

Combat Feedback from US Army Combatives Instructors

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“When Soldiers are engaged in hand-to-hand combat, they acquire new information about combatives. These lessons must be captured and analyzed so that the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) evolves to fit the needs of Soldiers.”

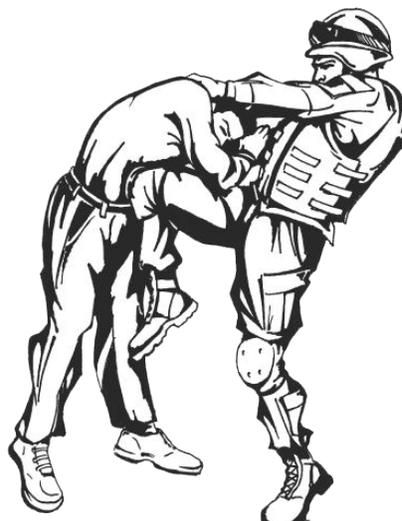
— Field Manual (FM) 3-25.150, *Combatives*

Technologically advanced weapons may define modern warfare, but when Soldiers close with and destroy the enemy, hand-to-hand combat can become a brutal reality. Defined as “a physical confrontation between two or more persons using empty-hand fighting or weapons that cannot fire,” hand-to-hand combat occurs more often than one would expect on the battlefield of today.¹ In one study, nearly a quarter (189 out of 876) of Soldiers from an infantry brigade in the 3rd Infantry Division reported engaging in hand-to-hand combat during an eight-month deployment to Iraq.² Additionally, an analysis of Army after action reports (AARs) between 2004 and 2008 found 19 percent of Soldiers (216 out of 1,226) reported using combatives skills during combat deployments.³ Preparing Soldiers for the demands of hand-to-hand combat is more challenging than ever.

The Army faces more training requirements than time available to train.⁴ Leaders and instructors must look for information to make training more effective and efficient so that when training takes place Soldiers get the maximum benefit. Combat feedback — lessons learned from Soldiers’ experiences on the battlefield — is one such source of information. Combatives instructors are a group of Soldiers well placed to provide combat feedback that improves training for hand-to-hand combat.

Previous combat feedback interviews with Soldiers about fighting in hand-to-hand combat suggest the mental aspects are important for success in such encounters.⁵ Additionally, interviewed Soldiers discussed the automatic nature of their fighting skills, the need to adapt to unexpected circumstances, and the need to conduct large amounts of training in hand-to-hand combat.⁶ These topics are useful areas to ask instructors for combat feedback that improves training effectiveness.

The purpose of this article is to review the lessons learned from a combat feedback survey completed by combatives instructors and based on their responses offer recommendations for combatives training.



After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, 27 combatives instructors completed a questionnaire on combatives at the 2012 Annual Combatives Instructor Symposium. The average age of the instructors was 35.41 years with an average of 12.19 years of military service.⁷ Nineteen were Level 4 Army Combatives instructors with an average of 4.46 years as an instructor.⁸ The remaining individuals were Level 3 (six instructors) and Level 2 (two instructors). Of those surveyed, 74.07 percent indicated experience in combat operations and 33.33 percent indicated experience using combatives skills during combat operations. The questionnaire asked about instructors' beliefs on several areas of performance and mental skills associated with success in both training for and performance during a hand-to-hand combat encounter during combat operations. Findings about success in combatives training are available in a separate article.⁹ This article details instructors' beliefs on the mental skills and training principles important for success in the use of combatives during a combat situation.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Training Time

Instructors were asked about the minimum number of hours of combatives training needed for a Soldier to be effective in a combat environment. The instructors reported an average of 79.69 hours.¹⁰ However, without any prompt, 13 instructors wrote more than the minimum number of hours and offered their views on the number of hours that should be trained each week, month, or year. From these instructors, the average regular training believed necessary for combat proficiency was 4.46 hours per week.¹¹ The instructors were then asked to rate (on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing "not important" and 7 representing "very important") the importance of fighting skills being automatic and a second question on the importance of fighting skills being adaptable during combat operations. Instructors believed that fighting skills should be automatic and adaptable.¹² Further, 48.15 percent of instructors believed it was "very important" for fighting skills to be automatic, and 81.48 percent believed it was "very important" that fighting skills are adaptable.

