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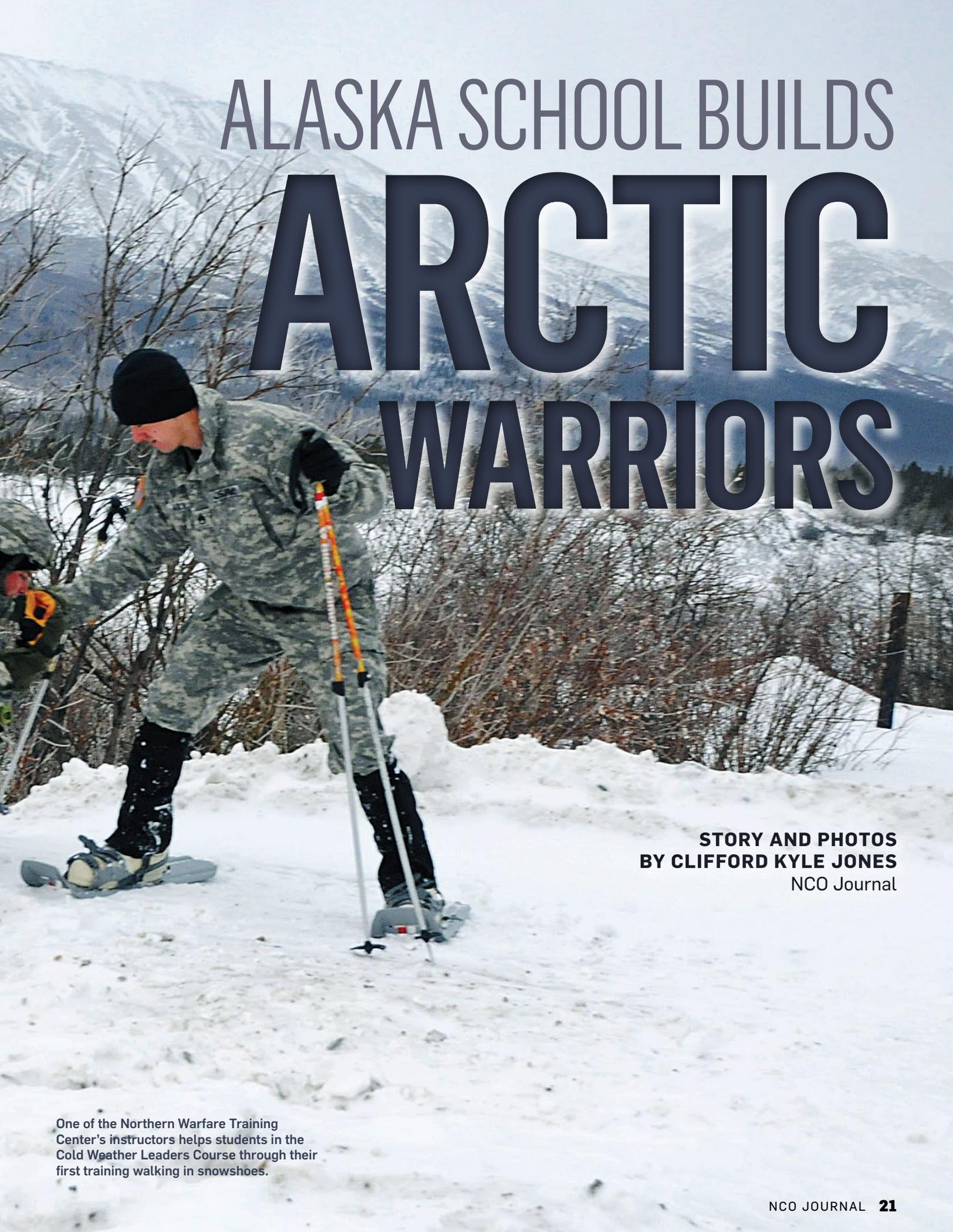
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TRAINING FOR THE  
**COLD**

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# ALASKA SCHOOL BUILDS ARCTIC WARRIORS

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY CLIFFORD KYLE JONES**  
NCO Journal

One of the Northern Warfare Training Center's instructors helps students in the Cold Weather Leaders Course through their first training walking in snowshoes.



