

First enlisted female graduates Army's Sapper Leader Course

By Michele Vowell, Fort Campbell Courier December 14, 2018



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FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. -- Sgt. Hailey Falk is the Army's first enlisted female Soldier to graduate from the rigorous Sapper Leader Course since the program's inception in 1985.

Falk, 23, received her Sapper Tab, Dec. 7, after completing the "demanding 28-day leadership development course for combat engineers that reinforces critical skills and teaches advanced techniques needed across the Army." She is assigned to B Company, 39th Engineer Battalion "Bull Strike," 2nd Brigade Combat Team "Strike," 101st Airborne Division, at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

"Sgt. Falk's success as the first enlisted [female] graduate represents a step forward in the process of recognizing success in the combat arms field by performance, not by gender," said Capt. John D. Baer, B Company commander, 39th BEB. "The combat

engineer MOS [12 Bravo] opened to females in 2015, and Sgt. Falk's graduation from the Sapper Leader Course reinforces the wisdom in that decision by proving that both genders can achieve success in the enlisted combat arms career field.

According to the Army, the mission of the course is to "train and certify the next generation of Sapper leaders, to serve as members of Combined Arms team, through training in small unit tactics and combat engineer battle drills in a physically demanding, stressful and austere environment."

SAPPER LEADER COURSE

Falk was promoted to sergeant last summer. With a high Army Physical Fitness Test score and a dedication to physical fitness, Falk's leadership saw her potential to succeed at the Sapper Leader Course.

"Sgt. Falk is an outstanding noncommissioned officer and embodies the be, know, do leadership model and esprit de corps. She accepts the most difficult task without hesitation. As an NCO she leads from the front and drives troops forward to accomplish all missions," said Staff Sgt. William Frye, Falk's squad leader.

Each platoon in B Company rallied to help Falk and her fellow Soldiers succeed at Fort Leonard Wood.

Among the challenges Falk faced at the leader course was the Sapper physical fitness test. The test is graded by Army standards to the individual's age and gender. The minimum passing criteria is 230 total score, with no less than 70 points in each event.

The Sapper Leader Course not only challenged Falk physically, but mentally. According to the Army, the Sapper Leader Course is designed "to build esprit de corps by training Soldiers in troop leading procedures, demolitions (conventional and expedient) and mountaineering operations. The course culminates in an intense field training exercise that reinforces the use of the battle drills and specialized engineer techniques learned throughout the course."

At the end of the course, Falk's instructor delivered the news that she had passed.

"At that moment, that's when it hit me that I did all this. Now, it didn't seem hard anymore," she said. "During it seemed like the hardest thing I've ever done. Then, after, I [thought] I could do this again, honestly."

Baer said Falk's success should be a challenge to all combat engineers of any gender.

"There are physiological differences between genders, and female combat engineers often have to work harder to meet the strenuous physical demands of combat relative to their male peers. Additionally, the unit's operational demands prevent an extended preparation time for the school," Baer said. "Sgt. Falk has humbly taken on these challenges, succeeding purely through hard work and mental toughness."

As the first female enlisted Soldier to graduate from the Sapper Leader Course, Falk said she encourages other Soldiers to try it and plans to encourage those under her command to enroll in the school.

"I would say 'go for it.' Don't be scared of failure. As long as you work hard for it and you don't give up, you can push through it," she said. "It's not just you, there are other people who are working to help you get it. All of your battle buddies are earning your tab for you. You can't just earn it yourself. Everyone has to work together."

HER ARMY FUTURE

A week after graduation, Falk said she is catching up on her sleep and preparing for her next adventure -- attending Pathfinder

School in January.

"[I'm] hoping to get as many [Army] schools as I can," she said. "I'm ready to do anything at this point. I just got through that, I guess I can do anything."

Her squad leader and company commander agree Falk has a bright future.

"With Sgt. Falk graduating Sapper Leader Course, she now has no limits. She has faced and overcome the many challenges of one of the Army's hardest schools," Frye said. "Her unit now has one more lethal fighter among the ranks who is now an expert in mobility, counter mobility and survivability, ready to provide her task force with the tools to accomplish the most difficult missions."

"Graduation from the course represents months of diligent preparation and an exceptional quantity of mental stamina," Baer said.

"Sgt. Falk has exhibited these qualities throughout her career in the 10^{1st}, and I suspect this is just the beginning of her success in the military."

Falk remains humble about her accomplishment and credits her leadership and unit for her success.

"I still don't think it's a big deal, [but] I couldn't have done it without everyone," she said. "I'm just glad I have the support system back here. My first sergeant, my sergeant major came [to graduation]. A lot of people from the unit came to support. I owe it to all of them because without all the training -- even though I didn't want to do it at the time -- the training that we do, that I dread, it ended up paying off."

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