

Combatives: More Than “Just PT”

CPT Christopher J. Mattos

After several staff assignments and a few unanticipated turns of events, I was afforded the opportunity to command Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Ky. On my second night of command, I received my first of many late-night phone calls — this one informing me that two of our Soldiers were involved in a vehicle accident in which one was killed and the other incarcerated for drunk driving. The wake of this tragedy rippled through the heart of the company and left me and the rest of the leadership searching for ways to bring the unit together and refocus the Soldiers on their mission.

In all of the years of training for company command, nothing can really prepare you for such a tragedy. We spent a lot of time talking to Soldiers, leveraging professional assets at Fort Campbell, and finding ways to honor the memory of the deceased. The first sergeant and I knew that above all other things we had to get the Soldiers back in the field, training and working. We knew we needed to find a way to create solidarity among the unit, and we were determined to help guide the company to become stronger after such a serious blow.

Unknown to us at the time, one of the significant contributors to the rebound of the company was a blossoming line of effort in its infant stages of development. In 1-187 IN (Leader Battalion), we were fortunate enough to have a battalion command team that not only supported combatives training but pushed it as a critical element of overall Soldier readiness and resilience. As a new commander, I wanted to make it clear that I understood and supported my commander’s intent and guidance, and I realized how important it was to carry my higher command’s priorities at my level. As a scholastic wrestler in my youth and a graduate of the Level II Army Combatives Course, I also had a deep appreciation for the program.



Trainees learn combatives techniques during training on Fort Benning, Ga., on 12 May 2015.

Photo by Markeith Horace

As I contemplated how to not only integrate combatives into the company's operations but to find the means to restore morale in the unit, I recalled the three large words painted in black on the wall of my old high school wrestling room: "Discipline, Dedication, Desire." I thought about the long three-hour practices in that room that often resembled a sauna as my coach would frequently put an ice bag on the thermostat to trick the system into pumping hotter and hotter air. I thought about the closeness our team and the attitude we carried through the halls, knowing that we were the hardest-working athletes in the school. Our confidence was unwavering; we knew there wasn't a single "tough guy" who could stand toe-to-toe with any of us. More importantly, the lasting values of teamwork, pride, and discipline were ingrained in us every day through incessant training, competition, and hardship.

If I could leverage those same principles in my Soldiers now and harness the energy and virtues that helped shape who I had become, I felt that we could really do something great in the company. This article highlights how we approached creating a sustainable combatives program in Charlie Company as a medium to increase the unit's overall fitness, morale, mental toughness, and resiliency.

Introduction

"When we started the tournament, I noticed one of the Soldiers overcome with emotion; it looked like all of his anger, frustration, and stress was released at once. He clearly had a lot going on in his head, and it was like he never knew how to deal. During his first match, he had to be taken off to the side because he just let it all out and he got way out of hand during the bout. At the end of the tournament, I went over to talk to him, and he told me that today was the first time he ever had to fight for real, and that he learned a lot. More importantly, he learned control. I could see it in his eyes; he wanted more." — **SSG Publio Pena**
C Company Lead Combatives NCOIC

Most Infantry company commanders have invested vast amounts of time, energy, and brain power into creatively seeking active and new ways to attack atrophy in their physical training and resiliency programs. Through our commissioning sources, our institutional training, professional development, and general experience, we develop an extensive array of options to tackle the common challenges that we face as leaders to keep our formations fit, ready, and resilient. At various times as platoon leaders or commanders, we have tried training purely on the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) or on combat-focused physical training (PT); we have listened to all the briefings and attempted to integrate new CrossFit trends, military fitness training (MFT) programs, or Martin Rooney workouts. We have all taken our 16-hour Master Resiliency Training (MRT) courses and spent hours talking to our Soldiers about their attitudes and their ability to adapt and overcome adversity. However, the integration of combatives into unit training programs can serve as an extremely influential and effective tool for increased physical, mental, and emotional readiness across your formation.

Developing Your Program

Starting the unit combatives program is the most challenging part of the process. It may take some calculated strategy to dispel any preexisting misconceptions associated with the program. One may encounter leaders or subordinates who are not familiar with or particularly interested in combatives; you may hear clichés like, "it is just an excuse for Soldiers to pretend they are in Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)," "it will get your Soldiers hurt," or that "it will turn your formation into a bunch of wild bar-fighting hooligans." The first duty of the unit leader is to do the adequate research; read the appropriate manuals, handbooks, or doctrine; and ensure the benefits of the program are understood at all levels. Develop an approach and pull in a support system. Start by bringing in the experienced trainers

in your formation and the Soldiers with experience in wrestling, boxing, or martial arts. Then develop your strategy; see Figure 1 for an example strategy outline.