**Above:** One of the students in December's Cold Weather Leaders Course at the Northern Warfare Training Center's Black Rapids Training Site, near Fort Greely, Alaska, skis along the trail of the course's last event, a 10-kilometer biathlon.

**Opposite page:** Another student takes part in the biathlon on snowshoes instead of skis.

**W**ant to prepare your unit for the challenges it might face in the mountains of Afghanistan? Or protect your Soldiers from the dangers of a freezing cold snap in Korea? You can see firsthand how experts deal with arctic conditions and mountainous terrain at the Northern Warfare Training Center's Black Rapid Training Site in Alaska. And the center's instructors can tell you not only how to overcome tough climates and landscapes, but also how to use them to your advantage.

The NWTC, which is based at Fort Wainwright, Alaska, has had many

names, and its mission has changed somewhat over the years since first being organized in Alaska, shortly after World War II. The NWTC, though, has remained one of the few sites within the Department of Defense that offers service members the chance to gain expertise in coping with harsh temperatures, precipitation and terrain, as well as how to conduct successful operations in these challenging conditions.

Soldiers stationed with units based in Alaska automatically benefit from such training. But the instruction available at the NWTC can be a boon to Soldiers throughout the Army.

The NWTC offers several regular

courses throughout the year, including the Cold Weather Leaders Course and the Basic Mountaineering Course. The CWLC primarily targets corporals through sergeants first class, as well as platoon-level officers. The 13-day course, during much of which students will be outside braving the elements, is intended to give graduates the tools they need to ensure their Soldiers are using their gear properly to protect themselves from the cold and know how to move themselves and their equipment across the snow and ice.

The BMC, intended for the same ranks, is a 15-day course that teaches Soldiers how to traverse rough, elevat-



ed terrain using the basic principles of knots, anchors and rope bridges, as well as how to prevent and treat altitude illness.

Shorter courses — the Cold Weather Orientation Course and the Mountain Warfare Orientation Course — are intended to familiarize higher-ranking NCOs and officers with the importance of cold-weather and mountain training, and how to successfully conduct operations in those environments.

The center's NCO in charge, 1st Sgt. Tom Dow, said the vast majority of the students come from U.S. Army Alaska, or USARAK, but that's because of "a lack of knowledge" about the school in the Lower 48 — "not knowing this place is up here and what we have to offer," he said.

However, word about the school is

starting to get out, Dow said.

"We've had several [Special Forces] teams come up lately and get personalized training. And I think we've had five guys from the 101st [Airborne Division]. So the word is starting to spread that we exist," he said. "Korea is interested. They're trying to start up an [Arctic Light Individual Training] program to combat some of their cold-weather injuries — they're having a spike in cold-weather injuries. Also 10th Mountain [Division] has been talking to us."

ALIT is a USARAK program intended to train Soldiers to operate safely and effectively in arctic environments. The NWTC's cold-weather courses prepare Soldiers to develop and implement ALIT training programs back at their units.

## SET UP TRAINING

Interested in setting up training for your unit at the Northern Warfare Training Center? Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Simmons, the center's training NCOIC, says it's as simple as calling or emailing the center's cadre or leadership and explaining what you want to learn.

"Tell us what you're strong in. Tell us what you're weak in," Simmons said. "From that, we'll build a course to suit your unit's needs."

Designing a course depends on the specifications, but typically the process takes a few months. Visit [www.wainwright.army.mil/nwtc/](http://www.wainwright.army.mil/nwtc/).



**Above:** CWLC students learn how to haul an ahkio sled before learning how to set up their campsite. **Below:** A Northern Warfare Training Center instructor shows students the contents of their ahkio sled, including tents and tools.

