

Academics, ethics merge at West Point

Leaders want to build officers who are grounded in more than combat skills

By Kelly Kennedy

KELLYKENNEDY@MILITARYTIMES.COM

WEST POINT, N.Y. — When Richard Swain walks through the graveyard at West Point, he says he thinks about the future.

“The long gray line ends at the cemetery,” said the retired colonel and professor of officership. “You have an obligation to your classmates, and I want a visceral response,” he told a reporter who accompanied him to the site.

Swain wants his cadets to passionately embrace that they’re professional soldiers and acknowledge that they may die doing what others won’t do. He talks of heroes, but he also speaks of mistakes — the leadership vacuums and ethical lapses that can make the world forget battlefield sacrifices.

As the Army goes through the myriad changes inspired by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, West Point leadership has focused on creating “professional” officers. To that end, the academy has added 70 hours of training aimed at developing officers who are not just drilled on doctrine and combat skills, but

grounded in the ethical decision-making that could prevent leadership failures like those behind the detainee-abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

So Swain gives the cadets an assignment representative of the changes being made at West Point.

Each cadet chooses a grave.

For instance, one stone marks the grave of Lt. Edmund Benchley. He died in Cuba during the Spanish-American War just months after graduating from West Point in 1898. His commander ordered him to wade through a river under heavy fire to carry orders during the battle of Fort San Juan. He made some deliveries, and then a bullet hit him in the heart.

Nearby lies Capt. William Whitehead, who insisted on deliv-

ering his soldiers’ pay personally during the Vietnam War. His helicopter was shot down in 1968.

A more recent grave remembers Lt. Emily Perez, who graduated from West Point last spring. She died in Iraq when a roadside bomb exploded under her Humvee Sept. 12 while on patrol. Cadets at West Point knew her.

After researching the names on the graves, the cadets write an essay: Did the officers die in vain?

Swain challenges the cadets to write about how those buried in the graves they have selected serve as examples not just of bravery but of professional conduct based on sound ethical and moral judgment, and of lives devoted full-time to service to their country. And were the officers willing

to give up what others may perceive as individual rights — those of life and liberty — for the rights of others?

Last year, leaders at West Point added 70 hours of mandatory ethics, moral, diversity and decision-making courses in seminar-style classes over four years. Professional Military

Ethic education topics include why politics cannot be allowed to degrade military conduct; whether force protection should take precedence over mission; and if it is morally OK to invade the rights of soldiers to check their health, financial situations and police records. But the classes also include training on sexual harassment, responsible alcohol use and healthy relationships.

The new course of study is meant to teach officers to think creatively, to continue to pursue education throughout their careers and to make ethical decisions — all instead of simply following orders.

Instructors bring back West Point lieutenants who have served in combat to talk about academic lessons versus decisions made under fire. The PowerPoint slide has been demoted as a teaching



HOLLEY MEISTER

In retired Col. Richard Swain’s class at the U.S. Military Academy, cadets must choose a grave from those buried at West Point and write an essay about whether the officer died in vain. The assignment is one sign of the academy’s move to produce “professional” officers who think creatively, pursue education throughout their careers and make ethical decisions instead of simply following orders.

tool; instructors instead encourage cadets to talk about the lessons and their own experiences.

Don Snider, author of “The Future of the Army Profession” and senior professor at West Point, said that under today’s theory, future officers must develop their human side in addition to their doctrinal side.

Snider said the 1996 Aberdeen scandal involving NCO sexual harassment of basic trainees served as a wake-up call to Army officer leadership because Congress stepped in and regulated training rather than allowing the Army to make changes itself. Snider said the Army had become too caught up in maintaining the status quo rather than coming up with new ideas.

“If [Congress] had thought the Army was a profession, they’d let us handle our training,” Snider said. “But we behaved like a bureaucracy and they treated us like a bureaucracy.”

So Snider decided to look at the idea of developing soldiers who are grounded in a wider range of values. His book includes essays from historians, ethics experts, policy analysts and war strategists, and covers everything from officer identity to expert knowledge of the officer to the military ethos.

It came out in 2002, and has been adopted at Fort Leavenworth’s Command and General Staff College

“It’s a logical evolution in the way the Army is moving,” Snider said.

Lt. Col. Casey Neff, special assistant for systems and planning

for the commandant at West Point, said the academy is tailoring training even further.

“At 17, 18, 19 years old, the cadets have an emerging self-identity,” he said. “We want to shape and guide that into what our profession wants it to be.”

For example, when he taught constitutional and military law 20 years ago, Neff talked about what soldiers were not allowed to do. Now, he and his students talk about why. They talk about why soldiers are subordinate to civilians, rather than insisting they follow orders from the president out of discipline. They talk about shifting roles from fighting an ambush to handing out books to children, and they talk about why both roles are important.

Maj. Devon Blake, education officer at West Point, said the style of teaching has also changed. As instructors shared more of themselves in their lessons, cadets also opened up.

“It used to be, ‘Here’s a PowerPoint,’” she said. “That’s not conducive to reflection and inspiration. This allows them to be honest and have some thought-provoking discussions.”

When Blake teaches, she talks about the mistakes she made as a lieutenant or the experiences she had that surprised her — like the time her first sergeant was brought up on charges of infidelity.

“If you’re real and you’re transparent, they’ll feel more comfortable asking you real questions,” she said. “But it takes a lot of courage to be able to admit fault.”

In addition to the changes in instruction, cadets now have greater voice inside and outside the class. In the ethics classes, instructors use current military justice cases from within the academy as examples. Cadets talk about their own experiences in the classes focusing on sexual harassment and diversity. Mentors within the officer corps provide a place where cadets can ask questions on a personal level and each company has a cadet assigned to help look out for possible discrimination or harassment.

The students seem to appreciate the new format.

“The officers don’t necessarily lead the sessions,” said Tari Glowacki, a senior cadet. “It forces us to examine ourselves and look at some issues.”

Marjana Mair, also a senior, said she appreciates that the instructors ask for her opinions and experiences.

“Before, it was more like they were talking at you,” she said. “But now they want to make sure the leaders who graduate from this academy aren’t the ones who shoulda, woulda, coulda done something. They’re the ones who do something.”

Still, they were surprised by the changes.

“I got this book, ‘In Search of Ethics,’ at the bookstore and thought, ‘What is this?’” Glowacki said. “You can hear ‘cadets take 70 hours of values education,’ but when you think about how much you learn in just one hour and think about all 70? It’s amazing.” □