

*By Army Spc.
Natasha M. Schroedel
Defense Information School*

“That’s not the one you want private, not the one you want!”

“Front leaning rest!”

“I will never what?!”

“I got you!”

“Phase ... back!”

These are the unnerving, but unique phrases that the United States Army Signal School Detachment soldiers have grown to recognize in their drill sergeants. Yet, drill sergeants will no longer use these phrases; they will become the words of platoon sergeants.

In a dehatting ceremony held here Nov. 19, the Army detachment drill sergeants removed their iconic “Smokey the Bear” hats and replaced them with black berets.

The mood was somber as the drill sergeants stood in preparation of retiring their well-known campaign hats. Drill sergeants are known for their hard-core expressions and absence of a smile, and that was more prevalent than ever at the ceremony.

The history of the drill sergeant began in 1962 when a recruit-training survey was conducted in the Army. Testing revealed that due to contributing factors, the noncommissioned officers who trained recruits had a negative attitude, which resulted in a mental block between the recruit and the trainer. This caused a negative impact on the qualified trainer and the quality of training presented. The successful testing resulted in the implementation of drill sergeants.

Drill sergeants were implemented to serve throughout the extensive duty hours and train recruits to perform their best, eliminating the stress on the NCO and the demoralizing affect on the trainee.

Historically, drill sergeants are known for being intimidating, yet efficient trainers for soldiers, but the removal of advanced individual training school drill sergeants marks a significant change in history.

The Department of the Army has ordered the removal of all drill sergeants from training schools, except for basic training, in order to better prepare soldiers for the future.

In the past, soldiers left basic training and AIT and were not subjected to combat for several years. Now, with the Global War on Terrorism, many soldiers are deploying as soon as they arrive at their duty stations, said Col. Frank G. Penha, the brigade commander of the 15th Regimental Signal Brigade, Fort Gordon, Ga.

This new transition from drill sergeant to platoon sergeant will give soldiers the opportunity to receive the necessary mentorship and preparation required to successfully train, deploy and return home safely, he said.

“The removal of the drill sergeant gives soldiers a feeling of mentorship from platoon sergeants,” said Sgt. 1st Class Cornelius B. Harrison, the former Army detachment senior drill sergeant. “It allows them to transition into the real Army sooner,” he said.

It will be a hard transition from drill sergeant to platoon sergeant, said Harrison. “We’ve had some good soldiers come through here. Their motivation hypes the drill sergeants up, gets us back on track and lets us know why we’re here,” he said.

One of his goals in life was to become a drill sergeant and “be the person to make a difference in all these young warrior’s lives,” said Harrison. Now he will have the opportunity to make a difference as a mentor instead of a trainer.

For Staff Sgt. Thomas L. Bray, who was the newest Army-detachment drill sergeant, being a drill sergeant is a family tradition because his mother was a drill sergeant, he said.

One disappointment for Bray is, after enduring 60 days of arduous training, his 56-day tenure as a drill sergeant abruptly ended, he said.

On the other hand, even though the platoon sergeants will still perform the role of drill sergeants, they will be able to mentor soldiers instead of “ruling with an iron fist,” said Bray.

After Harrison recited the Drill Sergeant Creed for the last time, the soldiers were reminded that the platoon sergeants will continue doing what they’ve always done – training soldiers.

The only difference between the platoon sergeant and drill sergeant is they will not be wearing the campaign hat anymore, said Penha. “I assure you that the hat does not make the NCO,” he said.

Indeed, many soldiers may miss the drill sergeants they have come to know and fear, but should gain equal respect for the platoon sergeants they may one day emulate.