- I. Pique an interest and get buy-in**
 - A. Get buy-in from higher HQ
 - B. Get buy-in from subordinates
 - C. Seek professional support
 - D. Start with the platoon leadership
 - E. Bring in the Soldiers
- II. Integrate combatives into the company battle rhythm and training plan**
 - A. Apply command emphasis
 - B. Integrate into range operations
 - C. Integrate into field training
 - D. Integrate into urban operations training
 - E. Integrate into unit challenges
 - F. Integrate into daily PT
 - G. Execute during deployment
- III. Push the envelope through competition**
 - A. Execute unit-level competitions
 - B. Enforce risk-mitigation measures
 - C. Foster professionalism
- IV. Reap the benefits of the program**
 - A. Physical readiness
 - B. Mental toughness
 - C. Combat readiness
 - D. Resiliency

Figure 1 — Example Strategy for Starting a Unit Combatives Program

Pique an Interest and Get Buy-in

Buy-in From Higher — Leaders need to show their commanders that they fall within their higher intent and guidance. You do not want to create the perception that you or your unit has gone “rogue” or that you have decided to disregard standing training and physical fitness guidance; if you cannot pitch it as an extension of your current PT, training, and resiliency programs, you are less likely to receive support from higher. You may only get one chance to prove that your unit can execute this program responsibly before you lose the backing of your higher chain of command.

Buy-in From Subordinates — After you receive approval from your commander, you need to be able to articulate the plan to your subordinate leaders and Soldiers. Without buy-in from your NCOs and junior commissioned officers, you are likely to lose momentum before you start. You must be able to explain how this program will benefit your Soldiers and how it will translate into increased physical fitness performance, improved physical and mental toughness, long-term resiliency, and combat proficiency. If your NCOs do not care, the Soldiers will follow quickly behind them.

Seek Professional Support — A great method to help kick-start your program is to enlist the support of subject matter experts (SMEs) on your installation. Many Army installations are co-located with special operations units and other organizations that house some of the most experienced and professional trainers in the world. They are generally eager and willing to get involved and help spread the “right way” of doing combatives. After a few initial coordination meetings and establishing a baseline rapport with these SMEs, you should seek to get your Soldiers involved in entry-level basic instruction training. The heightened atmosphere and the natural enamor that our Infantrymen hold for their special operations brethren and highly trained mixed martial arts experts will help constitute an initial interest and curiosity for a part of the Army to which conventional Soldiers are seldom exposed.

Start With the Platoon Leadership — A successful method is to begin by bringing in all of the senior leaders in the company for initial training with the experts. The trainers will expose your leaders to advanced techniques in order to give them a preview of where the program could go. They will also dispel many of the misconceptions associated with combatives programming, and they will certainly serve out a dose of humility that will leave your leaders challenged to increase their own skill sets.

Bring in the Soldiers — Approaching the next step correctly takes an understanding of the true nature of Soldiers. Soldiers want to be challenged and they want to discover their limits. Ultimately — they want to fight and win. Most Infantrymen have “type A” personalities. They are hungry to push themselves, and tapping into this precious resource is critical. Thus, if you feel that you have successfully grabbed the attention of your platoon leadership after your initial “exposure” session, the next step is translating that energy into buy-in from the Soldiers. By coordinating to have each platoon conduct several similar introduction classes with your SMEs and internal trainers, you can begin to build a foundation in your ranks.

Once the Soldiers have a base level of knowledge and understand how to properly execute the techniques, they become increasingly engaged in the program. Most Soldiers state that they have always enjoyed combatives, but they never knew enough techniques to perform well, so they became discouraged and backed away from it. However, once they know what they are doing, they gain confidence and actually start enjoying the training. Harnessing the competitive nature of Soldiers and specifically that of Infantrymen is imperative to your success in making this program survive the long haul. Soldiers want to be the best, and they want to be better than their peers. Competition is critical, and you will find the most success by integrating competition into every facet of the program.

