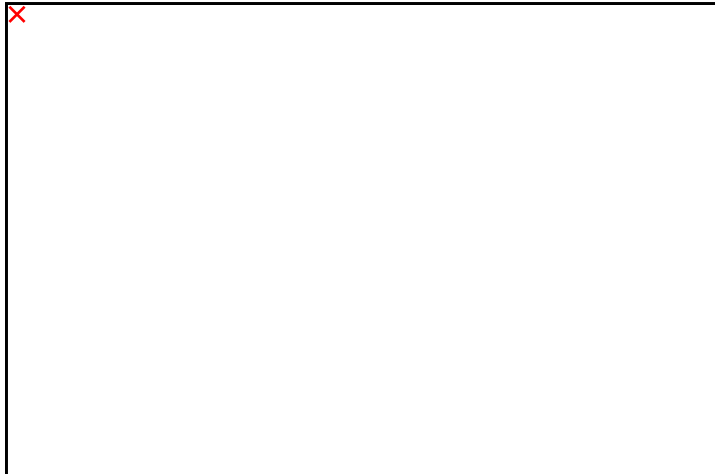


# Exercise places students at the center of crisis

*Thomas Zimmerman, Army War College Public Affairs Office*

## Exercise places USAWC students at center of crisis



*Army War College student Lt.Col. Michael Dvoracek answers a question during a short notice interview during the Strategic Decision Making Exercise which was held this month at the Center for Strategic Leadership. The exercise served as the capstone event for USAWC students. USAWC photo lab.*

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March 8, 2010 – If Army War College students looked frazzled and stressed out in March it's because they have been dealing with a tense situation in the Middle East, freedom of navigation issues all over the world and the threat of terrorism in the United States.

Of course, it was 2021, and each of those scenarios and more were all part of the Strategic Decision Making Exercise, held from March 3 to 10 in the Center for Strategic Leadership at Carlisle Barracks.

The exercise, or SDME as it is commonly referred to, serves as the capstone exercise for U.S. Army War College students. SDME is a six-day, interactive, strategic-level, political-military exercise based in the year 2021, 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."

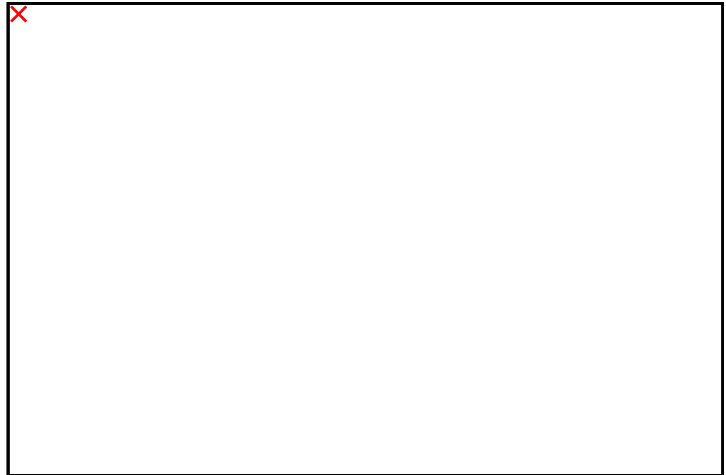
According to **Doug Campbell**, CSL director, planning for the exercise starts at the beginning of each

school year.

"Initial planning begins with the receipt of student and faculty comments on this year's SDME," explained Campbell. "The second key factor is the receipt of next year's International Fellow student roster so we can determine IF expertise available to support the exercise. Detailed planning begins in September as we begin to develop scenario material."

The process of developing each scenario for the exercise isn't a simple one either.

*During the exercise students assume the roles of leaders at all levels and also take part in mock congressional testimony with actually U.S. Congressmen. USAWC photo lab.*



"Scenario development takes considerable time and effort. We begin with an assessment of learning objectives to be achieved, identify potential areas of the world which meet the

criteria of possible, plausible and important enough to the U.S. and its allies that a scenario would pass the 'so what test'," said Campbell. "Following that assessment we develop a story outline, which lays out basic goals, objectives and flow of the scenario. After scenarios have been developed then all the scenarios must be integrated so that we understand their interaction and load factors and the impact on learning objectives."

The hard work to design and execute the exercise is not lost on the students.

"Normally I'm not a fan of simulations or exercises because they really don't test you or give you a realistic experience," said **Col. Tim Whalen**. "That wasn't this case with SDME though. The depth and breadth of this exercise was more than I expected. It really makes you dig down deep and get to the root of the issues and forces you to work that interagency and intergovernmental relationship."

"The way that this exercise is designed and executed really made me feel like I was back at the Pentagon," said student **Mary Marshall**. "At any given time you have fires to put out, meetings and issues to de-conflict and have to deal with constantly shifting priorities."

The exercise is designed to give the students a wide range of experiences.

"The most beneficial parts of the exercise are when we place students in difficult role playing situations," said Campbell. "Frequently that is when they interface with outside participants, such as

Congressional Hearings -- during which they testify before members of Congress or Congressional staffers playing Congressman, where they have to engage the media, in either a briefing or in a stand-up question period, where they have to brief and answer questions from distinguished visitor's who role play a special assistant to the President."



*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. Distinguished visitors add to the cell experience, providing real-world tips from those who have served in positions of authority in their regions. USAWC photo lab.*

The visitors added a level of realism to the exercise according to Whalen.

"The distinguished visitors that came into our cell really helped our understanding of the scenarios and the possible solution that were available," he said. "The time they spent with us was one of the highlight of the entire experience."

Marshall agreed, saying that the ability to conduct a mock congressional testimony helped prepare her in the event she would have to do so in her career.

"The congressmen and women who participated treated it like a real event so that was extremely helpful."

**Col. Tony Pelczynski** said that the ability to assume the role of a non-military leader gave him a new perspective on how they look at a crisis.

"By assuming a role where I was forced to look at a scenario from a non-military perspective, it forced me to use the other elements of power," he said. "I think that was the best part, having to turn off the military officer part of my brain and look at an issue from a policy or diplomatic perspective."

During the exercise War College students perform many of the duties and tasks that they will face once they graduate.

"They are also required to conduct VTC's with Combatant Commander staffs and perform bilateral negotiations with International Fellows role playing foreign government officials," said Campbell. "The most taxing element is the requirement to absorb information and make recommendations or decisions

under time pressure."

SDME has been very beneficial and a great learning experience, according to the students.

"One of the best parts of the exercise was when one of our colleagues would come back and tell us what they had been through, whether it was a meeting, congressional testimony or media event," said **Col. Frank McClary**. "We all learned as a team."

The exercise also 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. Personnel 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.

"The students participate in video teleconferences with members of Congress, who role-play as members of the House Armed Services Committee while the students testify. Each year there are ten to twelve serving members of Congress who participate by VTC from Washington," said Campbell.

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.

The filming of the interviews and the actual television broadcasts are produced by Army Reserve Soldiers from the 206<sup>th</sup> Broadcast Detachment out of Dallas, Texas.

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.

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