



NESA

Learning Skills to Save the Day

By Russell Slater

Every summer since 1998, hundreds of CAP members have made their way to the grounds of Indiana's Camp Atterbury in what has become an annual pilgrimage designed to sharpen their skills. The National Emergency Services Academy drew 376 participants from across the country for this year's training, which was held during weeklong sessions July 20-26 and July 27-Aug. 2.

NESA offers students the opportunity to connect with fellow service-minded volunteers and make new friends, all while learning vital mission-critical skills. Those who complete the various schools return to their local units with increased knowledge gained during the intensive

hands-on training.

NESA consists of three main components: Mission Aircrew School, Ground Search and Rescue School and Incident Command System School. All three schools offer challenging courses designed for various skill levels to help students achieve competence in their specific area of study.

The academy was launched in 1996 as the National Ground Search and Rescue School in Virginia. Founded by Lt. Col. John Desmarais, now director of operations at CAP National Headquarters, today's academy is the result of countless hours of work and fine-tuning over many years.

Lt. Col. Rick Woolfolk, clockwise from lower left, in water, of the Texas Wing, 2nd Lt. David Gauthier of the California Wing, Maj. Nancy Etheridge of the Florida Wing and 1st Lt. Matthew Olson of the Nebraska Wing deploy and occupy a life raft during aircrew survival training at NESAs. Photo by Maj. Gary Brockman, National Headquarters Squadron



“As NESAs’s founder, I’m proud to see how far we’ve come and more importantly the results of the great work that our dedicated staff puts in for our main courses and other training conducted throughout the year,” Desmarais said. “I know the work the staff puts in is incredibly valuable and has a huge impact. I love to hear the stories of members that have saved lives or helped their communities in a crisis after they go home — it makes it all worth it.”

Mission readiness, or producing volunteers qualified for their tasks, is the combined goal of the academy director and the trio of commandants who oversee the schools. The multidisciplinary exercises conducted at Camp Atterbury’s

Joint Maneuver Training Center in Edinburgh, Indiana, use both classroom presentations and training in the field to strengthen and advance participants’ capabilities.

By taking independent study courses offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Emergency Management Institute, students can familiarize themselves with the material before realistic application in training.

Under the watchful eye of CAP volunteer instructors and their counterparts from multiple local, state and federal agencies, students get to practice jobs they could be tasked with during real emergency scenarios. As force-multipliers, CAP members can be summoned to assist authorities, helping augment personnel who may become



Top: Cadet Senior Master Sgt. Christopher Holland, left, of the Alabama Wing instructs Cadet Master Sgt. Grant Falite of the Georgia Wing on how to use direction finding equipment. Photo by Maj. Gary Brockman, National Headquarters Squadron

From left, Senior Member Adam Berman of the Utah Wing, Col. Maurice Givens of the Illinois Wing and Maj. Rafael Salort of the Florida Wing study images on a computer monitor. Photo by Lt. Col. Pat Mitcham, Alabama Wing

overwhelmed during tumultuous times. Serving local communities and neighboring regions is one of the chief reasons many join CAP in the first place.

“NESA offers some unique opportunities that cannot be found in other programs,” said Maj. Gary Brockman, academy director. “As the largest Civil Air Patrol training event, we have personnel come in from every wing. This allows us to not only bring in top instructors from across

the nation, but also for emergency service personnel to work and learn together, which benefits CAP when missions cross wing and region lines.”

Lost and Found

While some students may compare NESA to nostalgic summer camp experiences, the intensity of the training quickly distinguishes it from the more casual activities characterizing a typical CAP encampment.

Aside from completing basic first aid and communications training, students in the Ground Search and Rescue School — helmed by Lt. Col. Michael Long, who also doubles as NESA’s deputy director — practice search operations and cross-country travel between overnight stays in the field. No tents are allowed; students must sleep in field expedient shelters they construct themselves.