One of the biggest reasons to conduct ALIT programs — and a major emphasis of the CWLC — is preventing cold-weather injuries. The Black Rapids Training Site, which is south of Fort Greely, Alaska, routinely reaches temperatures of minus 30 and minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Even simple actions become difficult when Soldiers must wear two sets of gloves and juggle several other layers of clothing to prevent dangerous moisture being trapped against their skin.

Even the standard method of firing a weapon doesn't work, said Staff Sgt. Gene MacKenzie, an NWTTC instructor.

In his presentation on ALIT during December's CWLC, MacKenzie recounted that when he arrived at Fort Wainwright in January 1998, it was his first duty station. His sergeant, who had a different philosophy about ALIT than the Army has now, told him then, "If you don't get frostbite or a cold weather injury, you're not a true arctic warrior."

As a result, MacKenzie's first exposure to "ALIT" consisted of spending the night outside in a sleeping bag wearing only his "skivvies," he said, and then helping treat some of the Soldiers in his squad for frostbite in



the morning.

And when he and his squad were at the range a few weeks later, he learned another lesson the hard way.

"In basic training, what do they teach you to do with your rifle when you shoot?" MacKenzie asked the December CWLC students. After several of the approximately 80 students responded, MacKenzie said, "That's right: 'Nose on the charging handle.'"

But it was about 50 below zero outside, MacKenzie said. So after firing a few rounds, he couldn't remove his

nose and cheek from the metal of the rifle. "So I just pulled, and [my rifle] took part of my nose with it."

That was his introduction to contact frostbite. Metal quickly cools to the temperature of the air around it, and when bare skin is exposed to that metal, instant injury can occur. It can happen firing a weapon, putting your hand on a vehicle as you climb in or picking up a trash can lid.

That's why whenever CWLC students step outside, they are required to wear contact gloves — a light set that

provide some protection while still allowing some dexterity, but can be worn under a thicker set in extreme cold.

With that sort of risk, uniform guidance takes on a whole new import.

“If you’re not following the uniform guidance, that’s a safety issue,” Dow told the students at the beginning of the course. “And if it’s brought to my attention or the commander’s attention that you’re a safety violation, then we’re going to process whether you need to stay here or go back to your unit.”

When there is enough demand, the center also offers its Assault Climbers Course, which trains Soldiers on more advanced mountaineering skills. And the center is capable of crafting programs based on the needs of individual units. For instance, this winter, the center’s instructors led dozens of members of a Special Forces unit from Fort Carson, Colo., through over-snow mobility training and basic mountaineering techniques.

The center’s leadership and cadre hope more units will take advantage of the expertise available at the Black Rapids Training Site. The training can be valuable for units heading to Afghanistan or other areas around the world regularly affected by the cold, such as South Korea or Germany. However, it can also be useful for units closer to home. Such places as Fort Drum, N.Y.; Fort Carson, Colo.; Fort Bragg, N.C.; and Fort Campbell, Ky., have severe winters and report a number of cold-weather injuries each year. But even less-obvious locations, such as Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Sill, Okla., can see a disturbing number of injuries from the cold.

“Anyone who’s going to have to operate in a cold environment for sure can benefit from the courses,” said Maj. Gary McDonald, the center’s commander. “So anybody up north — the 10th Mountain Division [at Fort Drum], the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea and Fort Lewis, Wash., as well — can definitely benefit from this. But even units at Hood have something to gain — learn about the cold weather. Every winter, the Army man-



CWLC students practice walking along hilly trails in snowshoes.

dates that you do cold weather training with your units; it doesn’t matter where you’re at. ... Well, this is the place to come to build your subject-matter experts. And those [SMEs] need to exist at the squad level; that needs to be your team leaders and your [staff sergeants]

because they’re the ones who have the most contact with Soldiers. They’re able to spread that knowledge over the largest breadth of people.”

