

Building a Unit Combatives Program

MAJ ROBERT M. SQUIER

In June of 1744, the College of William and Mary invited the Native Americans of the Six Nations to send 12 of their young men to their institution to receive a civilized education. The offer was intended to bridge the gap between the Europeans and the Native Americans in hope of assimilating the tribes into the growing colonial population. The following is the reply received from the chiefs of the Six Nations:

Sirs,

We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in Colleges, and that the maintenance of our young Men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinc'd, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some experience of it. Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the College of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger; knew neither how to build a cabin or take a deer; or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less oblig'd by your kind offer; tho' we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.¹

The tribal leaders knew that training methods influence training outcomes. The life skills that their warrior culture demanded could not be instilled through academics; the young braves had to experience challenges, endure hardship, and overcome obstacles. The old chiefs knew that warriors are not built in a classroom. Today, that reality is unchanged. As we pursue lethality and readiness as a force, we must remember that these characteristics



Soldiers engage in a double ankle lock during the Fort Bragg Combatives Tournament on 29 August 2019.
(Photo by SGT Brian Micheliche)

begin with an individual who internalizes the Warrior Ethos and commits to developing a skill set and a mindset that is combat ready.

The Army Vision Statement lays out an impressive image of a force that is modernized, integrated, and agile; however, the phrase that most caught my attention was that this effort is “centered on exceptional leaders and Soldiers of unmatched lethality.”² Lethality is improved in two ways: better training or better tools. Too often we gravitate towards spending money on technological tools rather improving our training. As an example, the 2019 Army Modernization Strategy projects spending more than \$6 billion just on the “Soldier Lethality” modernization priority over the next five years.³ However, I believe that our first and most important step in developing “Soldiers of unmatched lethality” is to begin by training the warrior mindset. Training Circular (TC) 3-25.150, *Combatives*, states that “the defining characteristic of a warrior is the willingness to close with the enemy.”⁴ The willingness to assault through the breach, go through the door, or push through a close ambush defines the warrior mindset. This mindset must be trained if we are serious about producing Soldiers of unmatched lethality. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery once said that “of all the factors, which make for success in battle, the spirit of the warrior is the most decisive.”⁵ Lethality begins in the mind that internalizes the warrior mindset; this mindset is empowered through a well-trained physical body and then magnified with weapons. If we can develop a weapons chassis (Soldier) that is inherently lethal, then any tool (weapon) that the Army provides becomes a force multiplier. The best training tool that leaders have to develop these attributes in their formations is the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP).

MACP Purpose

The MACP is carefully constructed to address two critical training objectives: skill-set training and mindset training. Skill-set training is necessary because we have a real need to learn realistic, combat-proven techniques that work on the modern battlefield. Our hand-to-hand skills must be grounded in the reality of the battlefield — not sport or classic martial arts requirements. This means our program must be well rounded and address all elements of the fight (striking, grappling, clinch fighting, weapons, etc.). Secondly and perhaps more importantly, our program must develop the mindset of a warrior within our Soldiers. This is accomplished by carefully choosing a training method that requires Soldiers to face their fears and overcome stressful situations. Like the tribal chiefs in our example, we must realize that developing warriors is not an academic exercise; it requires Soldiers to overcome fear through physical challenges to gain the confidence they need to succeed on the modern battlefield.

The purpose of a unit combatives program is ultimately derived from our understanding of what it means to be a Soldier and a member of a warrior profession. The U.S. Army’s mission is to “fight and win our nation’s wars by providing prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of combatant commanders.”⁶ The phrase “sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations” describes a fighting force that is capable of victory in any phase of land combat. This spans the spectrum of conflict from long-range precision fires to subterranean warfare in dense urban terrain. Units that ignore any of these phases of the fight are unprepared for the full range of military operations. Increasingly there is a belief that technology will lead to a form of warfare that is more remote; while this is partly true, current conflicts have shown that the increasingly urban landscape will place combatants in closely confined battlespaces that require skills in the hand-to-hand range of the fight. At its core, warfare is a fierce and destructive interaction between humans; this truth remains unchanged despite the changing technology of war. The spirit of the Soldier to engage and win this fight is most effectively trained in the hand-to-hand phase of combat because it is here that this violent interaction is most intense and personal.⁷

MACP Warrior Skill-Set Development

To better understand how the MACP develops fighting skills, it is worth taking a moment to discuss the motor learning process. Motor learning describes the process of how humans learn new physical skills. This process is broken down into three stages: cognitive, associative, and autonomous.⁸ The cognitive stage of learning describes how Soldiers intellectually learn what they are to do to accomplish the task. This stage requires significant guidance, instruction, and feedback as Soldiers learn how to perform the technique correctly.

