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Regional News April 12, 2007

Ten hut! Students drill with the state police
 by Melissa McKeon mmckeon@holdenlandmark.com



EYES RIGHT: In formation and ready to train, criminal justice program students fall out at attention at the Massachusetts State Police Academy in New Braintree to begin nearly 24 hours learning what it's like to be a recruit. Photo courtesy Justin McKay

The food, some say, was pretty good on a recent field trip by 40

Wachusett Regional High School students. But as students passed through the cafeteria line and headed for their tables, the accompaniment was not the sound of teenage chatter, but the harsher admonitions of a drill instructor, "Move along."

As instructed, the forty were silent when they filed into the dining area and took their places, not near their friends but wherever they were told.

Standing at attention, trays in hand, they waited for their fellow students to finish fetching their

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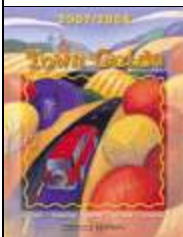
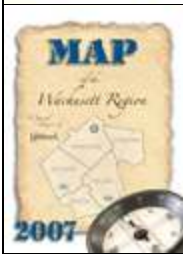
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food before making several attempts to place their trays down in unison. The meal was silent.

To put it mildly, it wasn't the usual high school cafeteria scene.

In fact it was 40 criminal justice students undergoing just a fraction of the paramilitary training Massachusetts State Police recruits face at the academy in New Braintree.



Before they even got off the bus (left), students got their instructions from drill instructors. (Above) Even filing down the stairs requires military discipline, as CJ students head for their beds to learn the proper way to arrange their belongings. Photos courtesy of Justin McKay

Students didn't just go for a meal, but for nearly 24 hours of disciplined sleeping, eating, training and learning they characterize as a little scary, but not as bad as they expected.

That was their opinion upon reflection after returning home.

Their faces as they stood at attention to walk, to learn, to wait were serious, and a little frightened. They never spoke as Massachusetts State Trooper Jody Greene gave them their instructions.

In the barracks dormitories after dinner, students learned from other recruits how to roll their clothing for storage in drawers, how to make their beds so that they'll pass inspection. Lights out at 10 p.m., up at 6 a.m.



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But it wasn't all learning how to live, military style.



Some of the "fun stuff," like

simulated target practice was part of the experience as well, and, overall, students admit it wasn't as scary as instructor Justin McKay led them to believe.

"Mind games," CJ student Brian Scannell calls it, but without resentment. Mind games are part of the training, part of the need to break recruits down before they build them up into team members who will obey orders and follow the rules as part of a team, he said.

McKay, in his first year as a CJ instructor, says this is also the first year junior CJ students have been brought along for their first taste of paramilitary training. He says that juniors have had a more volatile response to the field trip than seniors, who have already been through a year of CJ instruction and some other field experiences, like visits to prisons or military style workouts with drill instructors shouting in their faces.

Criminal Justice courses are not required, so McKay says everyone in the classes already is invested in the experience: no one's there for an easy way to fill up their time.

Many are, indeed, there because a career in law enforcement or a related field is something they see themselves doing in the future. They plan to be police officers, probation officers, paralegals and attorneys.



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Nearly half of the students raised their hands high when asked if such was the case; many expect to go to the Massachusetts State Police Academy for the full treatment.

While the MSP Academy is similar to Marine Corps training, the training CJ students get is probably only a one or a two on a scale of 10.

Trooper Greene and Sgt. Rick Wolansky spent most of their time with the group, treating them Wolansky says, as the smart young adults they are.

"They're here to take a look at their future," he observes.

On the wall above their heads as they returned their food trays is an array of navy blue caps, grim reminders of those state police academy recruits who arrived for training, and left early, failing to make the grade.

It's the one thing some of the students will admit to finding fearsome, that they would let down their fellow students.

Senior Katie O'Donoghue earned McKay's accolades for overcoming that fear.

"I didn't want to let the class down," she said. "I knew that if I did that everyone would be mad at me."

Peer pressure wasn't the only factor, though learning to live and work with their "peers" from the other classes was a concern before they all left for New Braintree. But it ended up being something positive, a bonding opportunity.

Megan Murphy of Holden admits the eating in silence was hard because she had so much she wanted to share with her fellow CJ students, and mealtime seemed like the time to do it.

Most left with a feeling of respect for those who complete their training there, and those who train them.

"They do not play around up there," Brendan Rutherford of Rutland says.

The Criminal Justice classes are the result of a partnership between Holden Police and Wachusett Regional.

Both Chief George Sherrill and WRHS liaison Sgt. David Armstrong also praise the students who participate in the classes, and who make it through the mini-training sessions.

McKay points out that

the students spend far more hours on their CJ classroom experience than other students, largely due to the drill training and the field trips to criminal justice facilities.

The whole experience is one Armstrong says is rare at high schools. "These kids get something nobody else gets," he says. "They're lucky."

And they know it. While it's hard to imagine students feeling grateful for the experience of becoming a recruit for a day, they are.

In the words of Adam Schmidt of Sterling, "It's nice to have that opportunity in high school. Not many high school students do."