Sgt. Mahuad Abdulrahman, a team leader with the 10th Special Forces Group at Fort Carson, was one of the

# HISTORY OF THE NORTHERN WARFARE TRAINING CENTER



**ORIGINS** Some phase of almost every conflict in which the United States has been engaged was fought in mountains or cold, or both. However, specialized training of units for cold weather and mountain warfare was not seriously undertaken until the approach of World War II.

**WWII** In 1942, the Mountain Training Center commenced operations at Camp Hale, Colo. Its primary accomplishment was training the 10th Mountain Division for its future role fighting in the mountains of Italy, but it also sent training detachments across the United States.

few students from outside Alaska during the Cold Weather Leaders Course in December. He definitely saw the benefits of the course.

“It was a good experience,” he said. “There was a lot of good information — training, how to deal with the cold weather, the effects on equipment and batteries.”

Before the end of the course, he was already preparing to use the information when he got back to Colorado.

“We actually have some training coming up,” he said. “We’re going to be out in the cold doing a cold weather exercise, so this is a carryover into that. We can take it back, teach the Soldiers the same thing that we use out here.”

In addition to learning how to prevent cold-weather injuries, CWLC students are trained on how to analyze the weather and evaluate the terrain; manage risks; plan over-snow movements; use snowshoes; haul an ahkio sled; set up tents and use stoves safely inside them; improvise shelters; maintain vehicles, weapons and other equipment in the cold; avoid the risks of avalanches; and conduct basic search and rescue in snowy and mountainous environments.

It’s a lot of information to convey in under two weeks, and in addition to completing all the assigned tasks during that time, students must pass a written exam covering all the material before being presented their “arctic” tabs, a locally authorized patch in USARAK for graduates of the NWTC.

Fortunately, Dow noted, the NWTC has great instructors, most of them infantrymen like himself.

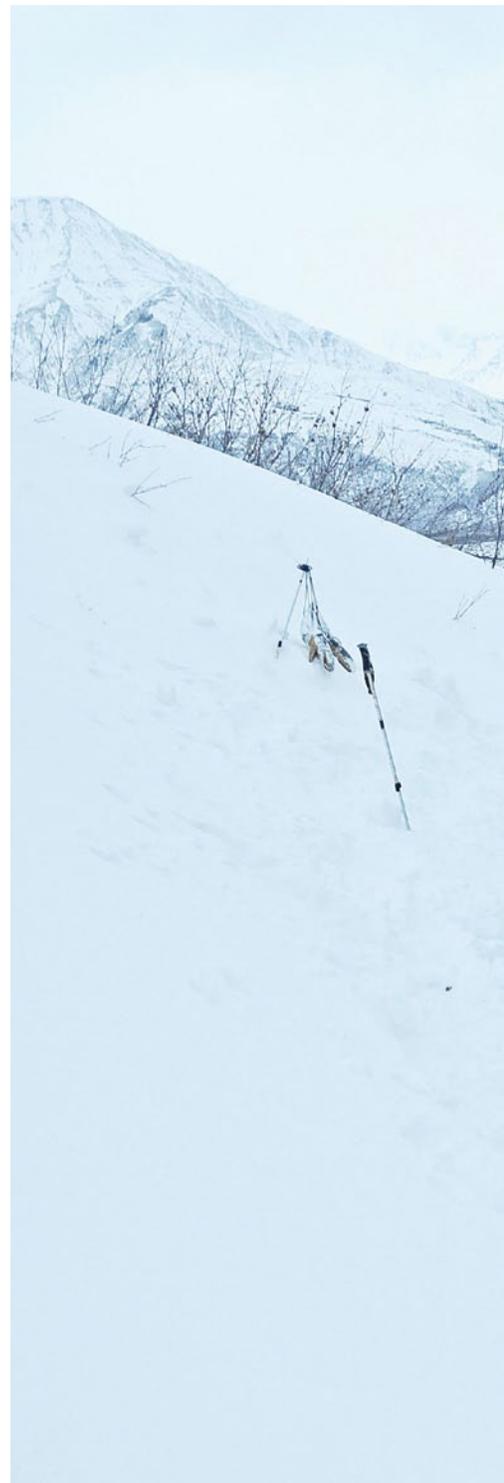
“We try to have instructors for three years,” Dow said. “Generally, we pull them from another unit in Alaska, and usually they have a lot of experience training already. They’re all 11B [infantryman] slots, but we have MPs in here, and we have some fire support guys. [The mix] helps; it gives us a good background. I’m kind of partial to the 11Bs, but all the instructors do a phenomenal job.”

