



**French and U.S. service members overcome an obstacle at the 5<sup>th</sup> French Marines Desert Commando Course at Arta Beach, Djibouti. (Photo by SSG Dillon White)**

**by 1LT David G. Forney**

Today's modern operating environment entails levels of complexity and transformation never before seen on the battlefield. Plain and simple, more is being required of young military leaders. There is a very tangible reconfiguration of our training directive as U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) courses are restructured to focus on a broad spectrum of topics. Physical fitness, tactical competence and technical aptitude alone are no longer enough to propel a Soldier to the higher ranks; modern leaders must now exhibit a multitude of qualities: patience, intelligence, empathy and organization, to name a few.

In our pursuit of the ideal Army leader, however, have we deviated too far from the foundation of leadership development: the ability to function as a team?

The recognition of a weakness does not always necessitate failure; sometimes exposure to something new is all that is required to inspire improvement. In my case, it was participation at the French Forces Desert Combat Training Course that revealed (to me) a potential weakness in some of our U.S. training and doctrinal programs.

The French Forces Desert Combat Training Course is held at the Centre d'Entraînement au Combat et d'Aguerrissement de Djibouti (CECAD), located at Arta Plage (Arta Beach) in Djibouti. CECAD is a training center designed to teach combat units to operate in a harsh desert environment. For years the French Marine 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment has invited the United States and other Coalition partners who operate in the Horn of Africa to participate in training.

## **U.S. Army training approach**

Many TRADOC schools quantify Soldier performance at the individual level.<sup>1</sup> There is certainly nothing wrong with this approach. In fact, it is often the specific intent of the course to rank the trainees. My experience in attending the cadets' Leadership Development and Assessment Course (LDAC), Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course (ABOLC), Army Ranger School and a number of other specialty training courses showed that each course has a specific

purpose, passing criteria and program of instruction (POI).

LDAC was certainly a program designed to evaluate and rank cadets. Ultimately the cadets' performance in the course plays a large role in determining their branch as well as their eligibility for active duty. Since I attended the course as a cadet and subsequently served as an instructor, I can attest that this is primarily an evaluation module, not a leadership-development program. The instructors must strictly regiment the training due to the number of cadets who are cycled through the course each summer. This severely limits cadets' ability to make actual leadership decisions. Therefore it is the responsibility of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program to progressively groom cadets into leadership with increasingly demanding positions of responsibility. If ROTC institutions fail to effectively implement a leadership-development program, there is the potential that cadets will be commissioned into the U.S. Army without the paramount skillsets needed to make life-altering decisions on America's front lines.

ABOLC at Fort Benning, GA, is another example of a TRADOC course intended to groom future leaders. The intent of this course is to educate second lieutenants about the tactical and technical skillsets required to conduct unified land operations in a combined-arms team. Similar to LDAC, ABOLC is a standardized course that has a significant amount of throughput each year. Throughout the course, officers rotate through leadership positions and are quantitatively graded on a number of individual and collective tasks. While attending ABOLC, all students are by definition "leaders," making the refinement of a leadership style challenging. Although missions and training exercises are completed in platoons, the nature, tempo and leadership rotations do not resemble those of U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) organizations.

Until this point in a young officer's career, he or she presumably has not had any practical training in an environment where team-building was the primary focus. Regardless, the officer is considered institutionally ready for assignment to a FORSCOM unit. LDAC and BOLC are intended to develop and refine leadership skills, but the emphasis on individual assessment and ranking intrinsically disrupts the team-building climate.

The same can be said of Army Ranger School. While the course is very physically and mentally challenging, the team-building differs significantly from the stages of team-building outlined in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22.<sup>2</sup> You certainly have to be able to operate cohesively, execute battle drills and conduct military operations with near-perfect precision.

There is no denying that Ranger School is one of the premiere military schools in the world, and it undoubtedly improved my ability to direct squad- and platoon-size elements under immensely stressful and challenging conditions. I still maintain contact with my "Ranger buddy" and a number of other close friends from our 61 days together in purgatory. However, retrospection can reveal that many of these friendships and cooperative efforts were forged out of self-preservation and a desire to graduate, as opposed to a true team effort and drive toward a common endstate. Again, there is nothing wrong with this type of applied stress and leadership development, but it is certainly a different approach than the French Marines have adopted.

