

Getting Back to Basics:

Building the Army Reserve NCO Corps From the Bottom Up



By Brigadier General Bud R. Jameson Jr. and Command Sergeant Major Steven M. Hatchell

*"With IC-JLEAD, I intend to provide the NCOs of the Iron Castle Brigade with the training, tools, and mission to revitalize the Army Reserve's NCO Corps as the backbone of the force and be the key effort in completing the transition of the Iron Castle Brigade to a trained and ready operational command capable of rapidly mobilizing and deploying for any OCONUS [outside the continental United States] or CONUS [continental United States] mission."*²¹

—Commanding General, 926th Engineer Brigade

With this commander's intent to guide them, the noncommissioned officer (NCO) leaders of the 841st Engineer Battalion launched into the Iron Castle Junior Leader Education and Development (IC-JLEAD) program in September 2010 at its headquarters in Miami, Florida. While still the "beta" version, this was the culminating event of an effort that had been more than a year in the making.

Transition to Operational Army Reserve

From observation of unit training and operations, the brigade commander had, shortly after assuming command, identified an apparent gap in the Army's junior NCO education system and began working with his command sergeant major (CSM) on the concept for a corrective program within the 926th Engineer Brigade. This shortfall was in the basic NCO leadership skills, tools, and understanding of the history, traditions, and authorities of the NCO Corps. While there was no single cause for this lack of NCO capabilities in the brigade, the command team believed it had developed over time for a variety of reasons—high individual operational tempo (OPTEMPO), in-theater promotion policies, delayed Noncommissioned Officer Educational System (NCOES) attendance, and the necessary focus on warfighting skills at the expense of a more balanced education—that were all part of the requirement to become an operational rather than strategic Army Reserve.

This transition to an operational reserve has vastly increased requirements for individual involvement and time commitment from NCOs at the unit level, including—

- Additional individual training (such as Composite Risk Management [CRM] and the Army Accident Avoidance Course [AAAC]).
- Additional individual readiness requirements (such as Periodic Health Assessment [PHA], online and medical visits, dental exams and follow-on treatment, and ever-changing immunizations).
- Frequent "to-be-done-immediately" Department of the Army or Department of Defense individual briefings or online requirements (such as suicide prevention and the Global Assessment Tool [GAT]) that have been added to the Army Reserve's unit training equation, but without additional inactive duty training (IDT) time beyond the traditional total of 196 hours annually (two days per month for twelve months).

The typical response by the company- and battalion-level commanders to meeting these new operational requirements has been to sacrifice traditional individual and collective training in favor of mass administrative events or individual Soldier time on computers at the Reserve Center. Within the brigade, this diversion of available time had particularly manifested itself in shortfalls of Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN)-related readiness goals, as well as specific training benchmarks.

Reserve Component ARFORGEN Model					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Unit Status	Reset	Train/Ready 1	Train/Ready 2	Train/Ready 3	Available
Training Focus	Individual Training/School	Collective Training Squad Level	Collective Training Platoon Level	Collective Training Company Level	Deployed

Technical Competence vs. Leadership Skills

When the 926th Engineer Brigade staff analyzed the various Army Reserve/ARFORGEN readiness metrics, they found that more than two-thirds were "Soldier issues" that should have been handled by the NCOs of the brigade in their everyday business of taking care of Soldiers. Yet, they weren't. The question

was—Why? It didn't take long to discover that the NCOs of the brigade had largely matured under the past policies of focusing available IDT training time on technical competence at the cost of basic NCO leadership skills. These NCOs were great engineer technicians who were being paid more—via their promotions—for their greater knowledge and experience, but without the NCO skills necessary to be the military leaders for their Soldiers. And now, under ARFORGEN and the concept of an operational Army Reserve, even more was being expected of them.

