



## COMMENTARY

# Inside modern military training

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Midwest Voices

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My experience with the military had been limited. My dad was in the Army, but he didn't ever talk about it.

There was a big trunk in the basement where he kept the pictures and memorabilia, but we weren't invited to look through it. My little sister and I would often sneak down to look at the medals and pictures without the associated story or explanation.

My days in sales at United Airlines often paired me with pilots who were from the military. They were respectable professionals who were focused and passionate about their work.

Lately my interaction with people in the military has been limited to a brief encounter at the airport when I stop to thank those serving our country for my freedom. My opinions about our military come from movies, newspapers and "embedded" journalists.

So when Maj. Christopher Austin, a Midwest Voices columnist, invited our panel and other members of the media to join him for a tour of Fort Leavenworth, I jumped at the chance to experience, firsthand, how leadership in the military operated.

Our small group of "media" was allowed to sit in on one of the School of Advanced Military Studies classrooms. Each class or seminar of 15 has graduated from the Command and General Staff College just across campus. The college is intense training and is required in the Army once the rank of major is reached. To advance to the School of Advanced Military Studies, the officer must apply, interview, test and be selected.

I can't share every little detail about the experience, but I want to convey what I got about the men and women who are the future leaders of our military. We often throw that phrase around when referring to our youth in general, but these are the leaders of tomorrow and, for the most part, the leaders of today.

When we entered, the class was in groups discussing how the Army could make communication more efficient and effective. The dialogue in the classroom included debate about what one group was presenting, offering differing viewpoints and challenging the thoughts on changes of the doctrine.

In an exercise called Challenging Boundaries, they debated word choices and meaning and how well the message could be communicated across a diverse group of individuals. It was notable that each was able, and encouraged, to bring his personality to the table and express concerns without fear. The degree to which this group could handle working together to deal with complex situations was refreshing.

The volumes of required reading students had to complete each night included books, white papers and current articles that had the feel of cutting edge business tools. "New Leaders Collaborative Not Commanding" by Bill George filled the computer screen of one student while he listened to the surrounding discussion on diversity and complexity. I had the pleasure of interacting one on one with several of the students and even participated in a group exercise in class. I will find it easier to sleep at night after meeting these bright, articulate officers.

The banter was stimulating, and it became clear watching the exchanges that the culture was being transformed. A

telling moment for me was when the question came up about how effective this approach would be in actual practice in combat.

The answer came from the cool Dr. Ryan, their professor and a Ph.D. in complexity theory. He said that over time, with the right approach, if it was truly useful, these cooperative techniques would be accepted and implemented. Feedback from the field was constantly being collected and used to reshape classes and training in real time.

It is extremely rare to be granted this kind of access, and for that reason alone I could already tell this wasn't my father's Army. I had imagined his Army had been filled with top down commands and little cooperative decision-making. Although that is still the case and necessary at certain levels, this Army is being equipped with tools more powerful than advanced weaponry to address the issues of today.

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