

If the Infantry Were a Football Team, Would It Win a Game?

Ways to Increase Access to Training Resources and Prioritize Training Time

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Imagine you're the new coach of an elite football team. You know you must win games and decide that the best way to win is to develop a highly trained team capable of defeating its opponents. You're eager to kick off the season with practice. Despite your zeal to train your team, you run into obstacles. Before you schedule practice, the team owner must approve of the practice schedule weeks in advance. Before you use the field created for your team, you must receive permission from the field manager. Before your players can use the pads, jerseys, and other equipment purchased for them, you must receive permission from the equipment manager. The physical trainer must also be on site to provide medical coverage. If any one permission is not gained weeks prior, practice will be cancelled.

Additionally, you're greatly frustrated that a significant percentage of your team changes as the season goes on. The team you started with looks nothing like the team you ended with. The revolving door of players and coaches unraveled your efforts to build a highly trained and cohesive team. In the middle of the season, you lost your defensive coordinator and gained a new one. You think to yourself, "what is the point of trying to build team unity with a team that morphs so rapidly?"

At the end of the season, how many games do you think you could win in these conditions?

Elite football teams do not train this way. Organizations make it easy for their teams to train by empowering their coaches to organize training without micromanagement from the top — and without needing permission from supporting managers. Additionally, the core of their team remains together throughout the season, with few exceptions, as trades and changes generally happen in the off-season.

Now imagine you're a new company commander eager to begin command. Your commander tasks you to develop a highly trained company capable of winning on the battlefield. Like the coach, you run into obstacles. You may not be able to easily acquire resources for your training plan. All your requests must be approved by echelons much higher than your position weeks in advance. Range Branch must approve your use of the land, and before you can use your vehicles (your property), battalion mechanics must approve the request. You also may not have easy access to the ammunition necessary to train. On top of that, as you lead your company from team live-fire to company live-fire exercises, the manning of your unit may change. In addition to lower ranked Soldiers leaving, some of your team leaders, squad leaders, and even a platoon leader or platoon sergeant may change. Even though you receive Soldiers to replace them, unit cohesion and mutual trust may not fully materialize due to the fluidity of your company.

Unfortunately, some junior officers may struggle to sufficiently train their units due to the difficult processes in place to resource and schedule training as well as their inability to maintain unit integrity and cohesion.¹ These are problems that can be fixed. In this article, I will discuss these two challenges and then offer solutions that both resolve these issues and adhere to Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, and FM 6-22, *Developing Leaders*.

"The Army trains to fight and win — it is what we do..."² Fighting and winning our nation's wars is our top priority, and training is the principal means to achieve this end. You would be hard pressed to find any lieutenant colonels and above or command sergeants major professing that they want to interrupt or block small unit training. They actively and openly encourage it.³ You would also find it difficult to discover any junior leaders and lower enlisted who do not want more training to become experts in their craft. Because Soldiers at both the top and the bottom want the same thing and Army doctrine declares training a top priority, one would assume that training would be

conducted as frequently as desired. Sadly, this may not always be the case.⁴ There is often a disconnect between the training circumstances we desire and what is happening on the ground. Why is that? There are often too many obstacles between Soldiers and their resources, and units can morph too frequently.

Challenge 1: Training Resources

The current process to get Soldiers their resources is often burdensome.⁵ For example, there are approximately 11 levels of permission that company leadership must obtain before they can train any of their sub-units.⁶ All permissions must be granted on time, and mostly in order, for the training to occur. If even one permission falls through, whether due to purposeful rejection or accidental negligence, that training is not executed. This process can restrict the amount of training opportunities conducted.⁷

The time requirement can also impact small unit training. For example, securing land resources such as training areas (TA), ranges, and the Engagement Skills Trainer (EST) must typically be completed four weeks in advance. Any request made within the four-week window requires additional memorandums and justifications explaining why training was not planned further out. This stigmatizes requesting training resources within that window.⁸ By essentially denying short-range training opportunities, small units can lose out on potential training time.

I personally experienced this obstacle preventing training. As a platoon leader, I found that an EST bay was open for the following week. I wanted my platoon to practice shooting and simulations at the EST because we had available time (white space). In order to do this, I needed to coordinate through my executive officer (XO) with leadership at much higher echelons and obtain additional memorandums because I had requested outside the standard time requirement. Despite my persistent efforts, the paperwork died somewhere in the process. The day of desired training came and went, and the EST went unused. Too many barriers between myself and an available resource prevented training. It made me doubt the utility of trying to organize white-space training with available resources because the process can be too difficult with almost no payoff. Would this situation have ended differently if I had been able to directly coordinate with the EST?

This scenario probably repeats frequently. There are many unused and unclaimed land resources available each week.⁹ Even though higher echelon leaders want small unit leaders to train, small unit leaders want to train, and there are many available land resources to use, units still may struggle to train while resources go unused.