The advanced course tests a student’s proficiency in map reading, the use of compasses and other direction-finding equipment as well as accurate assembly of both 24-hour and 72-hour gear as specified by the NESA gear list.

“With the advent of increased homeland security and the need for disaster operations posed by increased weather events, we are committed to training as many members as possible to provide mutual aid and community support in times of need,” Long said. “Our training emphasizes support to civil authorities, communications, direction finding and search planning and techniques and allows us to be a force-multiplier for a variety of mission types.”

Those aspiring to reach the position of ground search and rescue team leader must perform their grueling duties under all conditions, rain or shine. Mental alertness and physical fitness prove equally important as students are required to learn academic course material, perform practical fieldwork and walk significant distances in extreme heat or sudden storms, all while wearing 24-hour gear.

“As CAP’s missions evolve, our capabilities remain consistent; only the customers change,” Long said. “Training activities like NESA are important because they train and qualify CAP personnel in ground operations based on national standards. This is meant to assure our customers CAP can meet mission requirements anywhere in the country with a trained volunteer force that has common requirements for mission performance.”

Aerial Learning

Mission Aircrew School, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Eric Templeton, is an option for students who would rather take to the sky for their training. Working in conjunction with searchers on the ground, aircrews serve as an invaluable resource by relaying and recording observations from their bird's-eye point of view.

Introductory courses offer the opportunity to qualify as a mission scanner or aerial photographer; qualification as a mission scanner is a prerequisite to advance to intermediate level pilot and observer training. Student pilots are required to complete 50 hours of cross-country time before enrolling in the intermediate course. Observers in advanced training need to display high levels of understanding of air navigation as well as GPS usage.

Both mission pilots and observers must be able to independently plan the details of each flight in a consistent and highly accurate manner. Weather permitting, students can expect to fly five days during the six-day course.

Another aspect of Mission Aircrew School is the challenging survival course. In a classic example of “hope for the best, prepare for the worst,” students are taught how to survive on their own in various wilderness environments should a worst-case scenario ever arise. Participants are schooled in building suitable shelters out of available materials, finding local sources of food and water, treating injuries using basic first aid, signaling for help and increasing the probability of being discovered.

Students with an interest in the latest technological developments can whet their appetites by training on the GIIEP (Geospatial Information Interoperability Exploitation — Portable) system. GIIEP is a portable multiband receiver capable of handling various forms of both visual and text information. The resulting ability to capture still photos and video footage for distribution to mission partners helps enhance and maximize CAP's advantage in

supporting operations during disaster situations.

United Response

Man-made and natural disasters can strike at any place or time, often crossing lines of jurisdiction and forcing local, state and federal responders to act in concert. The ability to seamlessly blend organizations' official response is due largely to the Incident Command System.

As a direct result of ICS training and implementation, organizations like CAP can smoothly integrate with other agencies during a crisis and boost both operational safety and resource management.

Through NESA's ICS School, led by Lt. Col. Larry Mangum and his team, participants learn about the basics of communication by constructing and applying antennas, assembling operating positions, troubleshooting and message handling. An intermediate course focuses on the staff positions of ICS, including branch director, mission safety officer and public information officer. The advanced class also covers the posts of section chief and incident commander.

Forging Lasting Connections

CAP volunteers who spend extended amounts of time training with one another tend to develop a solid sense of camaraderie and lasting friendships. NESA participants are no exception.

“Not only do the participants make lifelong friendships,” Desmarais said, “but when that big incident occurs, these personnel already have the experience of working with hundreds of other volunteers in a mission setting and in all likelihood will know someone, wherever the disaster is.”

Although curriculum and courses may take new forms over time, the core NESA mission remains unchanged. Thanks to the efforts of a dedicated staff and the training they provide, CAP members stand ready to respond to calls for assistance when and if the time comes. ▲

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— Lt. Col. Michael Long, NESA Ground Search and Rescue School commandant