

SDME tests students to apply lessons learned

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During the Strategic Decision Making Exercise students assume the roles of leaders at all levels and also take part in mock congressional testimony with actual U.S. Congressmen. USAWC photo lab.

March 10, 2011 – For the past seven months Army War College students have participated in seminar discussions, listened to guest speakers and done everything else the curriculum required of them. All their hard work has culminated in the Strategic Decision Making Exercise, held March 2-9 at the Center for Strategic Leadership.

Considered the student's capstone exercise, SDME is a six-day, interactive, strategic-level, political-military exercise based in the year 2025, which gives students the opportunity to integrate and apply the knowledge they've acquired during the academic year to a "real-life" situation.

"Learning by doing is the most effective way to learn, and the exercise allows students to apply the principles they learned in the midst of a fast-paced, complex exercise that allows them to see how frictions affect the processes," said **Dr. Bill Johnsen**, Dean of Academics. "The SDME exposes students to new issues and areas that they will become involved in for the remainder of their careers."

"SDME provides the opportunity for the students to see how all of the processes and systems the students discuss in the core curriculum fit together into the US national security process," said **Prof. Doug Campbell**, CSL director. "It exposes them to the pressures and the kinds of events that senior national security leaders with on a regular basis."

"This has been one of the best and most valuable exercises I've ever been involved in," said **Col.**

Shawn Reed, student.

“It’s amazing how in-depth and complex this exercise really is,” said **Air Force Lt. Col. Chris Colbert**.

During the exercise students role-play many of the duties and tasks that they will face once they graduate, including conducting video teleconferences with Combatant Command Staffs, testifying before Congress, and performing bilateral negotiations with foreign government officials.

The exercise takes only six days to complete, but takes a small army of people to plan and execute.

Distinguished visitors and mentors like Gen. Raymond Odierno, Commander, Joint Forces Command and 1995 Army War College Graduate, add to the exercise.



“The number of people involved in SDME changes over time, starting with a small core that plans the basic structure for the next exercise eventually expanding to the entire faculty of the USAWC,” said Campbell.

The exercise brings together more than 600 personnel from the War College and subject matter experts from outside the school to serve as controllers, observer controllers, or exercise facilitators. People participating in the exercise come from numerous government organizations, including the Department of State, Joint Staff, FEMA, CENTCOM, FBI, and the CIA. Each year more than 50 distinguished visitors participate as role-players in the exercise; most as leaders from the military, diplomatic, interagency, business, and education communities.

Some of the distinguished visitors to this year’s exercise were Air Force Gen. Douglas Fraser and Gen. Raymond Odierno, commander, Joint Force Command, Lt. Gen. John Sterling, deputy commanding general/chief of staff, TRADOC, Lt. Gen. Frank Grass, director of operations, J3, Northern Command, Lt. Gen. Keith Huber, deputy commander, Joint Force Command, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. John Allen, deputy commander of CENTCOM, Matthew Cordova, office of the coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization, Joseph Donovan, deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian Affairs, and retired Gen. William Wallace

This team makes sure that the exercise is cutting-edge and provides realistic scenarios for the students to encounter.

Marine Corps Lt. Col. Darren Richardson takes part in a short notice interview during the exercise. Part of the exercise involves short notice interviews and press briefings, both of which are then included in daily news broadcasts. USAWC photo lab.



“We look at what is happening in the world and based upon the exercises we conduct with senior Army and Joint commands, what issues are those leaders dealing with and think may be an issue in the future,” said Campbell. “Based upon this information we review each scenario to ensure it is plausible, reasonable and reflects fresh issues and challenges and that it achieves the educational objectives for the exercise.”

Collins Hall is a perfect place to host exercise like SDME.

“Collins Hall was designed, built and staffed by HQDA for the purpose of using information technology to support education at the strategic level,” said Campbell. “The Army's senior leadership specifically wanted to see events like these as well as things like the Army's Title 10 exercise and Joint exercises that are conducted here.”

The exercise tests not only the students, but the faculty, exercise participants, observers and others as well.

“From an exercise design perspective it is challenging to integrate all of the events are going on during the exercise and make them happen flawlessly,” said Campbell. “From an exercise development perspective it is how to write scenarios which support the educational objectives we are trying to accomplish. From a faculty point of view it might be how to understand all that is going on and how it impacts the cell he or she is trying to "observe/control." From a student perspective it is probably testifying before Congress, or standing up in front of the "media," whose questions can be rather demanding.

Another important part of the exercise involves the students interacting with various national and international news media outlets. During press conferences and interviews, controllers act as reporters from different national and international news organizations. The sound bites from these media events are then incorporated into television news broadcasts televised in Collins Hall each day.



Students take part in a meeting of the National Security Council. The more than 330-member USAWC student body is split into two worlds, which are further divided into student cells that focus on specific geographic regions. USAWC photo lab.

The filming of the interviews and the television newscasts were produced by Army Reserve Soldiers from the 222nd Broadcast Operations Detachment out of Bell, Calif., and the 356th Broadcast Operations Detachment out of Ft. George G. Meade, Md.

“From a unit training point of view it is the best training environment we have had,” said Maj. Patty Brewer, commander of the 356th. “Our mission when we deploy is to work with AFN so short of going to an AFN station, this is the closest thing there is. This AIT is important because it gives the Soldiers a chance to use perishable skills.”

The exercise teaches lessons that will be valuable for years, according to Johnsen.

"The SDME requires students to continue to hone the critical thinking and creative thinking skills that they have developed during the course of this year, and upon which they will rely for the rest of their careers.