Integrate Combatives into the Company Battle Rhythm and Training Plan

Command Emphasis — Integrating combatives into your routine will be one of your biggest challenges. Assuming that you have already sold your commanders and your unit on the benefits, now you have to keep it alive. If you treat it like a deliberate training event, you will find success. Put it on the calendar, brief it in your training meetings, and follow the 10-step training model just like you would for a live-fire exercise. The amount of effort that goes into planning and resourcing this training will demonstrate its level of importance. Apply command emphasis to let everyone know that it is an absolute priority and then execute the basic fundamentals: task subordinate leaders to plan combatives events in order to foster their ownership of the program; leverage time and resources to make quality, worthwhile training events; and show up yourself. As a leader, if you are not present in this endeavor, it will likely fall apart. Get involved and execute the training with your Soldiers; do not be afraid to get beat in front of them either. Learning humility in defeat rather than gloating in victory is an equally important example to set for your Soldiers. Some quality engaged leadership will make the difference in maintaining the momentum in your program. If it is not clearly important to you, it won't be important to your Soldiers.

Range Operations — Once you have planned, resourced, and allocated time for your events, you may need to get creative. Finding ways to integrate combatives using non-standard methods during your busy training schedule will be a difficult task. You are certain to find success by implementing combatives into various other areas in your training calendar in order to maximize exposure to the program and to avoid atrophy as competing requirements mount. During range operations, there are countless hours spent away from the firing line that can easily serve as a prime opportunity to integrate combatives into your concurrent training plan. You will likely meet some resistance in this task, but once it becomes the norm, it can be a great supplement to your range operations. While Soldiers are waiting to fire or are finished firing, assign a qualified NCO to run a combatives station nearby. Additionally, an effective technique is to integrate combatives into your stress-shoot exercises. Develop a plan where Soldiers are required to execute several exercises to elevate their heart rate and then culminate the drill with a time-driven bout against an adversary of similar weight and skill before moving to the firing line. This will simulate the stressors of combat and will teach Soldiers how to maintain their composure before and after a physical altercation with the enemy while continuing to engage targets.

Field Training — There is also a great opportunity to continue to train combatives during field training exercises. Not only will you have the time to execute, but you will also have a captive audience devoid of the common distractions and daily tasks associated with garrison operations. By training combatives in the field, you are able to continue your PT regiment. Ensure unit packing lists accommodate combatives in the field to mitigate attrition of fresh uniforms and maintain field hygiene.



Maneuver Captains Career Course Soldiers participate in a tactical combatives exercise at Fort Benning, Ga., on 26 June 2015 to evaluate proficiency in hand-to-hand combat in an urban environment.

Photo by Markeith Horace

Urban Training — Integrating combatives into urban operations training is a great way to train multiple skill sets simultaneously while sustaining your program and providing your Soldiers with realistic and challenging training scenarios. In combat, Soldiers may have to resort to hand-to-hand combat while closing with the enemy or when a primary weapon system fails. Further, Soldiers will be carrying cumbersome full combat loads in excess of 100 pounds. Learning how to apply tactical combatives techniques in full kit against a live adversary will heighten the realism of your training extensively. After

your Soldiers have a good base of training, stepping up the intensity by training hand-to-hand combat with Battle Drill 6 exercises (enter building/clear room) will truly excite your Soldiers and will give them a realistic sense of what it may be like entering a room that is inhabited by a trained enemy. Collectively, we often perform urban operations training using glass houses, wooden mock-ups, or empty training villages. By safely placing a few trained enemy combatants in Blauer suits inside your objective, you will bring your training to life and test the aggressiveness of your teams and squads.

Unit Challenges — During unit PT or morale challenges and competitions, you can augment and enhance your events with combatives. For example, at the beginning of a multi-station event, Soldiers may have a given time frame to take down and subdue their opponents. Time bonuses and penalties can be enforced on each team given the performance of the designated Soldier. Another technique is to establish a station where Soldiers are required to disarm an enemy combatant in a Blauer suit with a knife or firearm without being incapacitated in order to proceed to the next station. Other commanders have had success using ACU (Army Combat Uniform) runs with unannounced combatives stations along the route as a successful tool. The Soldiers will find these events both challenging and fun, and it will allow leadership to integrate combatives training in a non-standard methodology while simultaneously teaching mental toughness under stressful combat-simulated conditions.

Daily PT — Using combatives as an extension of your normal PT program is the most efficient way to keep your program running. Whether you make it a weekly battle rhythm event or not, there is no reason that leaders cannot take 30 minutes before or after daily PT to teach a few techniques or to have the Soldiers compete against one another. The most effective method is to execute a few combatives drills after PT as a cool-down technique. Simply put, if you and your subordinate leaders want to train combatives, there are ample opportunities to do so; you just have to plan, execute, and supervise. Further, after you have created a sustainable and diverse program, push additional onus down to your subordinate leaders to assist in carrying on the training by integrating it into their platoon and squad operations. Challenge your platoon leaders and platoon sergeants to continue to execute under your intent and supervision.

