

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

The Spring 2017 issue (<http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2017/Spring/2Metz17.pdf>) had an excellent and thought-provoking article by CPT J. Scott Metz, "Overtasking and Its Effect on Platoon and Company Tactical Proficiency: an Opposing Forces and Observer/Coach/Trainer Perspective." I have taken the liberty of offering some reflections on his theme.

I was dismayed to read Metz's article – because, like Yogi Berra's quip that it's "dépjà vu all over again," this is a sad situation we have seen before. As an armored-cavalry-troop and tank-company commander, tank-battalion S-3, separate armored brigade S-3 and cavalry-squadron commander, the overtasking dilemma is one with which I am, unfortunately, all too familiar.

Of course, there are always creative ways to squeeze training into other duties: concurrent training on ranges, tactical rather than administrative roadmarches, adding Soldier skills training to maintenance periods and guard duty, reverse cycle night-training periods and so on. Every issue of **ARMOR** has training tips, and the Army is much better at capturing lessons-learned and disseminating these than it once was. These initiatives do help the beleaguered commander get the proverbial 10 pounds of poop into a five-pound bag, but they do not solve the problem.

The problem is leadership failure. Napoleon said, "Ask me for anything but time." It is all well and good that the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) and U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) commanding general state that training is first priority, but **someone** has allowed all that non-mission-essential-task-list (METL) "mandatory" training to be added to unit training programs across the Army. If not the CSA and FORSCOM commander, then who is accountable? Who could and should have just said, "No!" Commanders at every level down the chain of command similarly failed to protect METL training time. Boutique training issues (in other words, non-METL-related) constantly pop up and get dumped on unit commanders, who must then find the time to conduct them. Some commander acquiesced, and everyone down the chain of command saluted and moved out. Do more, better, with less, now.

If the Army is ever going to get serious about protecting METL training, here are some thoughts on how to do so.

Training sequester. The CSA should immediately direct that no subject or event may be added to the list of required training unless an equivalent billpayer is identified from the existing list of required training subjects that will be eliminated. This must be effective and enforced at every level. If the battalion commander requires every company to field a basketball team for round-robin competition, what is the billpayer? We do this with the budget; we can do it with training resources as well.

Protect METL training. Any training that is METL-related can only be cancelled or rescheduled with the approval of the commander two levels higher. Only the brigade commander can authorize a company to change the training schedule for METL-related training. The request must be endorsed up the chain of command, with a full explanation and the make-up period identified when the called training will be rescheduled. Emergency cancellations must be justified within 24 hours and similarly endorsed and rescheduled. Some units probably have such a policy **on paper** now but, in my day, this was a cover-your-butt paper drill. Include this directive as a subject of Department of the Army (DA) interest during annual general inspections. Did the make-up training occur, did it get lost in scheduling, or was it simply overcome by events?

Distraction-reduction initiative. At each level, beginning with DA and FORSCOM, require that the list of non-METL mandatory subjects be reduced in total hours by 10 percent during the next calendar year and 5 percent each succeeding year for three years. This will bring reality back to the force within four years. I can recall very few of these mandatory training requirements that could not be reduced, and many that were either superfluous or obsolete. Whenever a new required-training subject was introduced, it was inevitably announced with great fanfare. I cannot recall a single instance when a "special" subject was formally dropped with an official notice that the training had been effective and was no longer required. Pet rocks rarely die.

Test out. Mandatory subjects were often mandated by “hours” of training time. Care and cleaning of the gas mask may not actually need an hour of instruction. Further, many subjects have been mastered by individual Soldiers. Begin training with a diagnostic evaluation; if the Soldier can demonstrate proficiency, send him or her to alternate, concurrent training and focus the instructor’s time on those who do not have the required skill.

Sunset clause. While the titles and topics may have changed, no doubt the staff bureaucrats’ inherent response to anything that is a hot-button issue – driving while under the influence, absences without leave, racial graffiti, smoking cessation, re-enlistment shortfalls, vehicle accidents, accidental weapons discharge, etc. – is to “add training on this critical issue to every unit’s training program.” Boutique and “pop-up” issues, even important ones like rape prevention and suicide risk awareness, must have a sunset clause. Add the words, “This subject will be taught to every Soldier in the Army within one year and thereafter will only be taught during initial-entry training.” Sustainment or refresher training, should the command decide it has a recurring problem with a topic or challenge, may only be conducted when another non-METL topic of equal time is identified for deferral to the following training year.

The Army does too many things just because we have always done them that way. Training subjects linger because no one wants to take the responsibility of eliminating them and face the possibility of the reoccurrence of the issue that generated the requirement. Man up. Furthermore, the annual training program is an arbitrary and cumbersome measurement metric. Some issues could be addressed by units every other year and still maintain the minimum essential proficiency.

The problem with overtasking is neither new nor more complex in 2017 than it was in 1970. A colleague of mine succinctly identified the solution: “What we need is a ‘can’t do’ attitude.” In fact, in their testimonies before the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Chief of Naval Operations and the Secretary of the Navy said that they too have cut essential training and certification to meet operational-tempo mission demands. These training shortfalls are causal factors in the two recent fatal ship collisions that cost the lives of 17 sailors. Secretary Richard V. Spencer used the “rucksack” analogy: “[With] all the best intentions in the world – put a rock in to-do training on smoking cessation, put a rock in to-do other sorts of training, but no one’s taking a rock out, and the rucksack’s getting pretty damn heavy.” (See “[Chief of Naval Operations John] Richardson: High [Operations Tempo] and ‘Can-Do Culture’ Culminated in ‘Pervasive’ Expired Certifications in Forward-Deployed Surface Forces” by Megan Eckstein, *USNI News*, Sept. 20, 2017.)

Saying we have a combat-ready Army when the conditions Metz identified are there for all to see does a disservice to the nation, the Army and, most of all, the Soldiers who may have to face a more proficient enemy in the next war. A generation ago, the must-read book for officers was *America’s First Battles: 1776-1965* by Charles E. Heller and MG William A. Stofft. The tale of Task Force Smith in the Korea War is especially pertinent. Task Force Smith was out of shape, undermanned and poorly equipped, but it was overrun and its Soldiers killed, wounded and captured because it was not adequately trained to fight. The mantra of our former CSA, GEN Gordon Sullivan, after Operation Desert Storm was “No more Task Force Smiths!” If Metz’s article is even partially accurate, and I have no doubt it is, then our Army is preparing to fail because it is failing to prepare.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

CSA – Chief of Staff of the Army

DA – Department of the Army

FORSCOM – (U.S. Army) Forces Command

METL – mission-essential task list