The NWTC’s training NCOIC, Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Simmons, said the center’s instructors are diligent about working together and with their leadership to provide the best possible training. The NWTC is allotted 20 slots for instructors, he said, but less than three-quarters of those slots were filled this winter. However, the NWTC cadre was a careful mix of third-year, second-year and first-year instructors, so that the experienced crew can assist the newer Soldiers and share what works and what doesn’t.

“Because our cadre have been together for a while, they know the training, they know what works, they know how to implement, and they know how to train,” Simmons said.

This passing of knowledge happens both formally and informally, in chats in the office after classes or on the slopes.

“Every night, when we’re in class and even when we’re not in class, we have a meeting and go over what we think went well and what we think we could have done better,” Simmons said. “We don’t always agree on everything, but we find out what is best for the organization and we make it happen



As part of their training, CWLC students learn basic rescue and recovery techniques. In this simulated avalanche rescue, students prod the ground in search of “victims,” bags that have been stashed beneath the snow.

**POST-WAR** At the end of World War II, the center was moved to Camp Carson, Colo. In 1948, a school for arctic operations was organized at Big Delta, Alaska, later named Fort Greely. In July 1949, the Army Arctic School was redesignated the Army Arctic Indoctrination School.

**1950s** Training in mountain and cold weather operations were conducted simultaneously at Camp Carson and Fort Greely until 1957, when total responsibility for cold weather and mountain training was transferred to Alaska. It became the U.S. Army Cold Weather and Mountain School.

**MODERN ERA** In 1963, the Army shifted training from individuals to units. The school was redesignated the Northern Warfare Training Center and still maintains the Army's cold-weather and mountain warfare training and develops tactics and techniques for such operations.





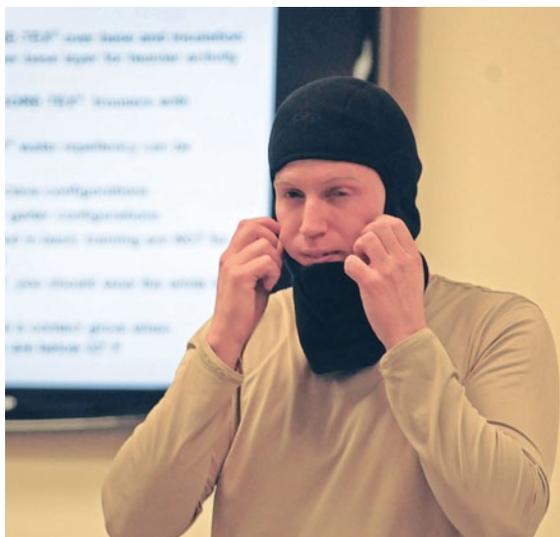
**Above:** After clearing and packing an area to prepare a campsite, CWLC students learn how to set up a tent. The students would spend seven of the course's 12 nights outside in the 10-man tents. **Below:** An NWTC instructor pulls on his balaclava to demonstrate one of the three ways it can be worn during a classroom course on the proper use of the Generation III Extended Climate Warfighter Clothing System.

— through communication and having those different mindsets. You can't just have somebody who's going to constantly agree with everything; you've got to have that difference of opinion. Everybody here is opinionated, especially when it comes to this. Most of them like to mountaineer. They love the cold weather. They love to ski. The majority of the time, these instructors, when we're not in class, they're skiing, snowmobiling, mountain climbing, or climbing on the glaciers — doing outdoorsy things to further enhance their skills."