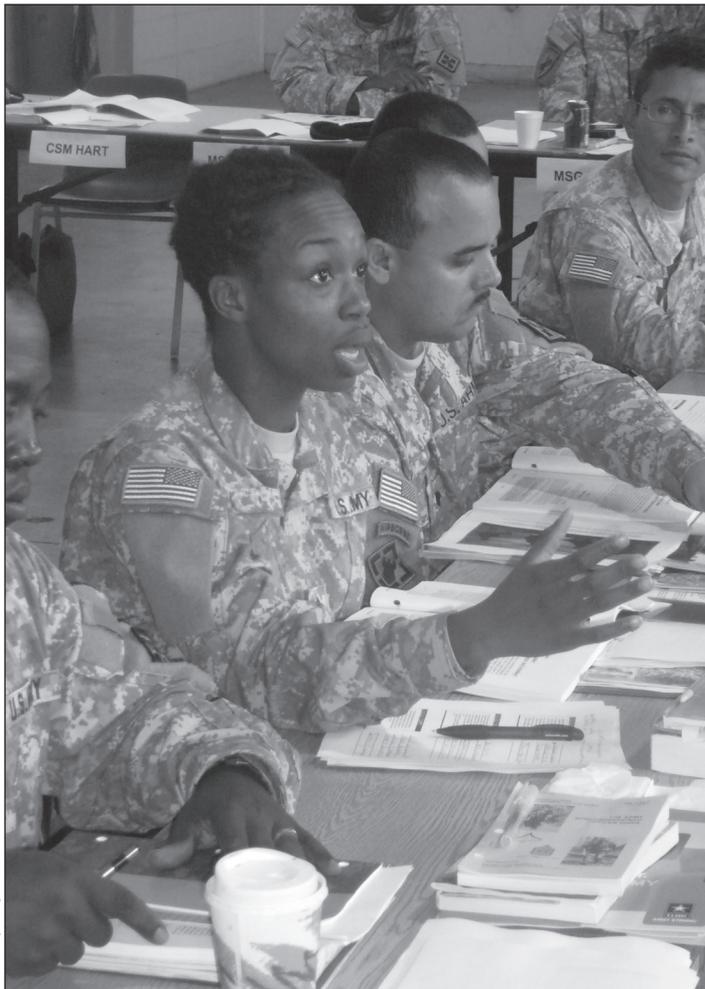


Photo by Brigadier General Budd R. Jameson Jr.

A student poses a question for the group during the JLEAD seminar at the 841st Engineer Battalion in Miami, Florida, proving the wisdom of opting for seminar discussion rather than straight lecture-style training.

A Matter of Timing

In addition to the basic lack of NCO knowledge, there was also the matter of ARFORGEN-appropriate timing for the routine Army NCOES courses. In the case of the Warrior Leader Course (WLC)—the traditional “introduction-to-being-an-NCO” course for the Army—there could be up to a three-year delay between Soldiers’ promotion to NCO rank and their ability to attend WLC due to ARFORGEN.

In the Army Reserve, ARFORGEN is a five-year cyclical process (see table above). Within this five-year cycle of increasing individual and unit readiness, individual training is only permitted—or funded—during Year 1 (and, selectively, Year 2). In the latter years, the shift of emphasis to committing available time and funding for collective training and unit readiness generally precludes continued individual education.

Yet, each year the promotion system continues to create new NCOs. While this is certainly necessary and proper, it nonetheless creates the conditions under which new NCOs could conceivably be promoted for up to three years before ARFORGEN permits them to attend NCOES to “learn how to be an NCO”! The Reserve Components cannot maintain their readiness levels according to their operational reserve requirements if the NCOES isn't better synchronized with NCO promotions and ARFORGEN expectations. While the brigade leadership continued its analysis, ongoing feedback from both theaters of conflict (as well as comments from the Inspector General of the Army) only confirmed the need for an education program—separate from the Army's institutional education system—to give junior NCOs the tools to succeed.



Students prepare to role-play during the resiliency training phase.

Front and Center: NCO Leadership Skills

Before he retired, Lieutenant General R.S. Whitcomb, the Inspector General of the Army, cautioned the general officer leadership:

“As I leave the Army, my number-one concern is the leadership skills of the young sergeants and officers—they are without peer in the world at warfighting, but in my opinion, some of those leader skills have not been taught by us by coaching and mentoring or have atrophied. This is not all attributable to the pace of operations. We are experts at talking ‘to’ and ‘at’ the troops, but how good are we at talking ‘with’ troopers? How good are we in understanding that fear and concern don’t stop when the mission is ended? Part of that is the ‘stuff’ of garrison life but really transcends to the ‘stuff’ of Army life.... This is going to get harder, but nothing will be more important to the ‘life and breath’ of our Army, and you all are the ones [who] set the example....”²²

The CSM of the 926th was reassigned, and for five months the brigade operations sergeant major continued the staff development process until a new top NCO arrived at the brigade. One of his first priorities was to take the commanding general’s intent and translate it into reality as quickly as possible. The challenge was to distill all the varied input—from individuals who earnestly felt their topics were absolutely necessary for first-line leaders to be successful—into something applicable across the variety of engineer companies of the brigade.

Decentralizing Instruction

Additionally, the CSM decided that the best target audience—the closest to the individual Soldiers—would be those selected for promotion to sergeant/

E-5 or those who had been already promoted to sergeant/E-5 but had yet to attend WLC. The command team opted to centrally develop the program of instruction (POI) for standardization of the content, but to decentralize execution by tasking it out to the six battalion CSMs to conduct at their various locations. Not only would this reduce the costs and ensure that the battalion-level CSMs were stakeholders in the whole effort, but it would also enable the senior NCOs of the respective battalions to absorb the IC–JLEAD curriculum through “learning by teaching.”

