

Law Enforcement Session

The Training of a Georgia Conservation Ranger

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Abstract: The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has a comprehensive basic training program for all conservation ranger recruits. The Conservation Ranger School consists of 16 weeks of vigorous training at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center in Forsyth. The training is coordinated and conducted by veteran officers who not only have years of experience, but who have prepared themselves as trainers by attending numerous instructor training programs and by spending much time involved in research and lesson preparation. Other professionals from various public safety agencies and from such institutions as the University of Georgia are involved in presenting the many subjects related to the duties and responsibilities of a conservation officer. This paper relates some of the experiences of a ranger trainee who graduated as a member of the 12th Basic Conservation Ranger Class in June 1989.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 43:497-506

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center in Forsyth is an outstanding training facility. It is the result of dreams formulated in the mid-1970s as several state public safety agencies jointly recognized the need for improved training facilities. Emerging from the myriad ideas and alternatives was the concept of a centralized training facility where consolidation of resources, personnel, and specialized training facilities would provide an opportunity for improving the quality of public safety training while remaining within the realistic abilities of a State budget.

A feasibility study was funded in 1978. Initial funds for the facility were appropriated in 1982 and development began shortly after the site near Forsyth was selected. The Georgia Public Safety Training Center was occupied in 1987 and is now in full operation.

The Center is designed to incorporate 7 inter-related training complexes in a 16-week course. These are:

- Academic Complex
- Driver Training Complex
- Corrections Complex
- Firefighter Complex

Practical Exercise Complex

Firearms Complex

Natural Resources Complex

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center is a comprehensive training facility unique with respect to its scope of training in that programs in criminal justice and public safety are included. It is an example of progressive leadership emanating from the State of Georgia. It is the result of governors having vision, insight, and commitment; legislators providing support and commitment; and professionals in public safety agencies supporting a unique program and generating support from their peers and their community.

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center was much more impressive and complex than I had ever dreamed that it would be. I had imagined that the many weeks that I would spend at the Center in basic training would be somewhat like going off to college. I knew that it would not be easy, but I had no idea that it would be as intense or as physically or as mentally challenging as it actually was.

That first day was unforgettable to say the least. All recruits were anxious because we all knew how much our jobs depended on our performance during the basic training. We all realized that some of us may not make it to graduation. We were aware that some trainees had not been successful in previous basic ranger schools. This awareness tended to heighten the intensity of our anxiety.

Training programs at the center normally run Monday through Friday. That Sunday we had the facility to ourselves. After the initial welcome, our training staff took us outside and began to teach us how to march and to work together as a team. Our Department takes great pride in our personal appearance and in our professional demeanor. During that long afternoon we began to develop friendships and a closeness that increased as the weeks went by and as we gained confidence and developed new skills and knowledge. We began to depend on each other while at the same time we maintained our individuality. Everyone had something to contribute to the class. This cohesiveness became obvious to our training staff and even to outside agencies that were able to observe us throughout the training course.

From the first day, the training was extremely intense and covered a vast spectrum of subjects. The first few weeks of training focused mainly on the criminal justice system and criminal law. Many of the class members transferred to the Department of Natural Resources from various other law enforcement agencies. They already had prior working knowledge and field experience in the criminal justice system and Georgia Criminal Code. This knowledge was utilized for the benefit of all when we worked together in study sessions in the evenings and before the Friday examinations. Each Friday we were tested on all of the material that had been covered during the week. The students who had trouble academically in different areas were aided and drilled by other students who had a better grasp of the subject.

When someone showed a weakness in a given area, there was usually another among us who had some kind of working background in that area. One of the

trainees, who proved invaluable during our first responder training, had been an emergency medical technician and a registered nurse. Five of the officers were wildlife technicians who came to train as deputy conservation rangers assigned to wildlife management areas throughout the State. They were able to help the rest of us through the wildlife and forestry training. And most of the class enjoyed either hunting, sportfishing, or both, which proved a valuable asset during our extensive study of game and fish rules and regulations.