Psychological Factors

Next, instructors rated the importance of psychological factors for success when using combatives skills in a combat setting. Psychological factors are thoughts, feelings, and mental characteristics that impact the attitude, behavior, and functions of the mind. Results revealed psychological factors were viewed as important with 74.07 percent of instructors rating psychological factors as "very important" (a score of 7 on a scale of 1-7).¹³ The instructors were next asked how well the MACP prepares Soldiers for the psychological demands of hand-to-hand combat in combat operations. The average rating by instructors was 5.44 with 29.63 percent of instructors believing MACP prepared Soldiers "very well" (a score of 7 on a scale of 1-7) for the psychological demands.¹⁴ Finally, the instructors rated the importance of 23 mental skills for success in hand-to-hand combat during combat operations. All ratings were made on a 1-7 scale, with 1 representing "not important" and 7 representing "very important." Table 1 shows the top 10 mental skills rated by instructors and further reveals that **stress control**, **mental toughness**, and **confidence** were judged three of the most important for success during combat operations. However, it should be noted that even items viewed to be least important received relatively moderate ratings.¹⁵

LESSONS LEARNED

Training Intervals and Duration

Results from this survey offer several recommendations for MACP "combat feedback." When asked the minimum number of hours of combatives training needed for a Soldier to be ready for combat, nearly half the instructors submitted an answer that instead described how frequently a Soldier should practice combatives. This is a powerful response. It suggests that instructors viewed regular training in combatives as very important in preparing Soldiers for performance in combat. This belief is consistent with the distributed learning concept. A distributed learning practice schedule refers to situations in which training is spread across several sessions.¹⁶ For sport skills similar to combatives (i.e., discrete skills), shorter training sessions that are spaced out are more effective than longer training sessions that are grouped together.¹⁷ Although the U.S. Army training method might require certification training in long, grouped blocks (e.g., Level One combatives instructor training is taught in five 8-hour blocks over one week), sustainment training or future training designs best maintain and further develop combatives skills through regular, relatively short training sessions.

Mental Skill	Rank	Average Rating on Scale of 1-7	Standard Deviation ⁷	% of Instructors that Rated as Very Important
Stress Control	1	6.48	1.12	81.48
Mental Toughness	2	6.40	1.12	85.19
Confidence	3	6.36	1.15	77.78
Controlled Aggression	4	6.32	1.14	77.78
Self-discipline	5	6.24	1.30	55.56
Attention-Concentration	6	6.20	1.44	51.85
Courage	7	6.20	1.35	55.56
Motivation	8	6.20	1.32	55.56
Pre-mission mental preparation	9	6.20	1.32	55.56
Emotional Control	10	6.16	1.31	51.85

Table 1: Importance Ratings of Mental Skills for Determining Success in a Hand-to-Hand Combat Encounter during Combat Operations

Lesson Learned #1: Regular combatives training — in short sessions totaling approximately 4.5 hours per week — is important for preparing Soldiers to succeed in a hand-to-hand combat encounter.

Automaticity or “Muscle Memory”

Instructors very strongly supported the view that combatives skills must be both automatic and adaptable for success in a combat situation. This view matches Soldiers interviewed about their experience of fighting in hand-to-hand combat.¹⁸ The term automatic refers to fighting skills that are fast, require little conscious thought to perform, and can occur involuntarily during a fighting encounter.¹⁹ Automatic skills are also referred to in the MACP as muscle memory.²⁰ Developing muscle memory for combatives skills is considered a good way to sustain performance during high levels of stress.²¹ For example, mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters with muscle memory can recognize their opponents’ movements and respond (i.e., punch, kick, throw, and grapple) with little or no thought while keeping focused on their fighting strategy. Unfortunately, muscle memory can work against Soldiers if their skills are not developed to deal with a dynamic fighting environment.

