



“Made-to-Order” NCOs: *The PLA’s Targeted Training NCO Program*

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Over the last decade, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has rapidly expanded a program to increase technical capabilities across its enlisted corps by developing what it calls “made-to-order” noncommissioned officers (NCO). These targeted training NCOs receive technical training at civilian institutions before entering the PLA with NCO rank and benefits, bypassing the junior enlisted ranks altogether. While the program is not likely to become the PLA’s main source of NCOs, its continued expansion indicates growing trust in its outcomes and highlights its increasing importance in a suite of PLA recruitment and talent development programs.¹

The PLA established a formal NCO corps in the late 1990s, partly to address the problem of its enlisted force being largely comprised of unskilled, poorly educated conscripts not well-suited to a rapidly modernizing military.¹ In the over two decades since, the PLA has introduced many initiatives to attract more educated enlisted members, such as focusing on recruiting college students and recent graduates and even directly recruiting college graduates with certain specialties into the PLA as NCOs.² Despite these programs, in recent years the PLA has acknowledged that its NCO corps still lacks higher education and technical skills, and that this problem will become more severe as increasingly modern weapons and equipment place higher demands on personnel.³ The “targeted training NCO” (定向培养士官) program is aimed at alleviating this shortfall.

While the majority of PLA NCOs still likely begin as junior enlisted members who apply and are selected to remain on active duty after their initial two-year commitment, an increasing number of those in technical expert positions are targeted training NCOs.⁴ These members are recruited as they graduate high school into a three-year program that includes 2.5 years of service-designated coursework at a civilian polytechnic/vocational college followed by 6 months of military training before being conferred with NCO rank and benefits.⁵ With over 20,000 students recruited into the program in 2020 and likely more in 2021, this program has the potential to inject significant technical knowledge into the PLA’s NCO corps.

Targeted training NCOs are reportedly in high demand by units for their ability to quickly adapt to military life and become technical experts.⁶ In one PLA Air Force (PLAAF) air division, leaders claimed they had better fundamentals and learned faster than even other types of degree-holding NCOs and implied they were a next step in an evolution from selecting NCOs from among junior enlisted members to directly recruiting college graduates as NCOs.⁷ This latter method,

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known as the direct recruit NCO (直招士官) program, involves recruiting civilian college graduates with select post-secondary educational diplomas (大专)ⁱⁱ or bachelor's degrees (本科) directly as NCOs. While both the direct recruitment and targeted training programs continue today, the latter may indeed be seen as an evolution in that it may better mitigate the potential drawbacks of recruiting skilled graduates directly as NCOs.



Targeted Training “NCO Cadets”, Taishan Polytechnic

Program Details

The targeted training NCO program was launched in 2012 by the PLA’s General Staff Department (GSD) and China’s Ministry of Education (MOE) to accelerate development of the high-quality NCO talent needed for military modernization.⁸ The program initially included 11 schools, and while it is not clear how many applicants were accepted PLA-wide, the PLAAF recruited only 310 “NCO cadets” that year.⁹ By 2020, the program had grown significantly to include 48 schools and accept over 20,000 students bound for eight different Central Military Commission (CMC), PLA, and People’s Armed Police (PAP) organizations.¹⁰ Table 1 contains a breakdown of these students by service. While 2021 PLA-wide data for the program was not released, recruitment at available provincial levels appears to have increased slightly.

Table 1: 2020 Targeted Training NCO Recruits by Serviceⁱⁱⁱ

Service/Organization	# Recruited	% of Total
CMC National Defense Mobilization Department	140	0.7%
PLA Army (PLAA)	4,110	19.9%
PLA Navy (PLAN)	3,260	15.8%
PLA Air Force	3,860	18.7%
PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)	3,650	17.7%
PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)	1,585	7.7%
PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (PLA JLSF)	170	0.8%
People’s Armed Police	3,840	18.6%
Total	20,615	-

ⁱⁱ The three-year professional education program known as dazhuan xueli (大专学历) is a post-secondary educational program in China that grants a non-degree diploma upon completion of all requirements. It is roughly an equivalent to the associate degree granted in the United States.

ⁱⁱⁱ The data in Table 1 is also included Appendix A, where it is further divided into province, autonomous region, or municipality.