The second stage of motor learning is the associative stage. In this stage Soldiers understand the movement but still must consciously think about performance. There is less verbal input, but this stage is characterized by constant adjustments, awkward movements, and slow task completion. During the associative stage, Soldiers are working



A Soldier from the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division demonstrates grappling techniques at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, AK, on 6 February 2020. (Photo by Justin Connaher)

to string together the steps learned in the cognitive stage and make them smooth and fluid. This stage is where the most time must be spent to master a skill.

Finally, we come to the autonomous stage of motor learning. This stage describes Soldiers who no longer consciously think about the skill; they merely react to a stimulus and their body responds with little processing required. Consider point guards on a basketball team, when they are running up the court on a fast break they do not have to give any conscious thought to dribbling the basketball — their minds are occupied with the tactics of the game, not the mechanics. This is the level of basic fighting skill that we need from our Soldiers. We need them to think tactically during the fight, not be completely preoccupied with survival. This means that our training programs must account for the thousands of repetitions needed to build this competency. Learning to fight is a process not an event, and our training must take this into consideration if we hope to build long-term competence.

The MACP address all three stages of motor learning through instruction, drills, and sparring. Basic instruction in any technique must be taught to address the cognitive stage of learning. However, this does not need to be a full day of training or attending a Basic Combatives Course (BCC — previously known as Level 1 Combatives). Soldiers can begin participating in drills and positional sparring with a foundation of four or five techniques. These can easily be taught in an hour. Once the Soldier understands the technique and moves on to the associative stage of learning, leaders need a mechanism to accumulate the thousands of repetitions necessary to achieve mastery. MACP addresses this problem through a drill-based learning format. The creatively named “Drills 1, 2, and 3” provide a framework for training. Each drill is cyclical in that it progresses through a series of dominant body positions until the training partners’ original positions are reversed, allowing each to train the same sequence without ever having to reset positions. This makes for very efficient use of training time, and it subconsciously emphasizes a sense of objective while fighting. These drills make it a simple matter to accumulate repetitions in a safe and efficient manner and can easily be modified to accommodate new techniques. Lastly, MACP trains the autonomous stage of learning through live sparring. As Soldiers’ technique improves, they must test their learning in a simulated “real” fight against a fully resistant opponent. This is the phase of learning where a Soldier learns to constantly problem solve and recognize opportunities provided by the opponent. As skill improves, their response to their opponent will become automatic.

MACP Warrior Mindset Development

The motor learning process and the MACP drill-based approach show leaders how to address the skill-set training

necessary for developing a combatives program. The mindset must be taught through live sparring. Drill-based training for fighting will never train the warrior mindset because it does not induce fear; everything is scripted and predictable. Full-speed training against a resisting opponent is stressful. The first time you are trapped beneath an opponent or caught in a submission, you must fight through your initial urge to panic, remain calm, and work through the problem. This is exactly the thinking process that we must instill in our Soldiers for the tactical fight. I do not know of any other training method that is as effective for training the portion of the fight that “happens between the ears.” Aristotle believed that courage is developed by routinely performing courageous acts, and research supports that courage is a learned habit developed through practice.⁹ It is easy to assault through a close ambush in training when you know the enemy is only shooting blanks; when real bullets are flying, the body’s natural biological response is to run. This response is only overcome through training that forces Soldiers to overcome fear and teaches them that the only way to win is to aggressively close with the enemy and gain control. Combatives teaches Soldiers the lesson that you cannot quit in a fight; all that does is make it easy for your opponent to dominate you.

MACP Program Design

If we accept that combatives training is valuable both for developing a useful tactical skill set and a warrior mindset, the question then becomes: “How do I fit this into a packed training schedule?” Commanders evaluate training priorities through the rubric of available training time, resources available, and impacts on Soldier readiness. Stated another way, commanders want to know: “Do I have time for this training, how much will it cost, and what is the level of risk?” A well-developed combatives training plan must address these concerns and avoid terminating training events. Terminating training describes a training event that does not account for follow-on training. Commanders often assign one day on the training calendar to focus on combatives or attempt to certify the entire unit in the Basic Combatives Course without a follow-on training plan. These approaches will fail because terminating training events ignore the reality of the process by which Soldiers learn physical skills. The stages of psycho-motor learning must be addressed in the training of physical skills to achieve a lasting effect.