Even though we had the benefit of this inside knowledge, every member of the class suffered through times of personal crisis when he/she had problems with a particular subject. We were given 1 chance to redeem ourselves if we failed any test or any part of the program. If we were unable to pass on the second attempt, our careers with the Department would be terminated. This was a stress factor that some class members had more difficulty dealing with than others. One of our members became so anxious that he had to be placed on medical leave because his blood pressure had risen so high. The fear of failure was very real to each of us throughout the training period. As the weeks went by, it became even more of a stress factor because we had invested so much time and effort into successfully completing the course.

Another very real stress factor during our training was the extended separation from our families. Many of our recruits had never been away from their families for an extended period of time. Even though we were allowed to go home on Friday nights we were required to be back at the training center by 2200 hours on Sunday evening. By Friday, we were all so tired that all we wanted to do when we got home was rest. Our Saturdays were spent in a rush of washing clothes, ironing uniforms, and repacking suitcases in preparation for the following week at school. With each week that passed, the drive back to the training center seemed to become longer and harder to make. Most of our class members were very family-oriented. I actually saw tears in the eyes of some of the men when they told me of the weekend antics of their children and how hard it was to leave them and come back to Forsyth. The overall morale of the recruits was usually very low on Monday.

With the foundation of our understanding of law and the judicial system laid, we began to branch into many other subjects. We received excellent training in wildlife management from several members of the University of Georgia's Wildlife School.

By far the best part of our training and the part that we learned the most from were the scenarios that were created for us in the numerous practical exercises that we participated in. The training officers involved in creating these extremely life-like situations are to be commended for their performance and imagination. These practical exercises were designed to place us in situations that would force us to act or react as if we were in real-life situation. They forced us to evaluate the situation and to take appropriate action under extremely stressful conditions. The scenarios taught us to think on our feet, to act immediately, and to take full responsibility for our actions.

This experience allowed us to make mistakes, evaluate them, and learn from

them in a controlled setting. Now each of us has the confidence of knowing that when we are faced with the same situations in real life we can fall back on our training and remember what we have learned.

The instructors who taught us in the 40-hour first responder course were licensed emergency medical technicians and firemen. These were an example of the many different experts which we were exposed to from many different public safety agencies. The Georgia State Patrol came in to teach us subjects such as vehicular pullovers, traffic accident investigation, and driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol. In mechanics of arrest we had a combination of specialists from the Georgia State Patrol, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as our own conservation rangers.

Some of the very best training that we received came from our own fellow conservation rangers who have attended schools, studied, done research, and become experts in various subjects. We were exposed to knowledge and techniques that have been developed through countless years of field experience by the rangers who preceded us. We were taught by fellow officers ranging in rank from Colonel Steve Black, chief of Law Enforcement, all the way down to a graduate of last year's ranger school. Leonard Ledbetter, commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, took the time to come in and speak to us. We also had the opportunity to meet several of the members of the Board of Natural Resources. All the agency staff took an active interest in our training and progress. Without exception they all seemed to take great pride in our class.

Even though we had the advantage of being exposed to some of the best instructors that I have ever studied under, some of the teachers that we encountered were not as good as others. It became increasingly difficult to maintain one's attention span after sitting in class for 8 hours a day. This was especially true during the first half of the training before we began getting more "hands on" field experience. Though we all realized that the classroom instruction was essential to teach us the basic principals and to give us the foundation of the education that we use in the field, we were all happiest when we were outside actually doing field work. As the weeks went by it became increasingly difficult to remain alert in class for 8 hours at a time.

Naturally, some of the instructors were more interesting in their presentations than others. Though it proved to be the exception in our training, we did encounter 1 or 2 instructors who lost the class from the very beginning because of their attitude. These instructors came into the class boasting of their expertise in their subjects; then they spent the entire day reading the material to us out of our textbooks. They were unable to answer our basic questions on the subjects, which caused us to lose our respect for them as teachers. This lack of knowledge combined with their attitude placed the class in a most unpleasant situation. Fortunately, this was the exception, not the norm.

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center itself is a training officer's dream. The classrooms are totally equipped with state of the art audio-visual training aids. We utilized its laboratories for learning how to fingerprint subjects, how to deliver

babies, and how to age and sex deer and turkeys, for only a few examples. The center even contains a complete mock courtroom where a local magistrate came in to drill us in our courtroom demeanor. The library is filled with books and tapes that encompass a multitude of training topics. Countless video tapes cover subjects ranging from "Miami Shootout" to "White Water Rescue" and "Stress Management." The gymnasium is complete with a weight room, an indoor pool, an infirmary and racquetball courts, as well as a steam room and hot tub.

