



SQUAD OVERMATCH

Training Methodology Integrates Classroom, Virtual, and Live Training

MIKE CASEY

The air horn blares to signal the start of training. A sergeant shouts, “Lock and load.” The bolts of 10 M4s click. And the squad moves out.

It seems like a typical start to a training exercise, but this one was different. Soldiers with the 25th Infantry Division took part in a special exercise last August at Schofield Barracks, HI. It was the final pilot test for Squad Overmatch.

Squad Overmatch is a training methodology that integrates classroom teaching, virtual training, and live exercises to improve resilience, team development, battlefield medical skills, advanced situational awareness, and after action reviews (AARs). It stemmed from the Army’s effort to improve individual and unit performance, and help Soldiers cope with the stresses from combat and multiple deployments.

In 2013, the Program Executive Office for Simulation Training and Instrumentation (PEO STRI), the Maneuver Center of Excellence, and other organizations began work on Squad Overmatch. The program is funded by the Defense Health Agency. The 25th ID’s exercise was the fourth such event at Army and Marine Corps locations.

But before the Hawaiian exercise started, Squad Overmatch had to win over two doubters — the NCO and officer who were going to lead the event.

“I was skeptical about it,” SSG James Kinkead said.

“I never heard of it,” 2LT Bryton Vanderloop said.

Their misgivings were understandable, particularly considering their significant challenges. Soldiers in the exercise came from different units and had never trained with



Photos by Mike Casey

Soldiers question role players during a training exercise at Schofield Barracks, HI. The Soldiers used information from the role players to conduct patrols as part of a Squad Overmatch training exercise. The training helps the Army improve readiness and develop leaders.

each other. And Kinkead and Vanderloop, along with other instructors, had less than a week to meld the Soldiers into two effective teams. Yet, by week’s end both were impressed with the squads’ successful completion of their missions.

“When we started, we could see how much they were lacking as a team,” Kinkead said. “Then to see how well they performed in live training. That shows that Squad Overmatch works.”

“They came together and performed as an expert team,” said Vanderloop. “It was great to see.”

In the Classroom

Kinkead’s and Vanderloop’s journey from skeptics to believers started the week before the training kicked off.

That's when they and other 25th ID instructors reviewed Squad Overmatch's train-the-trainer package with videos, PowerPoint slides, training scenario outlines, and other resources to help them become expert instructors.

Both Kinkead and Vanderloop found the training package helpful as did other instructors, including SPC Cassie Matthews. She said the training package materials prepared her better for teaching Squad Overmatch than taking a class to learn the instruction process.

"I liked the various portals that allowed you to get additional information," she said. "One of the videos showed how another instructor had taught the course."

Yet, Squad Overmatch is not a course in a box. The 25th ID instructors used their own experiences in their lectures. In preparing to teach the resilience course, Matthews learned how self-talk helps Soldiers focus on mission-critical tasks when things go wrong. Self-talk uses positive thoughts and personal encouragement to manage stress.

During a lecture, Matthews, a medic, told the Soldiers that the weekend before the course started, she was in the field and had a problem finding a Soldier's vein for inserting an IV. Then she explained how self-talk helped her to calm herself and regain her confidence to successfully insert the IV.

"With some training, you wonder: 'Am I ever going to use this?'" she said. "Well, I did use this training."

Giving Soldiers the responsibility to lead the instruction program marked a change from previous exercises when a PEO STRI team essentially ran the training. COL Dan Irizarry of PEO STRI explained that Squad Overmatch's future success will rest on Soldiers becoming the instructors.

"We just can't rely on a cadre of outside instructors," he said. "We want to pass on the knowledge to a unit so they

can carry it forward. It's like teaching someone to fish rather than just giving them a fish."

Some of the classroom instruction consisted of standard PowerPoints and videos, but it also included hands-on training.

For the combat casualty care section, Soldiers left the classroom to improve their battlefield medical skills. Under palm trees, the Soldiers practiced putting a tourniquet on a mannequin that simulates blood loss. To stop the bleeding, Soldiers had to yank the tourniquet very tight.