Given the chaos and unpredictability of combat, Soldiers may need to apply their skills against a wide range of scenarios and opponents. Combatives skills trained with only an “action-reaction” teaching method can build muscle memory — but not necessarily the capability to adjust quickly to unexpected demands. Adaptability refers to the expertise to apply a skill in different performance settings.²² For example, a Soldier may practice a rear-naked choke in training but must also adapt this combatives technique to the challenges of wearing body armor during application in a combat setting. Training fighting skills that are both automatic and adaptable requires a mixture of different practice schedules.

A **blocked practice** schedule involves repeating the same technique over and over in response to the same stimulus (i.e., “action-reaction” teaching model). For example, when an opponent throws a jab punch, the Soldier responds with the same defense, and this action-reaction is repeatedly practiced. Although this type of practice can quickly develop automatic skills, it can limit a Soldier’s ability to respond effectively in dynamic circumstances. A basketball player who only shoots free throws from the foul line should not expect this type of practice to prepare them to make a shot against an active opponent during regular play. Therefore, once basic competence of fundamental combatives techniques and movements are established through a block practice schedule, a Soldier should begin training in varied and random practice schedules.²³

A **varied practice** schedule has a Soldier practicing the same fundamental technique but doing so under continuously different challenges.²⁴ For example, a varied schedule for practicing a double-leg takedown might require a Soldier to practice each repetition against a different opponent or have the opponent regularly change his stance and position. A varied practice schedule builds both the relative timing pattern of a technique and the Soldier’s ability to adapt to a changing pattern.²⁵ Through a varied practice schedule, a Soldier “...learns the rules for performing

variations of a fundamental pattern, including new variations they might try to produce in a future...” hand-to-hand combat encounter.²⁶

A **random practice** schedule is the third training method to develop automatic and adaptable fighting skills. In a random practice schedule, a Soldier practices several fundamentally different combatives skills in a random order (instructor is aware of the order but not the Soldier).²⁷ In some instances, the same fighting technique is never performed twice in a row. For example, a Soldier may practice a variety of combatives techniques and movements (e.g., punches, knee strikes, take downs, etc.) that are randomly called out by an instructor. Another example of a random schedule is presenting a Soldier with realistic hand-to-hand combat scenarios where an opponent presents randomly different challenges (e.g., striking attacks, grappling attacks, etc.) that require very different and distinct responses from the Soldier. Soldiers may struggle with performance during random practice training, but the challenging demands of this schedule enhance learning and performance in later scenarios — such as combat.²⁸

Giving a Soldier’s combatives skills the best chance to function automatically and in an adaptable manner during a combat engagement is facilitated by focusing on the opponent. Science is quite clear that an external focus is preferable to an internal focus when executing well-learned physical skills.²⁹ For example, Soldiers should focus on their opponent and where they want to place a kick (i.e., external focus) rather than focusing on their own foot placement and the leg movement associated with a kick (i.e., internal focus). Experienced individuals can actually sabotage their automatic skills by putting their focus on the mechanics of skill execution rather than external cues.³⁰ In other words, Soldiers can become too focused on the mechanics of their own actions; methodically thinking through mechanics can physically slow you down.

Lesson Learned #2: In concert with the crawl-walk-run training method, combatives training can build muscle memory and adaptability through **block**, **varied**, and **random** practice schedules. Block practice involves practicing techniques under the same conditions until a basic understanding is formed and the skill requires little thought to execute. Varied practice refers to practicing a combatives technique under a wide range of conditions — forcing Soldiers to modify their techniques to the different challenges presented by an opponent. Random practice demands Soldiers use a continuously changing set of different combatives skills to solve hand-to-hand combat scenarios. During a combat situation, automatic and adaptable combative skills are best performed when Soldiers keep focused on their opponent rather than the execution of any particular skill.