Out on the grounds of the facility are several acres of woodland that were the scene of hikes, field trips, and practical exercises. The 8.9-ha/lake was the site of our boating safety training. There we received hands-on experience in boating and fishing violations as well as investigating an actual boating accident involving a boating under the influence charge. The wooded area around the lake was utilized to develop our skills in tracking, reading sign, and search techniques.

The nearby Rum Creek Wildlife Management Area and the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge were also used to our advantage. At Rum Creek we searched for animal traps that had been set by our instructors. The Piedmont Area was the scene of forestry training, a night hike, and all of our night deer hunting exercises. Every available resource was utilized to its maximum in training our class.

Our lives at the training center were extremely structured. The days began early every morning and occasionally ran deep into the night. We were required to be in formation ready for inspection at 0630 hours each morning. We lived in dormitories located off the main academic complex. We had to clean our rooms before we reported to formation because they were subject to inspection at any time, day or night. No food, drinks, or tobacco products were allowed in the dormitory rooms. For the first few weeks, radios and televisions were also banned.

Our class was expected to maintain high standards in our personal appearance and to maintain a professional attitude at all times. Our uniforms were starched and our brass and leather were polished to a shining glow. There was no doubt that our class stood out among the hundreds of other law enforcement officers and civilians who also attended classes at the training facility during that time period.

Each week we were assigned a different officer in charge (OIC). This was another area where the class encountered some conflict. We all understood the reasoning behind the structured nature of our training and accepted the need for it. The majority of the OICs were a pleasure to work with and became our good friends as well as our colleagues. However, a few of the OICs seemed to carry their responsibilities too far which caused resentment from the class. The age of our class members ranged from 21 to 38 years. Most of us were 30 or older. Though we could deal with our structured existence at the training center, each of us fully expected to be allowed to maintain our dignity and to be treated like adults. Those OICs who insisted on treating us like children and taking away the dignity quickly lost the respect of the class. The end of their duty assignment was a welcome relief to all of the members of our group.

The class itself was not immune to its own inner conflicts. In a group of 25 very different individuals living and working together for 15 weeks basic personality

clashes were to be expected. However, we tried and were very successful in solving our differences within the structure of our group. Through peer pressure and class meetings we were able to resolve most of the problems that arose between classmates without having to call for outside assistance. On few occasions did our training officers have to intercede.

Physical training was highly stressed during our basic training. We were encouraged to make optimum use of the center's physical training facilities and the opportunities they offered.

The Department of Natural Resources maintains rigid physical standards for its law enforcement personnel. Before we were hired each of us had to pass a physical agility test designed to evaluate each individual's upper body strength and total physical endurance. We were tested again at the beginning of our basic training. Thereafter we were tested periodically during the 16-week period and were expected to show steady improvement in our physical abilities. Four people who did not graduate with the rest of the class were eliminated because they could not meet the strenuous physical requirements of our training.

We started out slowly in our physical training with basic strengthening exercises; long, brisk hikes; and short runs. As we became stronger and our endurance grew, our runs became longer and more demanding. It did not take the class long to build up to daily runs around the 3-mile perimeter road that borders the training complex. On the days when the weather was too harsh to be outside we would meet in the gymnasium for an aerobics workout or at the swimming pool.

Because of the nature of the job and the time that we are required to spend on the water, all rangers are required to be capable swimmers. Therefore, we spent many hours honing our aquatic skills. We practiced drown-proofing techniques, life saving practices, and small boat recovery tactics in the pool. By far the most pleasurable of our workouts were the water polo games. These games were very competitive and great fun for all. They afforded the opportunity for us to practice aquatic defensive tactics and to gain strength, endurance, and confidence in our skills. Even our weakest swimmers would become so engrossed in the excitement of the game that they would forget their fears and venture into deep water for extended periods of time. Without exception the entire class showed tremendous improvement in their aquatic abilities.