To successfully build a unit combatives program that achieves lasting proficiency and addresses commander’s concerns, leaders must do three things:

- 1. Establish a unit culture that values fighting ability;**
- 2. Integrate combatives training into physical readiness training (PRT); and**
- 3. Integrate combatives training into existing tactical training events.**

Unit culture is established by the commander’s priorities. Commanders communicate their priorities by what they routinely inspect or require their Soldiers to do. A culture that values fighting ability is created through unit competitions and incentivizing performance. Competitions must be held routinely and can be formal or informal. Formal competitions consist of organized tournaments with recognized unit champions. These are valuable for inspiring excellence and raising the level of performance within the organization. Informal competitions can happen at any time; this is the routine sparring that happens as a part of training. This informal competition builds basic competence because all Soldiers are required to participate, and substandard Soldiers are quickly revealed and forced to improve or risk losing respect. Lastly, commanders can communicate their focus by incentivizing performance through recognition, rewards, or schooling opportunities. The Basic Combatives Course and the Tactical Combatives Course are offered at every Army installation. Leaders can encourage units to send NCOs to the Combatives Master Trainer Course at Fort Benning, GA, to further aid their program and build greater expertise within the system. Emphasizing these opportunities and committing to training junior leaders communicate the commander’s focus.

Secondly, the primary place to integrate combatives training is into PRT. This ensures that it can be done routinely and that it will not steal time from other training. The drill-based approach of MACP makes it very easy to integrate into a PRT workout. The combatives drills could be used as part of the morning warm-up before the primary workout or integrate sparring or punching bags into a circuit workout. The training takes very little time; why not finish off your five-mile run with three two-minute rounds of sparring? It is a great workout and you are training Soldiers to be ready to fight once they reach an objective.

The point is that combatives training is a perishable skill. To keep the skills fresh, it is better for Soldiers to do a little

bit every day or every week instead of a single-day training event once every six months. It reduces the impact on other training, reduces the risks of injuries, and builds better long-term proficiency. Another common approach to combatives training is to dedicate an entire PRT session to combatives on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, this approach has some drawbacks that make it difficult to sustain. First, it is difficult to make the session truly PRT focused. To fill 90 minutes of training time will likely require significant instruction time. This is time that is largely not beneficial for improving physical performance, so it undermines the PRT program. Secondly, in order to feel like they gave the Soldiers a good workout, leaders often resort to long sparring sessions at the end of training. While this is a smoker, it also poses an increased risk of injury, especially in the early stages of training. The better approach is to integrate elements of combatives training into the existing PRT training plan as warm-up drills, portions of circuits, or to cap off other workout elements.

Next, the basic skills acquired during PRT training must be placed in the battlefield context. Combatives training should be incorporated into any scenario-based training event. Stand-alone, combatives-focused scenario training is impractical because of the amount of resources required to train an individual skill. Combatives training must be integrated into collective training events. Basic room clearing is an easy scenario to envision. Commanders are not being honest about their training status if they state that their unit is “trained” at room clearing without evaluating Soldiers’ ability to physically control a combatant in the room. Commanders can place an unarmed combatant in an impact reduction suit in the room and force Soldiers to gain control over this attacker using combatives techniques. Detainee operations, search procedures, cuffing techniques, checkpoint operations, vehicle extractions — all these training events require Soldiers to control personnel without using lethal force. This is the domain of the combatives program, and it is the opportunity for commanders to build the bridge between the skills developed during PRT and the tactical fight. In my opinion, it is a moral failure if commanders ignore the need to train on personnel control techniques that cover the contingencies between willing compliance and the use of lethal force. Basic combatives techniques give Soldiers the skill set and confidence to control ambiguous situations without resorting to vicious beatings or lethal force unless absolutely necessary.



Paratroopers assigned to 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, put their combatives training to use during an exercise in Italy on 26 September 2017. (Photo by Paolo Bovo)

MACP Risk Mitigation

Finally, I will address how leaders can manage risk within the combatives program. Often the biggest challenge to combatives training is the perception that it is somehow extremely high risk. The reality is that more injuries happen during unit sports and standard PRT than happen in the combatives program. The leading cause of non-combat related medical evacuations from Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2013 was sports/physical training.¹⁰ Here in the Department of Physical Education at the U.S. Military Academy, we train more than 4,000 Cadets per year in a series of five core physical activity classes that includes combatives. Survival swimming is the only course that has a lower injury rate than combatives.¹¹ Our injury rate is below three percent in a course that requires Cadets to fight in most of their training sessions.