Deployment — Combatives does not have to cease while deployed either. If your unit cannot take mats and equipment downrange, you can order these items while deployed or improvise. Combatives is a great release of frustration, boredom, stress, and anxiety often found in a combat environment. Additionally, when running is not an option and lifting weights becomes the only means of PT, combatives is a great supplementary PT or morale event to maintain spirits and distract Soldiers from negative deployment influences.

Push the Envelope through Competition

Unit-level Competitions — Plan culminating events in accordance with your unit's battle rhythm in order to create a venue where your Soldiers can assess their progress, compete against each other, and build esprit-de-corps in your formation. One technique is to hold a quarterly company-level combatives tournament. The single most important contributor to the success of this event is preparation. Figure 2 lists some keys to success.

This event will greatly contribute to your unit's morale. Your Soldiers will truly covet the opportunity to compete in a public forum, and your leaders will be able to show their experience and provide their Soldiers with an example to follow. It also gives the command team the ability to assess which Soldiers have excelled during training, those who possess the attributes of the Warrior Ethos expected of them, and which Soldiers need additional training or mentorship.

Risk Mitigation — Nothing will prove your skeptics right and prove you wrong quicker than if your troops sustain multiple small injuries or a serious injury during your training, if one of your Soldiers is arrested

for fighting or hitting a family member, or if your unit begins to exude a general atmosphere of rowdiness, “tough-guy” attitudes, or arrogance.

When it comes to safety and the integrity of your program, you must take all necessary precautions. However, you must also avoid degrading the quality of the training by over-mitigating. Although it is likely that some Soldiers will sustain minor injuries, by taking some common-sense risk aversion measures you can greatly improve the quality of your training, avoid unnecessary pressure from your chain of command, and maintain a high level of intensity. First and foremost, you have to protect your unit by ensuring that all trainers are legitimately certified to train the given level of techniques and subsequently that all participating Soldiers are certified to the level 1 or level 2 standard. Secondly, always enforce rigorous stretching and perform warm-up and cool-down techniques before and after training to significantly reduce the potential for injury. Always have a medic or Combat Life Saver (CLS)-certified individual with the proper medical supplies to treat injuries and to maintain the casualty evacuation plan in the event of a serious injury. If conducting higher level or advanced training, ensure proper protective equipment is worn (groin protector, shin-guards, helmet, gloves, mouthpiece, etc.) and that all trainers and participants are certified for intermediate or advanced training. If conducting combatives integration into urban operations training with opponents in Blauer suits, Soldiers should receive an adequate safety brief and demonstration of the approved training techniques. Given the heightened level of adrenaline, there is a high potential for Soldiers to use their firearms or helmets as hand-to-hand weapons against the opposing force, which can result in serious injury even when protection is worn.

Professionalism — It is paramount that you create a responsible, mature, and professional climate for your program that is founded on discipline, restraint, and trained skill. When it comes to standards and discipline, you have to preach your intent and guidance from day one:

- 1) We are here to learn, to train, and to be experts in our craft.
- 2) We will take a deep pride in our ability to close with and destroy the enemy, but we will not use our skill sets when not in training or combat.
- 3) We will conduct all training to standard and implement the proper safety and risk-mitigation measures.
- 4) All training will be supervised by a trained NCO or officer.
- 5) Professionalism will be maintained at all times; sore losers or winners will be removed from training.
- 6) Partners will not attempt to hurt or injure each other; we are one team even during competitions.
- 7) This is not the UFC; we are training military hand-to-hand combat techniques in preparation for combat operations.

It is imperative that leaders give clear and direct guidance on appropriate conduct both on and off duty. Your combatives program will disappear quicker than it started if you have a Soldier put someone in a triangle choke at a bar downtown. Teach your Soldiers to respect the program and the art of what they have become a part of. Quality and disciplined mentorship coupled with direct supervision can prevent these problems. Be aware of the potential off-duty risks, identify high-risk Soldiers, and mitigate foreseeable issues before you have a serious incident that degrades the future of your program.

Reap the Benefits of the Program

Physical Readiness — There are both obvious and subtle benefits that can be leveraged across multiple company-level initiatives. First, is the inherent benefit to your unit’s physical readiness. Contrary to popular belief, when executed correctly, combatives will typically increase your performance measures in PT. Units that effectively integrate this training into their standard PT regiments will notice an increase in APFT performance that can be attributed to the full-body muscular endurance, the anaerobic and aerobic conditioning, and the intangible mental shifts in attitude gained through sustained combatives training. While executing your program, Soldiers naturally increase strength and increase their cardiovascular

efficiency without realizing it. Additionally, Soldiers seem to take more of a vested interest in their own strength and conditioning in order to enhance their performance during combatives training.