Our physical training developed into the largest single cause of personal conflict and anxiety within our group. There were several exceptional athletes in the class. Several could run the mile in well under 6 minutes. Unfortunately, all of us did not share their natural athletic prowess. We were divided into 3 groups according to our athletic abilities. The first group was made up of the fastest runners. The middle group consisted of good, strong runners that were not quite as fast as the first group. The last group was made up of those who were not as athletically inclined or as strong as the others. This division was made so that each individual could be allowed to advance at his/her own pace without holding anyone else back.

Our instructors spent many hours working with the last group encouraging their improvement. Each of the members of this group knew that their improved

performance in physical training (PT) would be a determining factor in their successful completion of basic training. This was the source of high anxiety within the last group. The fear of failure in PT was very real to them. The majority of the group worked very hard to improve their abilities and their strength. They were recognized and rewarded for their efforts at the graduation ceremony. We worked as a team in our PT. We took pride in the achievements of our classmates. We encouraged each other and pulled for each other.

On the same token, however, when it became obvious that several individuals were not trying to improve their abilities; that they were in fact doing everything that they could to get out of their PT; the class became relentless in its anger. The morale of the class began to suffer. When it became obvious that these individuals did not want nor care enough to improve, they became outcasts in the group. Nearly all of the personal conflict that took place within the class stemmed from these individuals and their attitude. Due to the lack of effort on their part to maintain the set physical standards, the entire class had to perform extra PT details. Our class refused to tolerate this behavior and refused to carry those who would not help themselves.

This was one of the situations when our training officers stepped in and took control. Those individuals were given every opportunity to redeem themselves. When they failed to do so they were expelled from Basic Ranger School. This decision was met with great relief among the members of our class. Our morale improved tremendously.

As our academic studies progressed we began to branch into a wide variety of subjects. We spent 40 hours at the Firearms Training Complex. This complex is comprised of 5 ranges and a skills building. Here we became proficient with both handguns and shotguns. On the 22.8-m courses we ran the Georgia Double Action Course with our handguns. On the shotgun range we were allowed to have some fun after qualifying with our weapons running the stress course and practicing our skills shooting trap. In the skills building we had our classroom training. Here we also practiced judgmental skills in the computerized galleries set up for that purpose. We also utilized the cleaning laboratory each afternoon to care for our firearms.

Another very active block of instruction that we all enjoyed was the 3-day precision/evasive action driving course. The Driver Training Complex is designed to provide for a diverse program of training for public safety personnel. Included in the facilities are a skid course, a tactical course, and a high speed emergency response course. Though we did not perform training on the emergency response course because it is utilized in advanced driver training, we spent many hours performing intricate braking maneuvers on the mechanical tactical course. Another area of the tactical course consists of 850 cones. There we developed our skills in accelerations, deceleration, backing, turning, parking, and braking maneuvers. Another section of the tactical course contained an area where we practiced on-off road recovery. The skid course is designed to develop driver skills basic to skid recovery and is engineered so that skidding occurs at low speed. Here we learned how to regain control of our vehicle once it had been lost. The driver training was exciting and fun for

everyone involved. At the end of this block of instruction our instructors surprised us by presenting us with a video tape that they had made of the more humorous segments of the training and had set to a background of beach music. We all found it very amusing.

Mechanics of Arrest proved to be an extremely physically trying segment of our training as well as an educational experience. Instructors were brought in from the Department of Natural Resources, the FBI, and the Georgia State Patrol. These experts taught us self-defense tactics, offensive and defensive weapon control, and active and passive handcuffing techniques. There we were also introduced to tactical baton techniques. Though the 3 days of training were very strenuous physically and often painful, each member of the class became proficient and confident in his/her skills in defensive tactics.

Other courses that we studied proved equally interesting. We studied a multitude of subjects seemingly unrelated to our particular branch of law enforcement. However, due to the overlapping quality of all law enforcement agencies, our training prepared us to handle any situation that we might be called upon to assist in. Some of these blocks of instruction included satanic cults and voodoo, hostage negotiations, bank robberies, and terrorist attacks. We studied narcotics and dangerous drugs, bombs and arson, sex crimes, and traffic accident investigation as well as many others.

