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State Patrol cadets shoot, sweat, steer, train

Shelton: 25 will have tough six months before graduation

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SHELTON – Until they graduate in June, the cadets in the 97th Washington State Patrol Trooper Basic Training Class will live under the rigors of a military-style boot camp here at the academy, living communally in the on-site barracks.

When they're not in the classroom or sleeping, they'll spend most of their days shooting at the range, sweating in the gym or steering on the driving course.

Cadet Ryan Burke of Olympia said he's used to the military-style training; before joining the academy, he was an aircraft mechanic on active duty at McChord Air Force Base. He said he typically responds to queries from his instructors with what he calls "a sir sandwich," or "sir on both sides" – "Sir, yes sir!"

The training was made possible by federal grant money obtained by the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. Early in 2009, Gov. Chris Gregoire had announced that there wasn't enough money in the state budget to fund trooper basic training classes for the rest of the year.

But the Washington Traffic Safety Commission's federal grant will pay for a DUI-enforcement program that will create "Target Zero Teams" made up of troopers and other law enforcement officers in Pierce, King and Snohomish counties.

"These cadets will be used to backfill vacant positions created by experienced troopers joining the Target Zero Teams," State Patrol Sgt. Freddy Williams said.

"It's a great opportunity," State Patrol Lt. Blaine Gunkel. "Not only to fight our DUI problem, but also to provide additional resources."

On Wednesday, one group of cadets practiced driving patrol cars backward at high speeds between orange cones on the rain-slicked driving course.

Another group was busy mastering defensive and control tactics in the gym. The defensive tactics are crucial in disarming and subduing armed suspects safely, Williams said.

The cadet-selection process is highly selective, said Gunkel, the Assistant Training Division commander. Only 4 percent of applicants pass the initial testing process, he said. And "not everyone you see here will probably graduate," Gunkel said.

Cpl. Eric Ludlow said that in two years, he has seen three people who didn't graduate because they couldn't pass the strict driving requirements during the 200 or so hours of training on the course.

Negotiating the course sometimes requires fast driving, Ludlow said. But he added, "we're constantly talking to them about technique over speed."

Other techniques cadets will learn include how to perform a "pursuit immobilization technique," or PIT stop – a maneuver in which the front of a patrol car taps the rear of a suspect's vehicle to safely bring it to a halt.

Ludlow said that for an instructor, there's nothing better than the feeling of satisfaction when a cadet masters the driving techniques.

“I know that I’ve taught somebody to be a better driver,” he said. “It’s not easy.”

Cadets also must learn to make split-second, life-or-death judgments about using deadly force.

Cpl. Paul Cagle demonstrated the academy’s shooting simulator, also called a judgment simulator – a computer program that helps teach cadets when to draw and use their firearms. The simulator projects a video screen that shows real-time potential deadly-force situations. A specially rigged firearm shoots an air pocket so a cadet can see whether his or her shot has hit the target.

In one simulation, a woman gets out of a car with her hands tied behind her back. A gunman also exits, and a cadet has about 24 seconds to decide what to do before the gunman shoots the hostage – then fires at the officer.

Instructors coach the cadets on how to verbally defuse a simulated situation and when to use deadly force, Cagle said.

“When things get really bad, most people are running away from that,” he said. “Our job is to run in there and confront that.”

Teaching cadets how to think and react correctly in such situations is part of the job, Cagle added. “You don’t have the luxury of time,” he said.

The recent rash of shootings of police officers locally underscores the importance of the shooting simulator.

“The ultimate goal is to get them home safe at night,” Cagle said.

2010 cadet class Number of people in class, which began Dec. 21 Number of women in the class Age of the oldest cadet, who is from Pierce County Percent of applicants who pass initial testing Graduation

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