The students get to ski, too. A lot. Some of the center's instructors have heard some students complain that they ski too much.

But at least one student wasn't complaining.

"The skiing was great. It's probably



one of the greatest schools I've been to, just for that simple fact," said Sgt. Alexander Houser, a team leader in the 23rd Sapper Company, 6th Engineering Battalion, 2nd Engineer Brigade, at Joint Base Richardson-Elmendorf, Alaska. "It's pretty much a free ski les-

son. I couldn't do it before; now I can. I'm not saying I got good, but I'm comfortable on them."

Houser attended the CWLC in December after attending the Basic Mountaineering Course last summer. Even with his previous experience at the school, the physical demands of the CWLC surprised him.

"I wasn't expecting it to be as active as it was," he said. "We did a lot of moving around, and I'm surprised that my silkweights held up so much — that's mostly what I wore. It's definitely a smoker."

Dow said Houser's newfound faith in his undergarments and the rest of his uniform is one of the most important elements of the lessons at the school.

"We teach people confidence in equipment," Dow said. "A lot of people — a lot of the younger NCOs, and

even some of the senior NCOs — don't really know how to fully use the equipment that we have. Then they get out here and test the equipment, and they see that it actually works. That's one of the best things that I see from the winter courses."

Finding out just how well their uniform items work is just one of the things students learn about their equipment. They put their skis, snowshoes, rescue equipment, tents and stoves to the test in rigorous training and exercises that include spending seven nights outside, several days hitting the slopes and a 10-kilometer biathlon that some students ski and others snowshoe.

The demands on the students are intense, but the demands on the instructors are even more strenuous. Part of the reason the NWTC doesn't have more of its allotted spots filled is because sometimes Soldiers don't work out in those instructor slots.

"There's no guarantee that, just because you come here, you're going to be an instructor, because you have to go through instructor qualification courses. If you don't make it, then you can't be an instructor," Simmons said. "You have to be a qualified instructor here to instruct, and it's pretty hard."

The center is selective about who it taps to be an instructor, so even being selected is difficult.

"We'll look at their [Enlisted Record Briefs], we'll screen their records, we'll talk to their chain of command, see what type of Soldier they are, because we only want high-caliber Soldiers here — who want to train, who want to succeed, who want to pass their skill set off to other people — so we look at all of that. And then if we have a warm and fuzzy about them we bring them aboard, try them out," he said.

The center looks at "where they've been, their different duty stations, the different schools they've been to," Simmons said. "We also look at [General Technical] scores — does somebody have the potential to comprehend everything? Because, if you look at what we teach, the instructors have to know everything. And the cold-weather courses are a smaller portion of what we teach. If you go into mountaineering, it's a whole lot more classes that



A CWLC student prepares to ride the ski lift during the first day of ski training at the NWTC.

they have to learn and be proficient in and instruct.

"We look at character, too. Does somebody have the drive? Do they want to be here? Do they want to advance? We don't want people who want to be stagnant. We want to progress. ... We're looking for people who want to continue to push themselves and push the people around them. So that way, we as instructors and as an organization don't get lazy. We just want to keep excelling."

And the students reap the benefits. Houser said, "It's definitely one hell of an experience. The instructors have been great. They're really calm. They just sit with you, and say, 'Ok, this is how you do this if you want to

survive."

Houser had wanted to attend the CWLC since he arrived at Fort Richardson and noticed his platoon sergeant's arctic tab.

"All my friends and I said, 'Ooh, I want that,'" he said. "I've just been waiting to get the rank to come here."

And now that he's completed his second course at the NWTC, Houser can't wait to come back.

"This is probably one of the most unusual schoolhouses I've ever been to," he said. "I actually want to come back and do the Assault Climbers Course." ❖

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