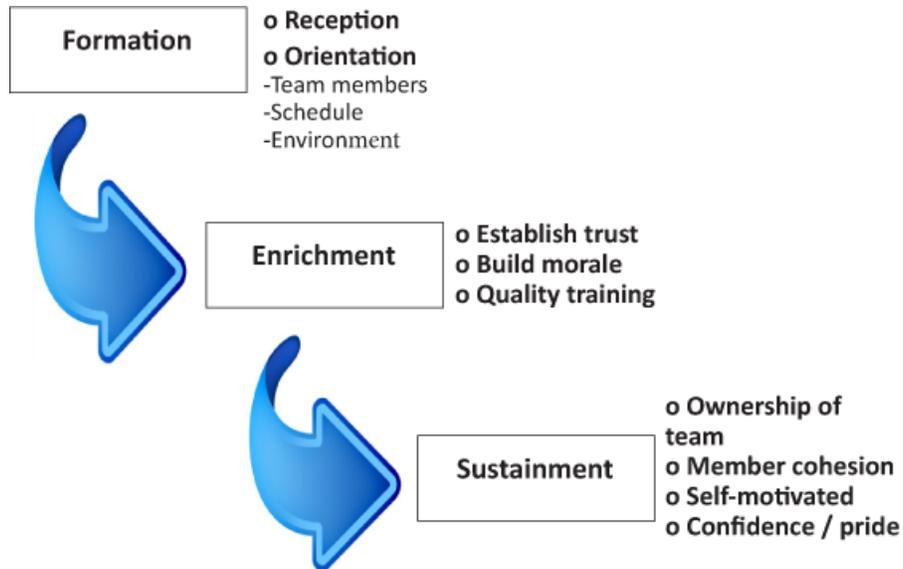
Unlike most TRADOC courses, the French Desert Course focuses on team-building as an integral part of its core curriculum. Analogous to many TRADOC school requirements, the course begins with a physical-fitness test, evaluating the muscular, cardiovascular and comprehensive fitness of the course candidates. Following the physical gates, Soldiers receive classes on desert-survival techniques, including wildlife familiarization, methods of water procurement and fire-starting techniques. Up to this point, the POI resembles many U.S. Army schools, such as the first days of Ranger School's Swamp Phase in Florida and the Mountain Warfare School. The differences in the French POI begins when the Soldiers move to Arta Plage for the team-building portion of the course.

## **Team-building tenets**

Arguably the greatest challenge of establishing effective teams is the intrinsic inability to quantify their performance. Part of this is due to the constant flux of personnel as well as the ever-changing mission assignments and operational tempos. Instead of focusing on the valuation of a team's current condition and quality, perhaps TRADOC's predominant focus should be on setting the conditions for team-building and let the raters and senior raters conduct the evaluations. It is paramount to recognize that teams are fluid and will have to go through cyclic phases of development. This is true whether the team is an infantry machinegun team or a specialty counterintelligence cell.

When an individual is assigned to a team, there is a natural progression through which they must advance. First, the individual has to feel accepted as a part of that team. Next, the Soldier begins to learn the standard operating procedures and the expectations placed on team members. Once the responsibilities are understood, a Soldier must demonstrate competency to the unit. After the individual exhibits value to the team, the team can begin to practice, build and refine as a unified element.

These stages of team-building are formally realized in ADRP 6-22<sup>3</sup>: Army leadership as formation, enrichment and sustainment (Figure 1). When teams are forming, leaders will rarely be afforded the opportunity to select the members of their team. Regardless, leaders are still held accountable for all their team does or fails to do. Therefore, leaders must bring new members on board as quickly as possible, setting the tone for the rest of the team-building process.



**Figure 1. Stages of team-building.**

Equally important in the formation stage is the orientation component. New members should be introduced and familiarized with members of the team, the typical schedule of the unit and the necessary information about the operating environment. Depending on the circumstances under which the team is being formed (peacetime vs. wartime), alternate methods may be employed such as sponsorship.

Next is the enrichment stage, where the team starts to function as a cohesive element. Team members gradually build trust and understanding of both fellow team members and the collective unit. Quality training is essential at this stage to continue the team-building effort and drive the unified team toward a single objective.

Last is the sustainment stage. At this point, team members now identify with the unit and are part of something greater than themselves. This is a unit that rises to meet challenges. It is anxious to operate together and improve on an already successful element.

Now the question is: how do we indoctrinate this process along with the skills required to replicate team-building into our young Army leaders?

## **French perspective**

Upon arrival at Arta Plage for the tactical portion of the French Forces Desert Combat Training Course, Soldiers are assigned to mixed French and Coalition forces platoons. Most French soldiers do not speak English, and the instructors have only a basic proficiency at best. Despite the enormity of the language barrier, platoons are still expected to complete a series of team obstacles on land and sea before progressing to the final phase.

