The answer is simple—yes, they do make a difference. 

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Endnote

¹The Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) is now known as the Engineer Command and Staff Course (ECSC). (See the article on page 29.)

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