

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Ways of the Warrior

The ambush was set. The platoon knew the “enemy” would likely travel down the dirt road in front of them, and took up positions. Squad leaders checked on their troops while Lt. Col. [Travis Buehner](#) watched it unfold with the trained eye of a 17-year Army veteran.

The scene didn’t take place in a Mideast desert, but in the rolling oak woodlands of the U.S. Army’s Fort Hunter Liggett in Monterey County. And the soldiers aren’t regular Army — yet. They’re members of UC Santa Barbara’s Surfrider Battalion of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which provides leadership training to future officers in the regular Army, Army Reserves and Army National Guard.

The Surfriders had come to the sprawling base for field training exercises (FTX), a three-day dive into the rigors of Army life. The battalion brought 61 of its cadets in the joint FTX with Cal Poly San Luis Obispo’s Fighting Mustang Battalion. Together they practiced land navigation, tactics and more. Armed mostly with M16 rifles that fired blanks, the cadets slept under the stars (and rain) and dined on Meals Ready to Eat.

Under a Microscope

This was no camping trip. It’s designed to push the cadets into their discomfort zones, said Buehner, professor and chair of UCSB’s [Department of Military Science](#), in which the Surfrider Battalion is based. The FTX is a testing ground, he explained, where the cadets’ leadership skills are put under a microscope.

“They’re evaluated the whole time out there,” said Buehner, whose usual assignment is flying Blackhawk helicopters. “So, it is stressful; it’s hot out there, it’s uncomfortable. You really get a good look at someone’s character when they’re in a miserable situation, and how are they acting under that pressure? That’s what I like to look at. It’s easy to be out in Santa Barbara, 70 degrees and everything’s fine, but when you start getting tired and you’ve been walking around all day, you get to see somebody’s true colors.”

For the third-year cadets, it’s also a tune-up for Advanced Camp, a grueling, monthlong training course at Fort Knox, Ky. In addition to training in multiple skills, it’s where future officers receive detailed assessments about their ability to lead. How cadets are graded plays a big role in their assignments after graduation.

“What we’re really trying to do at the end of the day is prepare our juniors,” Buehner said. “We want to give them this opportunity to hone their leadership skills and figure out exactly what they should be doing so when they get out there they’re comfortable and feel confident.”

Learning from Experience

The cadets have plenty of help. The battalion “cadre,” or staff, is loaded with combat veterans. Master Sgt. Renaldo Armstrong, senior military science instructor, has deployed to the Middle East five times.

“It’s really the reason they send us out there,” said Armstrong, who will retire in 2019 after nearly 30 years of service. “The Army understands that combat and life experience is vital to training future leaders.”

It’s not just the instructors who provide guidance. The seniors, who’ve already completed Advanced Camp, weigh in with advice during the FTX. Cadet Battalion Commander Gene Schreck, a fourth-year hydrology major, said it creates a virtuous cycle.

“A lot of it is senior-led, so the seniors plan all the training, because we know what helped us throughout the three years of us training, so now we kind of push it back onto them, and they keep the process going,” said Schreck, who will go on active duty as an Army engineer after graduation. “So the juniors doing the mission right now, they’re going to be in my shoes next year.”

A Tradition of Service

The Surfrider Battalion is the oldest student organization at UCSB, dating back to 1947. Back then, student participation was mandatory, and remained so until 1961. Today, cadets come from every segment of society to learn to be Army officers. Successful cadets are commissioned as 2nd lieutenants upon graduation.

Although a relatively small battalion, it's considered one of the top programs on the West Coast, with a high percentage of its cadets entering active duty when they leave UCSB. It's the cadre's job to make sure they know what they're getting into, and nobody had it easy on the FTX. The base had cabins available nearby, but Buehner said it would be more realistic if cadets slept in the field.

Cadet Delyla Rivera understood. Lying prone on the wet ground with her M16 at the ready, she scanned the distance as part of the perimeter watch while squad leaders were briefed on the ambush plans. It was cool and wet, but the second-year biology major didn't seem to notice. A first-generation college student from Ventura who hopes to attend medical school on an Army scholarship, she would also be the first in her family to join the military.

"It's a great experience to be out in the field because you get to see what we learn in the classroom out in the real world," Rivera said. "In high school I was a very shy person, and it was hard for me to come out of my shell. Coming to ROTC made me a more confident person. I think it gave me a better sense of balance and I've learned a lot."

No Bad Lessons

Buehner, who arrived at UCSB in time for the fall 2017 quarter, said cadets are motivated by a desire to serve. "We talk to them all the time: Why are you here? And nobody's ever said to me, 'To pay for school,' " he said. "They all want to give and be part of something bigger. We don't try to sugar-coat it; here's what you're going to do, because I don't want them to step out there as a young lieutenant and go, 'This isn't what I expected.' "

As for that ambush, it's fair to say it didn't unfold with military precision. Dozens of blank rounds rang out and someone in the distance yelled, "Bang! Bang!" The "enemy" seemed more rumor than existential threat, but that was fine by Buehner. The cadets came to learn, and there are no bad lessons.

“This is the first time they’ve really had a chance to actually get out in a little more realistic scenario versus on campus,” he said. “We didn’t expect everything to be perfect. What I’m looking for is, ‘OK, you learned a lesson here. As you progress, are you repeating the same mistakes or you actually capturing some of this and making the corrections?’ For the most part, when we get to our last iteration tomorrow, I think we’ll see a lot of improvement.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.