Mental Toughness — One of the primary goals of your program should be to build and foster mental toughness in your formation. Through competition, pushing Soldiers to their limits, and by harnessing the natural potential energy in your warfighters, you will teach your Soldiers to fight through adversity in everything that they do. Over time your Soldiers and subordinate leaders will begin to exude positive attitudes during stressful situations in their daily tasks and during field training. Your combatives program will begin to seep into other aspects of the company, and the formation will begin to embody more of a “can-do, no-fail, never quit” attitude in everything that it does. In general, performance and morale increases in parallel to the progression of your combatives training program.

Warrior Ethos and Combat Readiness — In military units, living and embodying the Warrior Ethos is critical to continuing to maintain the strategic, operational, and tactical overmatch of our enemies. Beyond our nation’s deep pockets and vast resources, our country’s military has always and should always fight harder, longer, and with more violence of action than our adversaries. It is this very attitude that combatives provides for your formation. We have to teach our warriors from day one that they will never quit, never waver, and always strive to win. Combatives at its essence is founded on these principles, and through a sustained regiment of training, your Soldiers will begin to learn these very basic truths. We cannot expect our Soldiers to fight through the objective and win for the first time in combat; just as we train as we fight in our military tasks and drills, we must train the human attributes needed for warfare. A Soldier should not experience the physiological and emotional strains of “the fight” for the first time when the stakes are life or death; through combatives you can teach your Soldiers how to keep fighting after they think they are beat, after they have nothing left, and after all hope is seemingly lost. You can establish a pre-configured trigger mechanism in your Soldiers that creates muscle memory so the body becomes comfortable with the “fight” solution when faced with the option for fight or flight. Of course, you want your Soldiers to exercise disciplined initiative and common sense when presented with a certain set of mission and operational variables, but you can greatly reduce the body’s natural tendencies to protect itself when faced with a potential mortal situation. Soldiers can learn how to control the adrenaline and maintain focus in combat through training combatives. At its core, this principle reduces to the development of self-confidence. If Soldiers believe in themselves on the mat and learn that they do have what it takes to defend themselves, they will believe it when the rounds start flying in their direction. There is an absolute correlation between the skills learned during combatives training and the mental, physical and emotional skills needed on the battlefield. Soldiers who can learn how to fight out of a choke hold — or who get taken down time and time again in the combatives room but still get back on their feet — will naturally and unknowingly bring the same spirit to the real fight against real enemies.

Resilience — A strong combatives program can translate into a more effective resiliency program. The mental and physical toughness that has been gained on the mat translates directly into emotional strength in your formation. In part, a strong combatives program can potentially assist your unit work towards decreasing suicidal ideations, behavioral issues, domestic violence issues, and serious incidents overall. The discipline gained through this training — as well as the mental capacity to overcome the rigors of daily life — can serve as coping tools for Soldiers to deal with unforeseen stressors, relationship issues, and ambiguous decision-making scenarios in their lives.

Conclusion

Combatives is more than just PT. It can assist your unit in all aspects of readiness. Leaders at all levels and all branches of the military seek to create formations that are fit, ready, resilient, and capable. Combatives is by no means the stand-alone solution, and engaged leadership must be applied in all aspects of

command. However, when managed and implemented correctly, safely, and with intensity, this unique tool can assist in transforming your formation for the better. It can attack problem sets in your unit from an indirect approach, and above all other things it can create immediate positive effects in your unit's morale, esprit de corps, and performance. Not all leaders are naturally interested or skilled in this training, but for those in combat arms units, it is imperative that leaders and Soldiers alike demonstrate and spread the values and warrior attributes that can be gained during combatives training.

CPT Christopher J. Mattos is currently serving as commander of Charlie Company, 1-187 IN, 3rd BCT, 101st ABN DIV (AASLT) at Fort Campbell, Ky. He was commissioned from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., in 2009. His previous assignments include serving as rifle platoon leader, reconnaissance platoon leader, and assistant S3 in Vilseck, Germany; division maneuver planner, CJ5 Future Plans, 101st Airborne Division; and assistant S3 for 1-187 IN. He is a graduate of the Javelin Leader, Sniper Employment Leader, Ranger, Stryker Leader, Airborne, and Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader courses.