Each day begins with what the French call a smoke session, synonymous to our physical training (PT). It is evident from the first PT session that the French view the Desert Commando Course as a team sport. Integrated into every

part of PT is a team-building task – everything from one- and two-man buddy carries to U.S. Navy SEAL-style sit-ups with the platoon seated in a row, arms linked. During these PT sessions, there is no announcement that any Soldier who fails to complete the run under a certain time standard will be dropped. Instructors do not threaten to fail a Soldier who is incapable of performing the prescribed number of pull-ups. Instead, an endstate is calmly announced by the instructors, the French soldiers do their best to act out the instructions with creative gesticulations, and the group proceeds to collectively execute.

At one point during the course I attended, one of the U.S. Soldiers started to fall behind on a particularly long stretch of fireman-carry drills. In response, a number of French soldiers rushed back to assist the struggling Soldier. It was a remarkable sight from an American perspective. The *esprit de corps* the French soldiers demonstrated along with their drive toward a common objective was remarkable.

After each morning's smoke session was either combatives, field classes or obstacle courses. For each event, the instructors would calmly explain the task, conditions, standards and endstate. During none of this was pass or fail criteria put out. Nonetheless, each French and U.S. Soldier strived to perform their very best during every task. Why? For me it was simply the desire to be the most effective and impactful member of the team I could be.

One of the other driving factors behind the team-building mantra and spirit of the course was the nature of the obstacles and tasks themselves. There have been very few, if any, group challenges in the Army that have pushed me to my physical or mental boundaries. Certainly, some aggregate missions or periods of training were challenging, but few team events required more than a short period of planning and execution. One of these was the Field Leader's Reaction Course (FLRC), a popular training exercise for ROTC battalions. Again, these are educational events, but they are far from physically demanding, and to state that they demand a cohesive team effort would be a stretch.

The French have created three very distinctive but equally challenging obstacle courses that truly push Soldiers to the point of discomfort. The first is an individual obstacle course built into the side of a mountain several hundred feet tall. One of the team courses consists of a series of land obstacles requiring coordination and cooperation by the entire team. Another is an obstacle course in the Red Sea requiring Soldiers to remain calm and collected under turbulent conditions.

Unlike its U.S. FLRC counterparts, the French course requires teamwork and cooperation. Without it, the course cannot be successfully negotiated. On the other hand, it is rare for the average U.S. Soldier to experience this type of adversity as a member of a team in our training courses.

## **Team first, individual second**

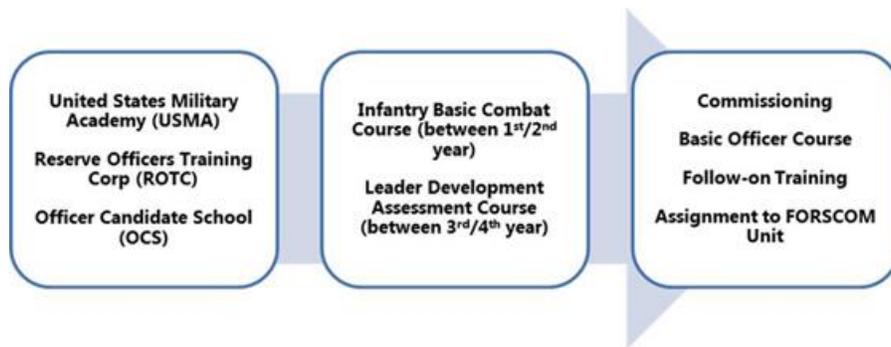
The necessary steps and leadership qualities required to build a successful team from the ground up were cited previously. Now comes the challenge of teaching these skills to our young leaders and providing an opportunity to apply them in a standardized way. I believe there are three ways to implement this proposed team-building module: expand the basic requirements to commission an officer, alter existing courses and create training opportunities for FORSCOM units designed specifically for small-unit improvement. A depiction of these improvement plans is captured in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

The three primary commissioning sources for Army officers are ROTC, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, and Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning, GA. Only a small minority of the cadets from these programs will attend Army basic combat training. Most of this minority is non-prior-military-service OCS cadets. A solution could be to require all commissioning sources to send cadets to Army basic combat training, preferably infantry one-station unit training at Fort Benning. In my opinion, the Infantry Branch has better mastered small-unit cohesion, and the infantry military-occupation specialty (MOS) generating course is taught at Fort Benning. This could be a similar module to U.S. Marine Corps officer progression, in which some non-infantry officers complete infantry training before learning skills associated with their assigned MOS. This requirement could be accomplished between the cadets' first and second year of education, regardless of their commissioning source.