PFC Lottie Hill said the training was better than previous combat medical care training.

"In the past, I put a tourniquet on battle buddies, but you can't tighten it enough as you would have to to stop the bleeding because it hurts them," she said. "Today's training was more realistic."

Virtual Team Building

One of the exercises' major challenges was creating a team from a bunch of Soldiers who didn't know each other. Both 10-Soldier squads were from the 65th Brigade Engineer Battalion (BEB) with one consisting of Soldiers with a mix of specialties and the other composed of sappers from three platoons. Yet, the teams coalesced quickly.

After the Soldiers finished their initial classroom instruction, they trained on Virtual Battlespace 3 (VBS3), a first-person gaming program that gave the squads the opportunity to practice for their live missions.

At the start of VBS3 training, SGT Connor Nelson, a squad leader, looked at a computer screen map for the upcoming mission and selected a casualty collection point. A medic squad member, SPC Sze Yeh, pointed out that the location didn't provide much cover. Nelson asked, "Where should it go?" Yeh pointed to the screen and Nelson agreed.

The two team leaders in the squad swiftly arranged their teams.

"Wedge formation. SAWs on the weak side."

"What's your weak side?" one team leader asked the other.

"Right."

"OK, mine's on the left."

During the virtual exercises, it took less than 30 minutes for the 20-something Soldiers to learn how to make their avatars run, jump, and shoot. Squad members communicated through headsets. The virtual training followed scenarios similar to the upcoming live exercises. The squads went to a fictitious Balkan village and met a friendly key leader who had information about insurgents terrorizing the town. Other Soldiers played the roles of villagers and terrorists, and they also had avatars in the virtual world.

During virtual training, the squad initially had problems coordinating maneuvers. One team was too far from the other team to provide support during a sniper attack. Following that misstep, the squad encountered the same problem. Nelson



A Soldier applies a tourniquet to a mannequin during Squad Overmatch training at Schofield Barracks.



A squad rehearses missions with Virtual Battlespace 3 as part of Squad Overmatch training.

halted the training. In an instant, the squad members' avatars returned to the starting point and this time moved out in proper order. The quick reset shows one of the strengths of virtual training. When things go wrong, it's easy to begin again as opposed to a time-consuming restart in a live exercise.

As part of Squad Overmatch's integrated approach, the virtual missions allowed Soldiers to practice the skills they learned in the classroom such as calling in a 9-line medical evacuation request or recognizing anomalies while on patrol.

Most important of all, the virtual training started turning a group of Soldiers into a squad.

"It helped us correct shortfalls in leadership and communication," Nelson said. "It helped us determine our roles and responsibilities."

Live Training

After two days in the classroom and the virtual world, the squads headed for Schofield Barracks' military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) site. Following the air horn blast, Soldiers advanced and took cover in the treeline to observe the village's market square, multi-story buildings, and shattered church.

In the market square, Soldiers played the roles of villagers, tending their stalls to serve food and sell trinkets. One Soldier played the role of the parish priest who had important information about the insurgents. After meeting with the priest, the squad members acted on the intelligence and continued their patrols.

In all, there were three training scenarios, and all of them could have resulted in a very bad day for an infantry squad. Each scenario tested the Soldiers' abilities to maintain the fight as Soldiers and civilians became casualties to improvised explosive devices (IEDs), snipers, and suicide bombers. And each successive mission amplified anxieties with more casualties and role players' shriller screams.

Yeh's heart beat quicker as the exercise's intensity

increased. "As a medic, it was more real than I expected, and it definitely raised my stress level," she said.

"It felt real," said Nelson who has deployed to Afghanistan. He added the role players' performances raised the exercise's authenticity.

The realistic performances arose from careful design. SGT Michael Phillips taught the advanced situational awareness portion of the course and spent a week preparing the role players. In the classroom, he instructed Soldiers to be aware of body language as tip-offs to possible dangers. Phillips coached the role

players so their nervous pacing or crossed arms at the MOUT site meshed with the classroom instruction.