Application

Applicants for the targeted training NCO program must be high school graduates who take the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE or *gaokao*) in the year that they apply. When registering for the exam, applicants must specify the school and specialty to which they are applying. They must be 20 years old or younger, unmarried,^{iv} and meet the same political and physical standards as traditional recruits. They must also pass a group interview with military, school, and military service organization personnel attending.¹¹



Targeted Training NCO Interview, Changsha

Phases

The full program is three years and awards a post-secondary educational diploma (大专) upon graduation. The civilian school is fully responsible for the initial 2.5 years, with guidance and support from the recruiting service as needed, while the final six months is handled by the service and includes basic training (入伍训练) and pre-billet specialty training (岗前专业培训).¹²

During their time at the civilian school, students are formed into classes of no more than 50 individuals, wear military uniforms with cadet rank insignia, are subject to “quasi-militarized management” (准军事化管理), and appear to stay in dedicated “NCO dormitories”.¹³ A 2017 *Air Force News* article indicated that during this time they are also considered part of the reserve forces (预备役部队) and participate in shooting training, field deployments, and live-ammunition target training, but similar claims were not found in any more recent documentation.¹⁴ All of this seems to imply the program is somewhat segregated from civilian courses of study at the otherwise civilian institutions, but regulations also allow for vacancies in any given specialty to be filled by other students in the same year of that program who meet military standards.¹⁵



NCO Dormitories at Henan College of Transportation (above) and Lanzhou Resource & Environment Vocational-Technical College (below)

After completing 2.5 years of technical training with passing marks, students are officially processed into their branch of service in December of their third year in the program. This is accomplished through coordination between military service organizations (兵役机关) local to the school and personnel dispatched from the service’s training guidance

^{iv} The PLA generally upholds the principle of encouraging its personnel to marry late (晚婚). Males must be at least 25 years old and females 23. See Marcus Clay, Ph.D., *Understanding the “People” of the People’s Liberation Army: A Study of Marriage, Family, Housing, and Benefits*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, 30 March 2019, accessed at [://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/Books/Understanding_the_People_of_the_PLA.pdf](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/Books/Understanding_the_People_of_the_PLA.pdf).

organization (训练指导机构) to receive the new recruits. This handover is done between December 20th and 30th, but the recruit's military service time officially begins on December 1st.

For the final six months, the "new recruits" complete basic training and pre-billet specialty training. Guidance stipulates this work should be integrated into each service's overall annual training plan, but these recruits do not appear to receive basic training alongside traditional new recruits, and it appears that basic training for these recruits differs from that received by traditional new recruits.¹⁶ For example, a 2021 *Air Force News* article noted that initial training for these recruits at an Eastern Theater Command Air Force training brigade was adapted because they had already learned the basics during their time at school.¹⁷

Service Commitment

Announcements from several participating schools indicate that targeted training NCOs incur a service commitment of five years. Some further specify this is because they are expected to serve until at least the service limit for one rank higher than the rank they are initially conferred. As most of these graduates begin at the lowest NCO rank of Corporal (下士)^v and the service limit for the next highest rank, Sergeant (中士), is six years, it seems that they are credited with one year of active-duty service for their time in the program. This policy is also seen for college graduates directly recruited by the PLA after earning their degree, a policy by which those who have earned a two- or three-year special technical degree (专科) are credited with one year of active service time for their time in school.¹⁸

Specialties

While national statistics on targeted training NCO specialties have not been released, several provinces publicize their recruitment quotas and specialties to inform prospective students and encourage them to apply. These notices are usually broken down by organization (CMC Defense Mobilization Department, PLA service or force, or the PAP) and taken together offer a snapshot of what each component seeks from the program. Table 2 is based on a data sample that likely represents about a third of targeted training NCO quotas for 2021 and lists the top three specialties for each component.¹⁹ It is uncertain whether this sample is representative of the whole in terms of specialties, but it does closely resemble complete 2020 data (Table 1) in terms of the proportion of each organization. The recruits who filled these requirements should complete the program and receive NCO orders from their organization on July 1st, 2024.



^v While enlisted rank structure is identical across the PLA, English translations of each rank differ by service. This article uses PLAAF translations along with Chinese characters, which are also included in Appendix B. Targeted training NCO rank is also discussed in the Benefits section below.

Table 2: 2021 Top Specialties by Organization (based on available sample)

Service/Organization	% of Sample	Top Specialties (% within Organization)
CMC Defense Mobilization Department	1%	Computer Network Technology (100%)
PLAA	18%	Modern Communications Technology (15%) Computer Information Engineering Technology (13%) Electrical Automation Technology (13%)
PLAN	17%	Marine Engineering Technology (32%) Aircraft Digitalized Manufacturing Technology (11%) Aircraft Electronic Equipment Maintenance (8%)
PLAAF	19%	Aircraft Electromechanical Equipment Repair (11%) Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Applications Technology (10%) Atmospheric Survey Technology (7%)
PLARF	20%	Modern Communications Technology (12%) Computer Network Technology (11%) Computer Information Engineering Technology (11%)
PLA SSF	5%	Big Data Technology (13%) Computer Network Technology (12%) Computer Application Technology (12%)
PLA JLSF	1%	Nursing (67%) Computer Network Technology (17%) Vehicle Testing and Repair Technology (17%)
PAP	19%	Modern Communications Technology (17%) Marine Engineering Technology (12%) Shipborne Electrical and Electronic Technology (8%) Bridge and Road Engineering Technology (8%)