**Figure 2. The expansion of commissioning requirements, incorporating the Infantry Basic Combat Course into all three commissioning sources.**

Another way to improve team-building would require minor adaptations to current Army TRADOC courses. LDAC is on the right track with a reduction in the number of formal evaluations from six to four. The intent is to allow cadets to experiment with different leadership styles, alleviating their focus on continuous assessments. Expanding this direction to include additional small-unit leadership challenges without formal evaluations would benefit young leaders, similar to the methods used in the French Commando Course. Furthermore, the addition of more demanding tasks, obstacles and missions to strain cadets to a point of physical and mental discomfort would further enhance leadership and team-building development.



**Figure 3. The adaptation of pre-existing TRADOC courses prior to an officers' assignment to a FORSCOM unit.**

The same refinement should also be made to basic officer courses for all MOSs. These adjustments do not have to be overly complex. Simply make the distances longer, raise the bar higher and design more difficult missions. It's important to include team incentives to foster effectiveness, efficiency and cohesion. Similar to the French Commando Course, the TRADOC design should force the strong to push the weak across the finish line. Soldiers would have two choices: persevere or quit. Either way helps the Army in the long run. The driving force of a unit is comprised of those who choose to endure. That is leadership progression, the overarching cycle that creates genuine leaders.



**Figure 4. Stepwise module for the establishment of a specialized training course designed to train team-, squad- and platoon-sized elements at Army installations.**

This merit of this team-building method played out for me when I was in college. I was a member of a team that attended an annual competition comprised of a series of physical and mental challenges. Ruck-marching was one of the cornerstone events. I was the only freshman on the team and by far the least experienced. Even after weeks of training, I was still the slowest of 10 members. Regardless, I selected the former of the two options cited previously and persevered. The next year I successfully completed the competition with no issues. During my third year, I was selected co-captain, and I served as team captain my final year. These leadership positions would have meant nothing had I not been pushed to my physical and mental limits that first year – the faster members of the team pushing the slower members to improve. This method can be replicated in Army leadership training but with an accelerated timeline.

Another approach could be to establish a small-unit training course at each of the major Army posts. The intent would be for platoon-size elements to conduct challenging, decentralized training. The courses should encompass four essential elements:

- Cultivation of competitive team spirit;
- Exertion of multifaceted challenges;
- Demand for long-term preparation and training; and
- Nullification of individualism in self-interested persons.

Similar to Best Ranger or Best Sapper competitions, these courses should test a unit's endurance, communication skills, physical-fitness level, mental agility and resiliency. Using the infantry model as an example, the courses could include a 26.2-mile ruckmarch, team obstacle course, combatives training, situational-training exercises, a practical exam and even a sporting event. The events would be team-based and could only be conducted at the pace of the least proficient individual.

Clearly, such a series of events would require significant preparation and training. By the time the team is prepared to negotiate the course, it would be in the enrichment, if not the sustainment, phase of team-building. From personal experience, I firmly believe there is no greater gratification than overcoming a series of challenges with close friends and teammates.

## Conclusion

U.S. Soldiers deserve to be led by competent and professional leaders. With that in mind, it is expected that prior to the assumption of a leadership position, new officers have a comprehensive understanding of the necessary balance between the art and science of leadership. Do we truly believe that Army TRADOC courses are accomplishing this standard? Most are designed to evaluate, teach and refine. They aren't designed to develop team-building skills. This type of leadership is best created through the execution of increasingly demanding collective tasks that develop team-building skills. To that end, the French Desert Commando Course is the epitome of team-building that could serve as an example for us.

We should indoctrinate the fundamentals of team-building into all TRADOC courses. The competitive nature,

ranking system and pass/fail events can and should certainly persist, but there is no reason these methods cannot coexist with quality team-building. With the required completion of basic combat training by all new officers, minor modification to Army TRADOC courses and added local training programs at major Army installations, we could begin integrating fundamental team-building skills into our nation's youth. As our Army focuses on promotions, physical fitness and evaluation reports, it is also imperative we focus on the foundation of our most lethal element – the small-unit team – to fight and win in a complex world.

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## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABOLC** – Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course

**ADRP** – Army doctrine reference publication

**CECAD** – Centre d'Entraînement au Combat et d'Aguerrissement de Djibouti

**FLRC** – Field Leader's Reaction Course

**FORSCOM** – (U.S. Army) Forces Command

**LDAC** – Leadership Development and Assessment Course

**MOS** – military-occupation specialty

**OCS** – Officer Candidate School

**Pol** – program of instruction

**PT** – physical training

**ROTC** – Reserve Officers Training Corps

**SEAL** – Sea Air and Land teams (U.S. Navy)

**TRADOC** – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> TRADOC, *Win in a Complex World*, April 8, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> ADRP 6-22, August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.