The exercise also sparked spontaneous training. After finishing lunch in the field, Soldiers, without orders, practiced clearing an imaginary room. A private first class told two other privates: "You go right. You go left. I got the center. Go." After clearing the room, the Soldiers did it again, and again, and again, and again.

Vanderloop, the lieutenant in charge of the exercise, was impressed with the Soldiers' attention to the unscheduled training.

"It was a direct reflection of what they discussed in an AAR," he said. "They recognized a need to do additional training, and they were proactive."

Vanderloop said Squad Overmatch's integrating training in the classroom, virtual environment, and live exercise produced improvements in the squad's resilience, team development, battlefield medical skills, advanced situational awareness, and AARs.

"From just classroom instruction, the Soldiers probably understood 10 percent of the content," he said. "But through the entire training, they were able to connect the dots." And the improvements showed up in the AARs.

AARs

After each mission, the squads participated in an AAR with the instructors asking open-ended questions to help the Soldiers recognize their errors and discover how to correct them.

For example, one Soldier was wounded and his battle casualty card said he could treat himself, but one of his team members ran to help him without first asking about the seriousness of the wound — something that the Soldiers had been taught in the classroom. An instructor asked the Soldier who administered first aid about the consequences of him providing assistance when it wasn't necessary. "It

reduced our fire superiority,” the Soldier replied.

In a following exercise, a sniper wounded a Soldier, and squad members asked the wounded Soldier if he could treat himself. The wounded Soldier said he could, and the other Soldiers held their positions and resumed firing at the sniper.

The instructors also benefited from the AARs.

“How I’m used to doing AARs is to ask: What was supposed to happen? What did happen? How can we improve?” said Kinkead, the NCO in charge of the training.

The Squad Overmatch philosophy is to look beyond what happened and learn why it happened.

“Now we’re asking these questions: What was your behavior? What were you doing as a team? How were you communicating?” Kinkead said. “When we asked these questions, we saw improvement happen in the team. Not only were they more effective, the improvement happened much faster.”

25th ID Reaction

The results of the Squad Overmatch training impressed Schofield Barracks leaders.

“It helps us to improve our readiness to fight tonight,” said LTC James Krueger, commander of the 65th BEB. He said he anticipates conducting similar training with other unit members.

COL (P) Johnny Davis, the 25th ID’s deputy commander

for operations, was impressed with what he saw.

“Today, I witnessed the advancement and growth of a squad as they negotiated multiple live-training scenarios across a multitude of warrior skills,” he said. “These are exactly the skillsets we need to improve readiness and unit cohesion within today’s complex environment.”

He added, “Any time you are able to combine virtual training with live training exercises focused on developing physiological, cognitive, and leadership skills to improve warfighter performance, you maximize the ability to generate readiness across squads and platoons.”

Prior to the Schofield Barracks exercise, a study showed Squad Overmatch’s benefits. The 2016 scientific report found improvements of 26 percent to 43 percent in the areas of team building, advanced situational awareness, and the conduct of AARs and tactical combat casualty care.

Squad Overmatch’s future

The Schofield Barracks exercise followed ones at Fort Benning, GA; Camp Buehring, Kuwait; and Camp Lejeune, NC. With each exercise, the PEO STRI team responsible for Squad Overmatch improved the train-the-trainer package that contains the course outlines, scenarios, role players’ descriptions, and other training materials.

“It prepares unit instructors to develop Soldiers into high-performing teams. It also develops leadership skills for the NCO and platoon leaders to plan and conduct effective training that meets collective and individual skill requirements,” said Rob Wolf, the Squad Overmatch program manager.

Wolf said his team is continuing to make improvements to the program and will focus on enhancing the resilience skills in 2018 by working with the Army Resiliency Directorate and Walter Reed Army Institute of Research.

Units interested in Squad Overmatch training can contact Wolf at (407) 384-5233.

(Mike Casey serves as the public affairs officer for the Combined Arms Center-Training at Fort Leavenworth, KS.)

A squad patrols the MOUT site at Schofield Barracks as part of Squad Overmatch training. Soldiers played the roles of villagers, key leaders, and insurgents in the exercise. Role players practiced for a week to add realism to the exercise.