Mechatronics Specialty, Taishan Polytechnic

Benefits

After fully completing the program, graduates earn a post-secondary educational diploma and then receive NCO orders from their service on July 1st.²⁰ Their military rank and salary grade are determined based on those given to higher education graduates who entered school in the same year and were then directly recruited as NCOs.²¹ While this implies some variability, it appears graduates usually begin at the lowest NCO rank of Corporal (下士). This means that in their first year they can expect a monthly salary of around 6,000 RMB (\$950 USD), drastically higher than the monthly allowance of around 1,000 RMB (\$157 USD) paid to the lowest rank, Private 2nd Class (列兵), at which most new recruits enter the PLA enlisted corps. In addition to higher initial rank, these NCOs also likely earn their first promotion (to Sergeant / 中士) one year early, at two years in rank rather than the usual three.^{22,23}

While it appears that students pay tuition to their school while in the program, either directly or by way of student loans, upon entering the PLA they qualify for a one-time tuition reduction or compensation of up to 8,000 RMB (\$1,265 USD) per year spent in school.²⁴ This reimbursement would likely significantly or completely offset all educational expenses incurred. While advertised as a benefit of the targeted training NCO program, this kind of reimbursement is available for any higher education student or graduate joining the PLA.²⁵

Another potential benefit is that starting as an NCO allows members a more certain path to a longer career in the PLA and additional benefits, such as placement in a government job after 12 years of service.²⁶ At the end of their initial two-year commitment, traditional junior enlisted members are demobilized if they are not selected to remain as an NCO, or more rarely, become an officer by attending an officer academic institution. At least some of those dismissed would have preferred to continue serving in the PLA.²⁷ Targeted training NCOs bypass this potential off-ramp and begin with a longer initial service commitment and a clear path to a longer career.



PLAA UAV Technical Competition for Targeted Training NCOs

An incidental draw of the program is that the application process effectively allows applicants to choose their military service and specialty. Applicants must specify the school and specialty to which they are applying, and schools publicize the service associated with each specialty. There are cases where a school offers a specialty that applies to multiple services, in which case the quotas are listed on separate lines, but it is not clear whether an applicant could specify which service they prefer in that specialty. In any case, most applicants seem to have more control over their service and specialty than traditional recruits. While official information is limited, it appears that most PLA recruits are only able to state their service preference, but that their service is ultimately based on the needs of the PLA and the requirements allotted to their local recruiting unit.²⁸ PLA reporting mentions college students and graduates being given priority service preference, further indicating most recruits have less ability to choose their service.²⁹

Program Outcomes

As mentioned above, reporting in recent years indicates that targeted training NCOs are in high demand at the “grassroots” level (e.g. battalion and below). While not surprising to see the

PLA assessing its initiative positively, the continued expansion of the program demonstrates a growing trust in program outcomes. The program also seems to be popular among prospective students. Nearly 13,700 students from Hunan province reportedly applied for the program in 2021, over four times the number being recruited for the program in that province that year.³⁰

However, recruiting members directly into the military as NCOs has potential downsides. Fresh NCOs with no experience in the junior enlisted ranks may struggle to gain the respect of their new subordinates and leaders alike, whether by actual lack of competence or the mere perception of being an outsider who skipped a formative experience. While of course not reflected in PLA reporting, this issue is raised in some online forum discussions about both targeted training and direct recruit NCOs. In one such forum in 2019, participants claiming to have worked



NCO Cadets, Henan College of Transportation

with these NCOs in the PLAN and PLAAF shared that they often had trouble adapting to military life, struggled to earn respect from both junior and senior enlisted members, and often their technical knowledge did not match up well with their duties.³¹ It should be noted that most comments did not distinguish between targeted training and direct recruitment NCOs. The first small groups of targeted training NCOs would not have entered service until mid-2015, so it is possible these complaints were largely based on experiences with direct recruits.

In fact, the targeted training NCO program seems inherently less prone to some of these drawbacks than the direct recruitment program. One commenter in the forum above conceded that targeted training NCOs adapted to military life more quickly than direct recruits because of the quasi-militarized management they experience during their time in the program. Policies allowing vacancies in a specialty to be filled by non-program students in the same specialty implies the militarized portion is perhaps not critical to the program, but such a transition may not be common in practice, and these “replacement” students could still rely on at least the perception of having something more like a junior enlisted experience than direct recruits would.



Targeted Training NCOs at Basic Training

Additionally, the program grants PLA services much more control over the training received by NCO cadets. While direct recruitment only seeks students who have already completed certain degrees at civilian institutions, targeted training programs are developed in close coordination with, and with the continued oversight of, PLA and PAP organizations.³² This arrangement seems more likely to produce graduates with technical skills better attuned to their organization’s needs. While these factors may alleviate potential issues, the individual success of these NCOs will ultimately depend on graduates with the social skills to navigate their unique position and a strong understanding of their role in each organization.

