

The Army Reconnaissance Course

by Nicole Randall

It's 11:04 a.m., and students at the Harmony Church training area on Fort Benning, GA, emerge from the forest behind Checkpoint 38 where, for one of the first times in 96 hours, they will take off all their equipment, wash their hands and sit in an air-conditioned building. This is the final day of Operation Bushmaster, the first operation students in the Army Reconnaissance Course will undergo to develop a skill set they will use not only throughout the rest of this course, but throughout the rest of their Army careers.

The Army Reconnaissance Course is a 27-day class designed to transform Soldiers from cavalry troopers, infantrymen and tankers into reconnaissance leaders and to build the Army's most adaptive and critical problem-solving leaders of the future, according to the former course commander, MAJ James Corbin.

"Here we focus on adaptive Soldier-leader training and education methodology, which provides us the ability to develop agile and adaptive leaders," said CPT William Biggs, course manager. Through three phases, the course builds on the knowledge infused into students by using a logical linkage of activities. By designing the course this way, the instructors can ensure students retain the information they are taught.

ARC's first phase uses classroom instruction, simulations like Virtual Battlespace Training and a field-training exercise to teach students how to recognize the effects of terrain features in a military aspect, evaluate routes and obstacles, infuse troop organizations and capabilities, and conduct enemy-threat analysis. After extensive classroom instruction, students head out to Operation Bushmaster. Because ARC is about training adaptive leaders, students are first given the opportunity to plan the mission themselves.

"ARC uses outcomes and performance measures to evaluate its students," said SFC Jared Martin, ARC teach chief. "This is what sets the course apart from all other military courses. The use of outcomes enables the student to use multiple methods to achieve course outcomes."

Phase I

Phase I is individually graded, where students evaluate themselves for any flaws they see in their skill sets. Well-trained instructors, who are specifically equipped to recognize leader attributes and train out bad habits, accompany them.

"Day 1 is primarily instructor-led; Day 2 is less instructor-led and more student-led; and Days 3 and 4 are a culmination of all the skills that have been taught either by being reinforced or introduced," Martin said. For students coming out of courses like the Basic Officer Leaders Course, land-navigation skills that have already been ingrained are built up. For students coming into ARC who have very basic land-navigation experience, these skills will be introduced in Phase I and will continue to be built upon in later phases.

"Typically, when they come out for Operation Bushmaster, they have already demonstrated that they understand land navigation and some terrain analysis," Martin said. "When they come out here, we teach them more in-depth terrain analysis but in a military aspect."

After spending four days sleeping on the ground, swatting away Georgia wildlife and avoiding obstacles like Fort Benning's lakes or streams, students return for an after-action review. During the AAR, instructors learn which parts of the course have been effective and what the students have learned

during their first field operation. This is also the time instructors learn which students adapt quickly and display the leadership attributes needed for future exercises.

While the Army has learned many lessons during its 11 years at war, it is still building the Army of the future. However, with the current operations tempo and the complex threat present today, Army leaders need to be ready for anything. Courses like ARC teach future leaders to think for themselves. "The course design links each day to the next, like a building block of instructions," Martin said. "Students are accountable for retaining the knowledge they received on previous days, as they will have to continue to demonstrate the skills they have been taught in the context of a reconnaissance mission."

If students know of only one solution, they don't search for any other options. During combat, if the solution doesn't work and the leader isn't practiced in critical problem-solving, he or she may not be equipped to plan for a different outcome. The course recognizes that many skills and situations have more than one acceptable way of solving the problem. During ARC operations, students plan missions and are not handed the solution but are guided by experienced instructors.

Phase II

Phase II of ARC will see the students in virtual training at Harmony Church's Clarke Simulation Center, where they use the VBS2 weapons-simulation system to gain vital knowledge and skills like troop organization and capabilities – as well as intelligence preparation of the battlefield. This prepares them for Operation Golden Eye, which takes their reconnaissance tactics to a new level. Students are organized into platoons, and Soldiers with leader attributes are given platoon-leader or platoon-sergeant assignments and must lead their platoons for a given amount of time through the exercise.

"In Phase I, everything was an individual movement and evaluation. In Phase II, they come together as a squad, and they're going to operate as a section in either an infantry brigade combat team or a Stryker brigade combat team," Martin said.

For Operation Golden Eye, the student's objective is to effectively reconnoiter into an urban area. Using one of two reconnaissance techniques, students will either maintain covert operations or avoid detection from enemy threats or local population – or students will actively conduct overt reconnaissance or carry out their mission without concealment, Martin said. The students will attempt to conduct a thorough tactical analysis to determine where the enemy could potentially be located while they choose multiple approaches leading into urban environments that they will later report to the commander. With the addition of platoon-sized operations, students will use a form of transportation.

"They're going to be on vehicles in this phase," Martin said. "They're going to do a route reconnaissance moving into an urban environment, where they find a couple of routes to get this urban environment – all relevant information a platoon or squad is going to have to report to their commander and tell him this is the type of force he needs or what type of equipment he needs to bring."

The hardest part of Phase II, or Operation Golden Eye, is learning how to operate effectively as a platoon as well as



collecting relevant intelligence in ambiguous conditions. Another challenge with Phase II is that the students are given 96 hours to complete their objective, which means that platoon leaders and sergeants need to plan their mission down to every detail, including the points where logistics – even physiological requirements – are needed.