As we progressed with our training, the focus of our instruction turned more and more to an intensive study of game and fish laws and regulation. At this point we began to get more "hands-on" experience through the scenarios set up for us by the training officers of our Department. Conservation rangers were brought in from all over the state to instruct us in the different aspects of enforcing our laws. The collective knowledge that we were exposed to in the Academy came from hundreds of combined years of field experience of the veteran rangers.

Our favorite of these scenarios were the night deer hunting exercises that were staged at the Piedmont Federal Wildlife Refuge located approximately 18.4 km from the Training Complex. Here we divided into groups and spent 3 nights on stakeout maneuvers attempting to apprehend and arrest rangers posing as night deer hunters. These exercises gave us the opportunity to practice our tracking and our surveillance skills. We were able to get first-hand experience gathering evidence for our cases and using our new-found knowledge to outsmart the violators. We also were able to experience the actual excitement of making arrests under a wide array of circumstances. These scenarios were great fun as well as excellent educational experiences.

Another of the more enjoyable of the practical exercises took place during our boating safety training. We spent time on the Training Complex's largest lake looking for boating and fishing violations being staged by our instructors. Here we were able to practice backing boats on trailers and launching them. Rangers from the counties around the Training Center brought in a variety of different sizes and types of boats and motors so that we could become familiar with them. We were able to practice operating and maneuvering these vessels in a number of different

situations. At the same time our instructors were able to evaluate our performance in the different exercises that they had set up for us.

Our instructors even brought in a pontoon boat that had been involved in a boating accident the previous weekend. This vessel was utilized as a training aid in boating accident investigation. With this boat our instructors set up an exercise that allowed us to investigate the accident, write up the reports, make an arrest on a boating under the influence charge on one of the operators, and later take the case to court. Everything that we did in our exercises prepared us for what would be our daily activities after graduation.

Besides enforcing game and fish laws, conservation rangers are very active in public education in game and fish related subjects. Georgia Rangers are required to regularly participate in hunter safety and boating safety programs. They are often called upon to speak to community organizations and local schools about conservation oriented topics. Therefore, our class spent many hours in classes designed to teach us how to speak to the public and to the news media and the press. Before graduation we were each required to prepare a 30-minute educational program and to present it to the class. This helped to prepare us for our role as public speakers.

Our instructors also worked hard to instill in us a sense of compassion for the public. They taught us to always treat people like we would want another officer to treat a member of our family. Our instructors strove to instill in us the fact that, in the public eye, WE ARE the Department of Natural Resources. They taught us to always conduct ourselves in a manner that reflects honesty, integrity, and pride in our Department.

The training that the 1989 graduating class received during the Basic Ranger School was among the best training of its kind available in the nation. The Georgia Public Safety Training Center itself is being used as a model facility throughout the United States. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has done everything possible to insure that its new recruits receive the best training available. The many weeks that we spent in basic training were very intense and very disciplined. Sergeant Ralph Sheppard, training officer of the Department of Natural Resources, personally nurtured every aspect of our academic and physical training. He was our father, mother, mentor, and drill sergeant throughout the entire training period. All of the Department's personnel took an active interest in our class and its progress. Quite often, one of the lieutenant colonels or majors would come down to run with us in physical training or just to sit in on our classes. From statewide, experienced rangers came in to share their knowledge with the class and actively assist in our training whenever possible. The combined efforts of the personnel of the Department of Natural Resources as well as those of the other public safety agencies who took an active part in our training made the 12th Basic Ranger School elite among others of its kind. Without exception, the members of the graduating class are very proud to be part of an agency that puts so much time and effort into insuring that its personnel are well qualified and prepared to perform their duties.

Our class spent many long, hard weeks together and became a working unit

that we all take great pride in. We suffered together in our mistakes and rejoiced together in our triumphs. We laughed together and cried together. We strove together to achieve a common end. We have made life-long friends and we know that no matter where we might be assigned within the state that another member of our class will be close by.

I, personally, would not take anything at all for the time that I spent at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center in the Basic Conservation Ranger Training School. It definitely was an educational experience. However, I can say from the bottom of my heart and I am sure that I speak for the rest of my class, that though I appreciate all of the training that I was fortunate enough to receive and the supreme efforts of everyone involved in that training; I sure am glad to be back home!