Psychological Factors or Mental Skills

A large majority of the surveyed instructors believed psychological aspects play a very important role in a Soldier’s success during hand-to-hand combat. Although instructors were less supportive that MACP prepared Soldiers for the psychological demands of hand-to-hand combat, there was still a fairly strong belief that MACP prepared Soldiers sufficiently. Of the 23 mental skills considered, stress control, confidence, and mental toughness were viewed as three of the most important for success in hand-to-hand combat. Stress control is defined as the ability to adjust your mental and physical intensity (i.e., fight or flight response) to the level that helps you perform at your best in a given situation.³¹ Confidence is the collection of beliefs and thoughts a person has about their ability to successfully perform in a particular situation.³² Mental toughness is defined as the “psychological edge that enables you to: generally cope better than your opponents with the many demands... specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure.”³³ Training recommendations for building confidence and mental toughness are available in another article.³⁴ Developing a Soldier’s mental skill of stress control during combatives training begins with understanding that experiencing stress during combat is a normal reaction.

Reactions to stress — whether in combat or not — include both the physical and the mental. Some physical reactions to stress include increases in breathing, heart rate, and muscle tension.³⁵ Fearful emotions, racing thoughts, and tunnel vision are examples of some of the mental reactions to stress.³⁶ Perhaps the most important lesson about the physical and mental characteristics of stress is that they are normal reactions to challenging and dangerous situations.³⁷ Soldiers interviewed about their experiences of hand-to-hand combat agreed that a high level of physical and mental intensity accompanies fighting.³⁸ Developing an acceptance that some amount of physical and mental reaction to stress is normal can help in keeping stress from overwhelming a Soldier. Two skills that can further safeguard performance during highly stressful situations and can be incorporated into combatives training are an external focus and tactical breathing.



**Modern Army Combatives Program instructors speak with students during an Army Basic Combatives Course on Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, on 13 February 2014.
(Photo by SrA Tabatha Zarrella, USAF)**

As mentioned earlier for enabling automatic and adaptable skills, an external focus is also a useful skill to keep stress from impacting performance. When engaged in hand-to-hand combat, Soldiers should continually focus their attention on their opponent and the tactics necessary to win. Physical and mental reactions to stress can distract a Soldier's focus — pulling attention inward to muscle tension or fearful thoughts — but continually refocusing on an opponent and key performance cues needed to win are ways to control stress.³⁹ One method to teach Soldiers how to remain externally focused during combat is using the phrase "What's Important Now" (WIN). Using WIN can quickly remind Soldiers to keep their focus to the performance cues most relevant to their situation. For example, a Soldier using combatives skills during a close quarters battle situation can become distracted by fearful thoughts or an increased breathing rate. Focusing on the WIN phrase can rapidly shift a Soldier's focus from distracting stress reactions to the demands of the task at hand: defeating an opponent in hand-to-hand combat. As with any skill, WIN requires practice and integration into existing combatives training. With regular practice, Soldiers can quickly and efficiently identify the most important factors for success in a hand-to-hand combat setting and keep their attention focused on those factors in the face of distractions.

Self-controlled breathing is a set of techniques to manage stress in a wide variety of situations and found in a many disciplines including sports, yoga, and martial arts.⁴⁰ Breathing techniques used to control stress immediately before, during, or after a highly threatening performance situation are termed "tactical breathing."⁴¹ Defined as deliberate, conscious breathing usually with a Soldier inhaling for a four-count and exhaling for a four-count, tactical breathing has been taught to Soldiers during MACP training and recommended to help Soldiers stay focused during vehicle route clearance.⁴² Recent research suggests Soldiers with training in tactical breathing managed their stress better during a simulated emergency than Soldiers without similar training.⁴³ Tactical breathing assists a Soldier in coping with both physical and mental aspects of stress.