Management of these NCOs will also impact their level of success. Those assigned to positions where their technical training is relevant and in which they can quickly prove useful as subject matter experts will likely experience a smoother transition and build confidence faster than those assigned to positions not as directly suited to their skills or that highlight their lack of service experience. For example, the PLAAF has previously made a distinction between technical NCOs (技术型士官) and command NCOs (指挥型士官).³³ It is not clear how these designations are used, but it seems reasonable that assigning targeted training NCOs as technical NCOs, at least to start, would allow the PLAAF to make use of their skills without putting them directly into a position managing members who have spent more time on active-duty than they have. Indeed, a 2018 report on PLAAF targeted training NCOs revealed that only 11% of these NCOs had become squad leaders, while 60% had become technical experts, indicating a preference for them to fill technical positions over leadership ones.³⁴

It should also be noted that even if these NCOs do not perform as well or better than traditionally-developed NCOs, the longer service commitments associated with the program may still be beneficial to the PLA. As some signals, such as encouraging demobilized members to return for a “second enlistment”, indicate the PLA may be struggling to meet recruitment quotas required by its size and usual two-year commitments, attracting young people to serve for over twice that (five years) with incentives to stay even longer may be a benefit in itself.³⁵ This is even more true for the more technical positions this program aims to fill, where it may be especially difficult to maintain qualified personnel with only two-year commitments.

Finally, the targeted training NCO program may be partially intended to broaden the appeal of the PLA to a new segment of ambitious students (and parents) with a promise of specific educational and career opportunities. In this way, it might be considered part of an overall suite of recruitment programs meant to appeal to eligible members at different life stages rather than just an attempt to develop a single, most effective method to produce technically-minded NCOs. Such an approach could also explain why the targeted training and direct recruitment programs both continue today.

Conclusion

The targeted training NCO program is a growing part of the PLA's overall efforts to build a technically-skilled NCO corps suitable for a fully modernized military. PLA reporting indicates the program has been successful in its first decade, and continued expansion of the program seems to bear this out. The program shows that the PLA is serious about building an effective NCO corps and is willing to experiment with new methods in pursuit of that goal. The targeted training NCO program can be expected to continue and possibly expand even further in the coming years as the PLA continues its push toward basic military modernization and then a world-class military.

Appendix A: 2020 Targeted Training NCO Program Recruits³⁶

	PLAA	PLAN	PLAAF	PLARF	SSF	JLSF	PAP	CMC National Defense Mobilization Force	Total
Liaoning	95	170	100	73	18	0	225	5	686
Jilin	120	80	75	15	5	0	155	0	450
Jiangsu	20	100	40	30	0	0	120	0	310
Zhejiang	105	175	45	155	5	30	150	10	675
Anhui	105	170	145	165	90	10	270	5	960
Jiangxi	127	310	325	305	100	10	355	10	1542
Shandong	875	555	485	703	445	20	500	10	3593
Henan	430	330	540	592	149	45	400	20	2506
Hubei	330	285	335	45	100	40	435	40	1610
Hunan	760	410	535	610	253	15	430	20	3033
Chongqing	90	130	135	305	135	0	150	0	945
Sichuan	180	155	165	134	45	0	325	20	1024
Tibet	65	0	10	10	0	0	10	0	95
Shaanxi	200	200	375	191	100	0	120	0	1186
Gansu	335	170	320	252	100	0	70	0	1247
Ningxia	178	20	110	35	15	0	75	0	433
Xinjiang	95	0	120	30	25	0	50	0	320
Total	4110	3260	3860	3650	1585	170	3840	140	20615

Appendix B: PLAAF Enlisted Rank Structure³⁷

Grade Level	Service Period	Rank (with PLAAF translations)	Time in Rank
Conscript (义务兵)	1 st year	Private 2 nd Class (列兵)	About 9 months
	2 nd year	Private 1 st Class (上等兵)	1 year
Junior Grade NCO (初级士官)	3 rd to 8 th years	Corporal (下士)	3 Years
		Sergeant (中士)	3 Years
Intermediate Grade NCO (中级士官)	9 th to 16 th years	Sergeant First Class (上士)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-4 (四级军士长)	4 Years
Senior Grade NCO (高级士官)	17 th to 30 th years	Master Sergeant Class-3 (三级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-2 (二级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-1 (一级军士长)	6 Years

Note: This chart describes traditional PLAAF progression and differs slightly from targeted training NCOs, who generally enter the PLAAF at the rank of Corporal (下士) and earn Sergeant (中士) after two years in rank rather than three.

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Endnotes

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