As in any training event, leaders must learn to manage risk and train safely. Combatives injuries are primarily caused by exuberance and ignorance. Unskilled, excited fighters in a competitive environment either get hurt or hurt other people. Leaders can mitigate these risks by limiting the amount of sparring until a Soldier attains some basic skill and familiarity with the techniques. A good guideline is to prevent Soldiers from sparring until they can demonstrate proficiency in the basic positional drills. This eliminates the misguided approach of many junior leaders of teaching two or three techniques and then staging a platoon tournament. Sparring sessions should be short and can be constrained to make them safer (fight for dominant positions not submissions, start in a position on the ground [mount, guard, etc.] instead of standing or neutral). Leaders should emphasize the drilling portions of training over sparring initially, then slowly add in the intensity. Lastly, the atmosphere around training must emphasize team improvement over personal ego. Leaders must reinforce good training partner behavior by establishing expectations before training and controlling the environment during training.

MACP and Leadership

A last obstacle to effective training that must be addressed is the ego of the leader. Often unit combatives programs die in their infancy because leaders know that they must participate, and they are afraid of being embarrassed. Leaders will default to several common excuses to avoid training: "It's too dangerous," "We don't have the certified personnel," "I'm not combat arms," or the ever popular, "I would just shoot you." It is important to understand that none of these excuses are grounded in reality; they are contrived to protect the self-esteem of the leader and reveal that the leader does not truly have the Warrior Ethos. It is impossible to make a cogent argument for the position that it is not important for U.S. Army Soldiers to know how to fight. And yet, units routinely shut down combatives programs for any of the excuses previously mentioned. This is a formidable and well-entrenched problem. Leaders must address this obstacle by first recognizing the excuses for what they are and offering well-planned training solutions that address the concerns. This returns to step one of building a successful program: Establish a unit culture that values fighting ability. Leaders must realize that losing a fight does not undermine their credibility as a leader; refusing to fight undermines their credibility as a leader because it demonstrates the lack of commitment to developing the Warrior Ethos both personally and within the organization. Soldiers do not expect leaders to be the best at every Soldier skill, but they do expect them to be competent and resilient.

Unit combatives training is a tool that commanders at all levels can leverage to impact the culture of their organization. Combatives provides a realistic skill set that is increasingly relevant in the modern close quarter battle that requires judicious application of lethal force. Even more importantly, combatives training builds the warrior mindset in a way that few training events can.

Notes

¹ Andrew Carroll, *Letters of a Nation* (NY: Broadway Books, 1999).

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³ Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Army 'Big Six' Ramp Up in 2021: Learning From FCS," *Breaking Defense*, 14 March 2019, retrieved from <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/03/army-big-six-ramp-up-in-2021-learning-from-fcs/>. "2019 Army Modernization Strategy: Investing in the Future," retrieved from https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/2019_army_modernization_strategy_final.pdf.

⁴ Training Circular 3-25.150, *Combatives*, March 2017.

⁵ Bernard Montgomery, "Bernard Montgomery War Speech, Maroon Beret, D-Day," retrieved from <https://>

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⁶ Milley and Esper, "The Army Vision."

⁷ "Why the British Army Needs a Combatives System," Wavell Room, 9 February 2019, retrieved from <https://wavellroom.com/2018/02/09/why-the-british-army-needs-a-combatives-system/>.

⁸ Jeffrey Huber, "Understanding Motor Learning Stages Improves Skill Instruction," an excerpt from "Applying Educational Psychology in Coaching Athletes," Human Kinetics, retrieved from <https://us.humankinetics.com/blogs/excerpt/understanding-motor-learning-stages-improves-skill-instruction>.

⁹ Department of Physical Education (DPE), U.S. Military Academy, "Preparing Tomorrow's Leaders to Meet the Physical Demands of the Army," *Operational Concept for the Physical Domain* (2010). G.F. Cavanagh and D.J. Moberg, "The Virture of Courage Within the Organization," *Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations* (1999): 1-25.

¹⁰ Avni A. Patel, Keith G. Hauret, Bonnie J. Taylor, and Bruce H. Jones, "Non-Battle Injuries Among U.S. Army Soldiers Deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001-2013," *Journal of Safety Research* 60 (February 2017): 29-34.

¹¹ J. Palmer, "DPE Annual Injury Report," West Point: Department of Physical Education, 2019.

MAJ Rob Squier most recently served as the executive officer for the Department of Physical Education (DPE) at the United States Military Academy at West Point, NY. He is an Army combatives master trainer and the senior military combatives instructor in DPE. MAJ Squier has a master's degree in kinesiology from the University of Virginia and combat leadership experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan.