

# Healthy Habits For Prospective Ranger School Students

CPT Michael Kearnes

*“Ranger course graduates return to their units physically and mentally tough, proficient in squad- and platoon-sized dismounted operations in austere terrain. Graduates will understand how to plan, coordinate, and execute small unit missions confidently and completely with little to no guidance. The superior stress management ability of Ranger graduates will enable them to push their subordinates further and faster than previously thought possible. Ranger graduates better understand the limits of the human body and the complexity of leading Soldiers in adverse conditions during tactical operations.”*

— Ranger Course Graduate End State

Ranger School provides the Army with proven leaders who possess the skill, will, and drive to succeed in the harshest of conditions with physically and mentally exhausted subordinates. Operating under those conditions requires great resilience in addition to understanding how to deal with personal weaknesses and limitations. After three days of less than an hour of sleep and limited rations while walking up and down the mountains of North Georgia, even the fittest Soldiers begin to break down physically, emotionally, or mentally. Ranger graduates return to the Army with a greater understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, along with strategies to increase the overall performance of themselves and their operational units. The completion of the Ranger course is an indicator of future success, especially for new lieutenants in the Army and junior enlisted Soldiers in the 75th Ranger Regiment. New leaders are able to place themselves above their peers by proving their tactical and technical competence in preparation for leading Soldiers in combat. The lessons learned in Ranger School will continue to pay dividends to the units that receive and retain Ranger-qualified leaders during training and deployments. There are certain habits that can enable success in the course when properly incorporated into a daily routine.



***Ranger School students conduct patrols during the Darby Phase of the course 21 May 2015***

Photo by PFC Antonio Lewis

As stated by MG Austin S. Miller, commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE), “No one smokes the course. Ranger School smokes you.” While the course may seem daunting, there are proven ways to increase the chances of success. One of the best ways to become familiarized with the course conditions is to attend a unit-level pre-Ranger class. If a unit-level course is not available, the National Guard’s Warrior Training Center offers the Ranger Training and Assessment Course (RTAC) at Fort Benning. Many officers attend Ranger School immediately following their basic courses, most of which provide a solid preparation program. With this in mind, there are certain habits that will instill positive behaviors and mitigate prospective students’ weaknesses during training for attendance.

The most important habit every student should have is a daily physical fitness regimen that focuses on running, rucking, and upper body strength. Potential students should include several days of running and at least one day of foot marching per week (increasing weight and distance over time). The vigorous nature of the Ranger course requires Soldiers to carry heavy loads over long distances and be able to arrive on the objective ready to fight through all three phases. The vast majority of the course is spent wearing a rucksack of increasing weight that varies from 50 to more than 100 pounds. Running is a major part of the Ranger Physical Assessment (RPA), and Rangers are required to run everywhere when they do not have a rucksack on their backs. Workouts focusing on upper body strength, especially push-ups and pull-ups, should comprise the other days’ events.



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Maneuver Center of Excellence photo

The most significant stressor in the first week of Ranger School is the tempo of events. Performed individually, each task is easily attainable, but when combined with little sleep and restricted food over a period of 80 hours, they become much more difficult. Without sufficient physical and mental preparation, Ranger students are more susceptible to injury, and recovery is very difficult because of the tempo of the

course. A recommended workout program can be found on the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade (ARTB) website and offers 30-, 60-, and 90-day programs (<http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/rtb/content/PDF/Sample%20Ranger%20School%20Physical%20Training%20Program.pdf>).

Land navigation is a perishable skill, and Rangers must demonstrate their ability to navigate at night and during the day using terrain association, dead reckoning, intersection, and resection. A strong foundation in these techniques will benefit students in all phases of the course as Ranger students will maneuver their units over great distances in arduous terrain. There is a brief train-up during the first day of Ranger School, but if students enter the course expecting to learn how to navigate they will most likely fail. There are two major incentives in passing land navigation on the first attempt: more sleep and less wear on the feet! Re-testing Rangers must wake up several hours prior to those that pass on the first morning. Practicing in uneven, wooded terrain both at night and during the day will improve navigation skills. Training Circular 3-25.26, *Map Reading and Land Navigation*, provides a good reference for what to train and how to train on improving land navigation (Find the manual at: [http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/21\\_Series\\_Collection\\_1.html](http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/21_Series_Collection_1.html)).

Ranger students should also practice the 26 basic infantry tasks and gain overall leadership experience outside the school environment. To prepare for the basic infantry tasks, go to the ARTB website, identify the Ranger Tactical Tasks, and seek training on them from unit members prior to attendance. While these tasks are reviewed and evaluated during Ranger Assessment Phase (RAP) week, a base knowledge will be inherently beneficial to students. Making a habit of practicing frequently will increase confidence and reduce the possibility of errors when tired and hungry. Even inexperienced privates first class and second lieutenants can improve their leadership skills by displaying the volunteer attitude and receiving as much feedback as possible from subordinates, peers, and leaders. Whether using the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) 360 tool or a face-to-face conversation, potential Ranger students should identify weaknesses prior to attending the course to develop techniques to mitigate flaws. The time to discover weaknesses is not at the end of a phase when students can fail peer evaluations due to poor teamwork within the squad. Potential Ranger students can set themselves up for success in the course with a balanced and focused training plan.

Improving tactical knowledge is another habit potential Ranger students should incorporate into their routines. Regardless of Ranger School attendance, it is not possible to be too knowledgeable about tactics. Newer Soldiers and officers may lack tactical knowledge and should establish a habit of studying the *Ranger Handbook* and FM 3-21.8, *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, daily with an emphasis on react-to-contact, ambush, raid, and patrol base tasks. For inspiration in instilling an offensive mindset, I recommend reading *Attacks* by Erwin Rommel. Prospective students should seek out knowledgeable leadership within their units while practicing these maneuvers as well. Additionally, understanding the roles and responsibilities of the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, squad leaders, and team leaders will enable Rangers to be proactive and more effective overall.

Personal and financial readiness is a habit that is not only advised but necessary. All personal and financial issues should be resolved prior to reporting to Ranger School. Similar to deployment, basic Soldier Readiness Program tasks such as updating the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance (SGLI), DD93, personal will, and automating monthly payments such as rent and car payments will reduce stress and allow students to keep their focus where it should be: on graduating. Attending the Ranger course with these distracters and without the right habits can potentially prevent a student from completing the course.

Finally, the Ranger Creed contains a blueprint for success both in the course and as a Ranger leader. A daily habit of saying it or reading it nightly will help to instill the Ranger spirit and give additional motivation to succeed. After reading and living the creed every day, the words “never shall I fail my comrades” and “I will always fight on to the Ranger objective” become more than words. They become ingrained in the psyche and provide the will and drive to keep moving, even if it is just one step at a time. Not everyone will successfully complete the Ranger course, but Rangers can maximize their potential for success with these habits.

Daily habits such as these will help potential students achieve their goal to earn the coveted Ranger tab. Greater knowledge of what the course entails can only help to reduce anxiety and increase confidence prior to showing up at Camp Rogers on Fort Benning.

To graduate from Ranger School and earn the Ranger tab, all students must pass at least one patrol in each phase while maintaining a 50 percent passing rate of their graded patrols, receive a favorable rating in peer evaluations in each phase, and possess no more than eight negative spot reports. Spot reports may be earned for positive events, such as exceptional performance in the non-graded position of radio-telephone operator (RTO), or for negative events, such as repeatedly falling asleep in a tactical environment.

Each phase of the Ranger course includes progressive field training exercises (FTX) that continually test students’ physical and mental limits. Upon arrival at Camp Rogers, Rangers undergo RAP for four days. RAP week determines if the Ranger candidates possess the physical and mental stamina to continue the course and begins with the RPA, which consists of 49 push-ups, 59 sit-ups, a five-mile run in 40 minutes, and six chin-ups. The Combat Water Survival Assessment measures the students’ ability to perform while managing fear of heights and to complete a 15-meter swim in ACUs and boots. Land navigation is a night-into-day course in which students must find four of five points in five hours. A two-mile buddy run and the Malvesti and Darby Queen obstacle courses ensure that Rangers have the intestinal fortitude to continue despite fatigue and stress in physically and mentally demanding circumstances. Finally, RAP week concludes with a 12-mile foot march, which is conducted with an approximately 35-pound rucksack, fighting load carrier (FLC), and rifle in three hours. More than 60 percent of Ranger School failures occur during RAP week.

In the Darby Phase, Rangers learn how to conduct squad-sized reconnaissance missions and ambushes, in addition to squad patrol bases at night. Over the course of the six-day FTX, Rangers are evaluated as squad leaders and team leaders, and must pass at least one graded patrol to move forward to Camp Merrill (Dahlonoga, Ga.) for the Mountain Phase.

In the Mountain Phase, Rangers learn the fundamentals of military mountaineering including rappelling, rock climbing, and mobility rope systems. After mountaineering, Rangers transition into platoon operations with a focus on platoon ambush, raid, and patrol base operations. Following an in-depth troop leading procedures (TLP) class, Rangers begin a 10-day FTX that emphasizes the ambush and how to use terrain to gain superiority against an agile and aggressive enemy.

Rangers then progress to the Florida Phase at Camp Rudder (Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.) where they learn the basics of waterborne operations and are taught how to conduct a movement to contact. Following the techniques classes, Rangers spend their final 10 days conducting raids, ambushes, and movements to contact with levels of increasing complexity. This culminates into a battalion operation on Auxillary Field. Over the duration of the course, Rangers spend a total of 27 days in the field, not counting additional techniques days.

At the unit level, there are some constraints that have the potential to limit attendance to the Ranger course in units. First, the relative lack of Ranger-qualified NCOs and officers can lead to fear and hesitancy

about the course. Success breeds success, and when more individuals attend and earn the Ranger Tab, more will be willing to volunteer. Finally, many units may simply de-emphasize the Ranger course as an unnecessary use of valuable unit time and money through policies and common practices. Ranger School is the premier combat leadership course in the Army, and the honor roll of the Ranger Hall of Fame serves as an indication of the contributions made in the past and the potential for the future. By limiting potential attendees to certain ranks and duty positions, units may reduce the course's accessibility. Leader development is one of the Army Chief of Staff's highest priorities. By sending Soldiers to Ranger School, units gain better trained Soldiers, even though they may lose them for National Training Center (NTC) or Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotations. During the Ranger candidate's absence, subordinates will have the opportunity to gain invaluable experience by stepping up and filling in for the Ranger student. There are also other ways to attend the Ranger course outside of a unit. First, the Infantry Advanced Leader and Maneuver Senior Leader Courses offer a pre-Ranger program that allows attendance prior to returning to home station at no cost to the unit. The Army will also pay for a Soldier to attend Ranger School TDY enroute to their next duty station. Branch managers and re-enlistment NCOs can provide more information about both options. Potential students should explore their options and focus on attending Ranger School by any means necessary.

Ranger School is as relevant to the Army today as it was when conceived in 1951. Individuals gain tactical and technical skills in addition to leadership experience and feedback that they return to their units. Prospective students can maximize their potential for success by focusing on the habits of physical fitness, land navigation, personal study, leadership feedback, financial and personal readiness, and living the Ranger Creed. Grounded in the past with a vision for the future, Ranger School will continue to provide proven agile and adaptive leaders to the Army well into the 21st century.

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