Physically, tactical breathing replicates a low-stress breathing pattern that aims to decrease the intensity level of other physical characteristics (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, etc.). For example, tactical breathing seeks to decrease the shaking in arms or "frozen" legs from excessive muscle tension under stress. Mentally, the deliberate and conscious aspects of tactical breathing create a sense of control for a Soldier that can be missing during a highly stressful situation. Tactical breathing can be easily incorporated into existing training and used by Soldiers in a variety of performance situations.

Perhaps the most important aspect of using tactical breathing is that — just like any combatives skill — it must be practiced and taught to be useful in a combat situation. Additionally, this type of skill may not be as useful while fully engaged with an opponent in a hand-to-hand combat encounter. For example, Soldiers in the middle of trading punches with an opponent may not find it advantageous to shift their attention from their opponent to their tactical breathing skill. At these performance moments, Soldiers should keep their attention fully on the demands of their opponent and the tactics needed for winning.

Tactical breathing is best leveraged during windows of time between performance events and executing skills. For example, before Soldiers enter a room during close quarters battle they may take a moment to use tactical breathing to lower their physical and mental intensity to the optimal level for performance. Stacked with fellow Soldiers on a wall outside the room — waiting for a signal from the leader to enter — a Soldier can take a moment to inhale and exhale in a controlled, deliberate manner. It is also possible to use tactical breathing in very small gaps in time during performance. An example from sport is the motocross athlete who takes just one deep, controlled, tactical breath while in air during the highest jump on a race track to relax and refocus on his tactics. Soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, after achieving a clinch with an opponent, could use tactical breathing very briefly to lower their extreme level of physical intensity and refocus mentally on the demands of their opponent.

Lesson Learned #3: Psychological factors are important for success in a hand-to-hand combat situation, especially the ability to control stress, remain confident, and be mentally tough. Mental skills training can be incorporated into combatives training to maximize the success of a Soldier who faces hand-to-hand combat on the battlefield.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

With only 27 instructors surveyed in this effort, these findings are limited and may not generalize to other combatives instructors. Despite limitations, three-quarters of the instructors had experience in combat operations and one-third had experience in hand-to-hand combat, which is encouraging. This study might serve as a model for future, larger efforts to examine the views of combatives instructors to obtain their combat feedback. Other studies might include surveying Soldiers about their experience using combatives skills during combat operations. There is some precedence for this type of study through the 900 interviews of Soldiers about their experiences of hand-to-hand combat collected by the U.S. Army Combatives School.⁴⁴ Further information and support for mental skills and training schedules is available from the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness program (CSF2) at www.csf2.army.mil or CSF2 sites located on U.S. Army installations.

Notes

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⁴ Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession," Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2015.

⁵ Peter R. Jensen and Craig A. Wrisberg, "Performance Under Acute Stress: A Qualitative Study of Soldiers' Experiences of Hand-to-Hand Combat," *International Journal of Stress Management* 21 (2014): 406-423.

⁶ Ibid; Peter R. Jensen and Greg Young, "Soldiers' Experiences of Training for Emergency Performance Situations," *Journal of Sport and Human Performance* 4 (2016): 1-15.

⁷ Standard deviation (SD) is a measure of how spread out numbers are from the average in a data set. Average age: SD = 7.66; average years of military service: SD = 6.36.

⁸ SD = 3.09.

⁹ Peter R. Jensen and Nate Zinsser, "Initiating Mental Skills Training With Tactical Athletes - Views of United States Army Hand-to-Hand Combat Instructors," *Tactical Strength and Conditioning Report* 44 (2017): 1-11.

¹⁰ SD = 44.88 hours.

¹¹ SD = 2.23.

¹² Automatic: M = 6.15, SD = 0.99; adaptable: M = 6.67, SD = 0.78.

¹³ M = 6.70, SD = 0.54.

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- ²⁵ Ibid.
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