



PHOTOS BY MASTER SGT. KIMBERLY WILLIAMS

Early graduates of Sergeants Major Course Class 57 sit in East Auditorium in anticipation of crossing the stage to receive their graduation diploma. The Friday ceremony capped off eight months of resident study at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy for the 115 students, who departed shortly afterward for critical assignments in support of the Global War on Terrorism.



Academy Commandant Lt. Col. Stanford Suits, left, helps retired Command Sgt. Maj. Mark Avery unveil the Sergeants Major Course Class 57 scroll.



Sgt. Maj. Brian Thomas receives his diploma from Maj. Gen. Robert Nixon, commanding general of Division West, First Army and Fort Carson, Colo., at an early graduation ceremony for 115 Sergeants Major Course Class 57 April 13. The remainder of the 649 members of Class 57 will graduate May 22.



Stacks of "diplomas" sit on a table prior to the early graduation ceremony .

Deployment theme resonates at Sergeants Major Course early graduation

MASTER SGT. ERIC B. PILGRIM

USASMA

Combat and terrorism were the hot topics of the night at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy April 13 as 115 of the 649 students from Sergeants Major Course Class 57 graduated one month early.

The East Auditorium of the academy overflowed into the West Auditorium as enthusiastic well-wishers from the Army and El Paso communities celebrated the students' achievements before they departed to fill critical positions throughout the Army.

Among the well-wishers was guest speaker Maj. Gen. Robert Nixon, commanding general of Division West, First Army and Fort Carson, Colo. He told the graduates they should not only relish the academic legacy they are leaving behind, but also the historic combat legacy many will soon establish.

"We're making real progress in both Iraq and Afghanistan, contrary to what you may hear and see on the news," Nixon said. "That progress is due in large part to the leadership of the noncommissioned officer corps on the battlefield. NCOs that you led, developed and mentored are leading on those battlefields today and I know you are as proud of them as I am, and I know many of you will rejoin them soon."

This was the second year the academy allowed an early graduation in order to meet critical Army needs in support of the Global War on Terrorism. All the students have met the requirements necessary for graduation and will be traveling to what Lt. Col. Stanford Suits, USASMA commandant, called "a new beginning."

"As early graduates, this new beginning means these warriors will not only be returning to their most important mission – taking care of Soldiers – they'll be doing so in the critical time of deployment," Suits said.

Before the graduation ceremony began, academy officials honored 16 of the early grads, six of their spouses and four of their children for the tremendous support they have given to the El Paso community. Some of their accolades included special recognition for their help of flood victims in July and August 2006, when extreme rainfall destroyed more than 290 homes, leaving more than 1,500 residents homeless.

Several of the students also completed college degrees during their eight months at the academy. Sitting among the early grads were five who earned master's degrees, 20

who earned bachelor's degrees and 18 who earned associate's degrees.

Many said they will carry these and other fond memories of their time with them to their next duty station; some even listed the building of relationships with other students as one of the most important aspects of the academy experience.

"You learn a lot from your peers, especially the ones who have been downrange," said Sgt. Maj. David Hammond. "Doctrine can only teach you so much, but the hands-on experience and how the different [military occupational specialties] employ that made it all work."

Hammond will attend Airborne School before signing into 503rd Military Police Battalion at Fort Bragg, N.C. They are scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan soon. He is one of the five who earned a master's degree – in human relations. His wife, Kiley, was one of the six spouses awarded for their volunteer work.

Hammond sees the relationships he has developed as crucial to his mission in combat. Although he had to leave the academy a month early, Hammond said it should remain a nine-month course of study to "allow everyone to come in and take a knee, get to know your fellow sergeants major and develop that social network; that way, we can have a full circle out in the field that we can rely on and pull information from."

Sgt. Maj. Yrhonda Young agreed. She earned a bachelor of arts in social science while here, and will travel to Fort Lewis, Wash., where she will link up with the 62nd Medical Brigade before deploying.

Young said the joint, multi-service environment at the academy is critical because it is also critical in combat.

"Everyone is depending on the other one to perform their jobs to standards," she said.

Mixon said whatever the environment, NCOs will succeed because of their commitment to fight terrorism and win.

After the ceremony, many of the graduates, along with friends and family, flooded into the foyer for more than 30 minutes of shouts of jubilation, laughter, hugs and smiles; and even some lighthearted jealousy from some of their many peers who must wait until May 22 to graduate.

Master Sgt. Dennis Lopez said his good-byes and grinned as he made his way to the door.

"Oh, I'm jealous," Lopez said. "... One more month."