“Typically, students try to solve the whole problem in one shot and two days into this thing, and they forget to plan for when they need to sleep and start struggling with time and space,” Martin said.

After students return from Operation Golden Eye, they will have gained experience operating as a platoon in various mounted platforms.

ARC incorporates the student-centric teaching method and Adaptive Soldier Leader Training. “ARC uses a 360-degree assessment tool,” Martin said. “This provides feedback an instructor would not typically get. There are four assessment forms used: self-assessment, peer assessment, cadre assessment and the performance rubric.”

This style of evaluating each other will hold each student not only accountable to himself and his ability to retain information, but to students they learn and serve with. “This assessment allows these guys to be introduced for the first time to the professional evaluation of another student,” Biggs said. “They assess the student’s ability, his intangibles based on the outcomes of ARC, and those are the things we look for. We’re standardized here at ARC by our outcomes, not just by a learn-and-go basis.”

Phase III

Phase III of ARC includes training on the VBS2 system as well, but this time it is a squad-level operation. Students put their virtual skills to the test as they practice what they will do in their final operation.

“[Operation] Blackjack is the final portion of ARC; it’s the culmination of all the skills they’ve been taught up to this point,” Martin said. Students are bused to the airfield hangar, where they board a Blackhawk that carries them to an unknown location in Alabama. Their air insertion simulates a common combat experience where reconnaissance Soldiers are inserted into unknown territory to reconnoiter and report relevant information to their commanders. After students exit the UH-60, they convene with their platoons in the woods beyond the drop zone and start their longest reconnaissance yet. Their goal? To accurately conduct reconnaissance of the area from where they were dropped to Harmony Church, where their objective ends.

“Students will coordinate with the Blackhawk pilots on Fort Benning to insert them onto one of the various hot landing zones. Students will struggle with time and space during this operation,” said Martin. “Students will operate as a reconnaissance platoon, again from either an IBCT or SBCT. They will conduct this operation both as a mounted platoon and dismounted squad. Once each platoon has reached a certain portion of this operation, they will be removed from the field and placed into simulation to finish out the exercise.”

Students use the skills they have acquired the last 22 days of class while gathering relevant intelligence. The exercise primarily focuses on security operations, including air-ground integration. After students reach a certain point, they are given transportation in the form of humvees or Strykers. While screening or providing in-depth security for a larger element, students are part of a combined, simulated security operation, conducting proper reconnaissance of the area they traveled and selecting a variety of routes the force coming through can use.

They end back at Patton Hall in Harmony Church, where they use simulators to finish the exercise virtually. They will operate as a platoon-sized element, with all the assets assigned to a BCT such as indirect-fire capabilities and fire-delivery platforms. The simulated environment allows them to actually play that out and conduct security operations for a larger element to provide time and space, Martin said.

During the final simulated hours of Operation Blackjack, students encounter the enemy and are incorporated into the entire force as part of a combined-arms maneuver. “[The simulation] allows the students to employ the force multipliers they have chosen to mitigate the identified risks,” Martin said.

ARC’s advantages

ARC takes the best training methodologies of the current force and incorporates them into innovative leader- and student-centric training. Instructors use 360-degree assessments, ASLT and a multitude of other techniques to train the Army’s future leaders and future recon Soldiers to think critically, innovate in their problem-solving and lead Soldiers in a prolonged stressful environment.

“This isn’t one of the courses where it’s memorize and forget,” Martin said. “You really have to apply everything you’ve been taught up to this point into these problems.”

What makes ARC so effective and its training so innovative are the instructors, according to Biggs. “The leaders who [graduate] from ARC leave here with an unprecedented amount of knowledge,” he said. “The cadre we have here are professionals, top-tier individuals, and that – coupled with the learning methodology we use – will create better, adaptive Soldiers, leaders and thinkers.”

Outcome-based training relies more on the expertise of its instructors rather than the student’s ability to follow scripts and procedures. “[Outcome-based training] helps the instructor provide specific areas to target during the developmental counseling each student receives at the end of each phase,” Martin said. With the proficiency every ARC instructor has, students are able to maintain the appropriate amount of control during their mission, knowing an expertly trained instructor has their back.

“Instructors will exploit [students’] struggles to keep the threshold of training toward the side of chaos,” Martin said. “This threshold of training allows the instructor to control the level of chaos students are in by changing the conditions to allow the student still to learn. If chaos becomes overwhelming, students will no longer learn but will put their heads down and just try to bear through it.”

ARC trains the Army’s future recon leaders in the most controlled yet adaptive environment possible. “ARC focuses on the mastery of reconnaissance skills and the development of the leader attributes of adaptability, anticipation, critical thinking, deliberate thought and risk management,” Martin said. The lessons these future platoon leaders and platoon sergeants learn will stay with them as they move through their career, incorporating the same learning methodologies and skills they learned at ARC.



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Videos Fort Benning Television produced on ARC:

Phase I: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7p0skXYZLJE&feature=plcp>

Phase II: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F67uo4LirBA&feature=share>

Phase III: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3l1dfQCJd7w>

ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

- AAR** – after-action review
- ARC** – Army Reconnaissance Course
- ASLT** – Adaptive Soldier Leader Training
- IBCT** – infantry brigade combat team
- SBCT** – Stryker brigade combat team
- VBS2** – Virtual Battlespace Training

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