Two-Day IDT

While a three-day POI would have been preferable, the uncertainty of additional training funding for the program drove the final topic list to only those subjects that could reasonably be fit into a two-day IDT weekend. This constraint also ruled out the field-craft and theater-specific topics that the students would learn at WLC and/or at their mobilization station before deployment.

Course Content

For the initial presentation, the brigade command team settled on a course content that included the following:

- History of the Army and Federal Reserve History and Heritage of the NCO Corps
- Duties, Responsibilities, and Authorities of the NCO
- Sergeant’s Time Expectations
- Junior Promotion Process Update
- First-Line Leader Responsibilities: Sponsorship of Soldiers; Counseling of Soldiers; and Purpose and Use of Leader Books
- Required Online Training and Soldier Readiness

“In addition to being a beta test of the curriculum and mode of instruction, this session would also be for observation by, and demonstration for, the CSMs and senior trainers for the remaining five battalions.”

- Understanding the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER)
- Reserve Retirement System
- First-Line Leader’s Role in Comprehensive Soldier Fitness—also known as “Resiliency Training”

Small-Group Discussion

Additionally, the brigade CSM agreed with the commanding general that the need to get as much of this information successfully absorbed by the students in the time available precluded any traditional “platform instruction” lecture or “death by PowerPoint®” techniques, opting instead for small-group, guided discussion as the appropriate mode of training.

Army Values and Soldier Fitness

The final requirement was that all such group discussion would be facilitated through the dual lenses of Army Values and Comprehensive Soldier Fitness—all vignettes, all examples, all discussions—would thus inculcate these basic Army tenets in the future junior NCOs from the start.

Beta Test Session

The next step was for the brigade CSM to select which of the six battalion CSMs would conduct the “beta test” and coordinate its execution. Because of its advanced placement in the ARFORGEN cycle—thus entitling it to command focus at all levels to set it up for a successful deployment—he decided on the 841st Engineer Battalion in Miami, Florida. In addition to being a beta test of the curriculum and mode of instruction, this session would also be for observation by, and demonstration for, the CSMs and senior trainers for the remaining five battalions.

With all this planning and coordination to guide them, the CSM and senior NCOs of the 841st Engineer Battalion successfully executed the mission with a class of seventeen. This first training session wrapped up with a student-led after action review (AAR). The prevailing student consensus throughout the AAR was appreciation for the opportunity to hone their junior leader skills and network with the senior leaders facilitating. Additionally, the AAR produced some good feedback that was used to further adapt the POI for the next session at the next battalion. Specifically, the command team approved adding a session—to be held before the actual first day of classroom instruction—that would familiarize the student NCOs with the new physical readiness training (PRT) program, according to Training

Circular 3-22.20, *Army Physical Readiness Training*, and how to conduct a training session. With the fielding of the new Army Service Uniform, there will be a demonstration block added on the wear and inspection of both the Army Class A and Service Uniforms (likely with an instructor with intentional uniform violations).

The JLEAD session concluded with the formal presentation of the brigade’s version of the NCO Creed, 841st Engineer Battalion’s JLEAD completion certificate, and a follow-on brainstorming session on the way ahead with the gathered CSMs and trainers from all six battalions, led by the brigade CSM and commanding general.

Investment in Future NCO Leaders

This junior NCO education program is a work-in-progress. The content and presentation will continue to be refined through successive iterations across the brigade, so as to keep them current. For example, the next iteration will address the new structured self-development requirement to familiarize the new NCOs with the concept and expectations. The leadership of the 926th Engineer Brigade is committed to investing in the development of the future NCO leaders of the Army Reserve. 

Brigadier General Jameson commands the 926th Engineer Brigade in Montgomery, Alabama. In 2003, he served as the acting Warrior Brigade commander at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and deployed to Iraq in 2007 as deputy team leader of an embedded provincial reconstruction team. He holds a bachelor’s from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, and a master’s from the United States Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Command Sergeant Major Hatchell is the command sergeant major of the 926th Engineer Brigade in Montgomery, Alabama. His deployments include Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, Tallil, Iraq. He holds a bachelor’s from Excelsior College of New York State.

Endnotes

¹Brigadier General Bud R. Jameson Jr., PowerPoint presentation at the Iron Castle—Junior Leader and Development Beta Version in Miami, Florida, 11 September 2010.

²Lieutenant General R. Steven Whitcomb, quoted by General George William Casey Jr. at <http://www.army.mil/-speeches/2010/08/17/43850-august-13-2010---lt-gen-whitcomb-retirement/>, 17 August 2010.