
The Wilcox Project

By Captain Silvia Longo

As a lieutenant attending the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Basic Officer Leader's Course (BOLC), I looked up to my small-group instructor (SGI) and considered him a "subject matter expert." The immense role that he played in our development and improvement as officers in the U.S. Army cannot be overstated. We were his top priority, and he was capable of fielding questions on any topic we raised. When we had curriculum-related questions, he always provided an answer. When we inquired about various Army installations, he discussed the pros and cons of each. And when he was uncertain about an answer, he did whatever it took to find one. In short, he taught and mentored thirty young, impressionable lieutenants who, at the time, had little or no knowledge about what it was like to be a U.S. Army officer—let alone an officer in the Chemical Corps. I could never have imagined that I would be an SGI just two and half years later!

With the growing demand for captains in units executing Army force generation-based rotations in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, senior leaders elected to accept the risks associated with filling U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command instructor positions at only 50–75 percent strength (with no corresponding decrease in student throughput). In response, several U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command schools implemented a strategy to use students from Captain's Career Courses to teach BOLCs.

At the U.S. Army CBRN School, Colonel Dave Wilcox (commander of the 3d Chemical Brigade) and cadre with the CBRN Officer Training Department decided to defer the course start date for qualified captains with orders to attend the Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Captain's Career Course (CBRNC3) by six to seven months and, instead, have them serve as CBRN BOLC SGIs. To meet the basic SGI qualifications, a captain must have been a platoon leader, on battalion staff, and deployed. While it is rare for captains to be placed in command before arriving for CBRNC3, those who have are considered exceptional CBRN BOLC SGI candidates. This program, which was implemented in late 2009, was unofficially dubbed the "Wilcox Project."

I first learned of the Wilcox Project as I was preparing for a permanent change of station to Fort Leonard Wood,

Missouri, to attend CBRNC3 in early 2010. That's when my branch manager asked me if I would like to take part in the program. For several reasons, I immediately jumped at the opportunity.

One of the main reasons that I chose to participate in the Wilcox Project is that I enjoyed the idea of aiding in the development of a group of lieutenants. Because I had held various positions (including those of staff and platoon leader) during my limited time in the Army, I believed that I could provide valuable insight—especially since I had recently held the same positions that the lieutenants would soon be filling. I truly felt that I could effectively answer questions and address concerns about serving as a CBRN officer in a chemical battalion and on a light infantry combat team. In addition, because I had just redeployed from Afghanistan, I was eager to pass my deployment experiences along to the lieutenants.

Furthermore, most of the knowledge and skills that I acquired while attending CBRN BOLC are what I consider "perishable." After rarely putting those particular skills to use in the last couple of years, I was intimidated by the idea of relearning the material while simultaneously attending CBRNC3. Therefore, the opportunity to work as an SGI (which would allow me to not only assist in the professional development of lieutenants, but also to further my own professional development) was appealing. I knew that, as an SGI, I would occasionally get a chance to observe technical blocks of instruction, which would be excellent "refreshers."

Finally, I wanted to experience what it meant to be an SGI. The Wilcox Project would afford me the opportunity to learn about the time and effort that goes into serving as an instructor so that I might be better equipped to determine whether I would be interested in pursuing such a position in the future.

Although I was excited about participating in the Wilcox Project, I initially had some reservations about becoming an instructor. I was worried that I would not have sufficient knowledge to offer the lieutenants since I had not yet attended CBRNC3. I was also worried that there would be insufficient time for me to shadow another instructor so that I could become familiar with how things worked. But, I soon realized that my fears were unwarranted.

During the first few weeks as an SGI, I taught common-core classes such as “Advise the Commander on CBRN Threats” and “Training Management.” I was able to rely on my previous experiences to convey teaching points, answer questions, and address concerns. In addition, other departmental instructors and noncommissioned officers were always willing to help by answering my questions and offering advice about the execution of training. The common-core block of instruction was followed by several weeks of technical instruction, which was conducted by expert instructors from the 84th Chemical Battalion, Fort Leonard Wood. During the technical blocks of instruction, my job

primarily consisted of ensuring that the training was properly resourced, while also counseling, mentoring, and building upon the leadership foundations of the lieutenants.

Ultimately, the Wilcox Project was an incredibly insightful and truly rewarding experience that allowed me the opportunity to further develop myself and the young CBRN BOLC lieutenants. I not only instructed and mentored the students, but I also gained a better understanding of what it takes to serve as an SGI and acquired the skills necessary to promote future success. And I learned that serving as an SGI is a job that I truly enjoy—even one that I wouldn’t mind doing again. 

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