If junior leaders are unable to access resources to train their units, by default, that unit only trains when they certify as a unit during their situational training exercises (STXs) and live-fire exercises (LFXs). What does this mean in practice then? Units are getting minimal repetitions training as a unit, which is insufficient. By only performing the required training found in a typical training cycle of 6-9 months, a fire team will conduct 36 repetitions oper-



Soldiers conduct training using the Engagement Skills Trainer II at the Panzer Range Complex in Germany. (Photo by Martin Greeson)

ating as a team, or 4-6 repetitions per month respectively. Infantry squads conduct 27 total repetitions operating as a squad, or 3-4.5 repetitions per month; platoons conduct 18 total repetitions as a platoon, or 2-3 per month; and companies conduct 9 total repetitions as a company, or 1-1.5 per month.¹⁰ If units only train together during required certification, then they only train a few times each month. Imagine your football team trying to win games by practicing their offensive plays only a few times a month.

Too many obstacles between Soldiers and their training resources can artificially limit training opportunities, which dulls lethality. Must there really be that many barriers to accomplish the Infantryman's main purpose? Are all these permissions necessary, or could we safely reduce the number? I believe this is the case, and I will discuss this more later in this article. But first, let's examine a second obstacle to lethal units — fluid units.

Challenge 2: Personnel Turbulence

Assuming that a unit trains as frequently and easily as it should, a change in personnel could erode the gains made by that unit. As a unit trains together, it becomes more cohesive. Soldiers build trust and learn each other's tendencies and reactions. Eventually they become proficient in intercommunication, whether verbal or non-verbal, and develop trust. When Soldiers leave and new ones arrive, the unit is essentially new and must rebuild what was lost. This occurs naturally for all teams. However, if the turnover is more rapid than the ability to train, unit training may become almost pointless. The revolving door of Soldiers entering and exiting can impede small units from achieving meaningful cohesion and advanced training.¹¹

This steady trickle is largely due to drastically different timelines of individual Soldiers, which require permanent changes of station (PCS), changes of duty, expiration terms of service (ETS), taskings, etc. While leaders do not try to change the composition of their units during training, external requirements sometimes force these changes, and leaders are left reacting. Fluid units undercut lethality. Imagine a football team trading their quarterback every week and what problems that would pose for their offense and team cohesion.

Solutions

The dual challenges of inaccessible resources and fluid units may prevent infantry units from executing and fully benefitting from their training. Here, I will propose solutions aligned with Army doctrine that I believe would allow infantry units to become more lethal and preserve combat power. There are both immediate and long-term actions that commanders can take for both problems. I will first offer the immediate solutions commanders can implement and then the long-term solutions.

There are actions that installation senior leaders could take to improve training. As previously noted, a number of training resources may go unused every week because of the four-week time requirement. Allow platoon leaders, squad leaders, and team leaders to conduct "white-space" training on short notice on these land resources. This can be done by authorizing company commanders (and delegatory authority to an XO) to acquire available land resources with range branch, rather than needing a higher echelon to schedule land use in the advance window. Ensure range branch's role is providing coordination and not giving permission. The risk is low, especially if there is no ammunition, and units could conduct quality training such as practicing their standard operating procedures, training as units in real environments, using range targets to work on battle drills, achieving "maximum 'repetitions' to sustain proficiency over time," executing "more complex collective tasks," and avoiding "task atrophy."¹² Make available land assets easily accessible to small unit leaders.

In the short term, concerning fluid units, the most obvious remedy is for leaders to look at probable timelines for their Soldiers and assign roles and responsibilities as best they can. More importantly, higher units, particularly battalions and brigades, must fulfill taskings in a predictable manner.¹³ Higher units can destroy training opportunities through taskings. Tasking Soldiers to details in a predictable manner (such as duty weeks) and resisting the "hey you" mentality will allow junior leaders the time and predictability needed to accomplish their first task and purpose: close with and destroy the enemy.¹⁴

Additionally, leaders must implement, protect, and expand "sergeant's time training," which is "training time set aside by unit commanders for unit NCOs to train their Soldiers in specified tasks and skills."¹⁵ By vigorously protect-



Soldiers assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division receive a class on the M120 mortar system as part of sergeant's time training. (Photo by SSG Armando R. Limon)

ing the doctrinally prescribed sergeant's time training, and possibly expanding it to team leaders and platoon leaders, unit training can occur more frequently. Connecting units with the available land resources and protecting and prioritizing training time will increase the frequency and repetitions of their training.

In the long term, senior leaders on an installation should implement a training process where company commanders possess more authorization to resource training. Company commanders should be able to schedule land directly with range branch and draw from an ammunition allocation.¹⁶ If "70-80 percent of training should occur at platoon level and below," then that makes company commanders "the primary trainers of their elements," who are "responsible for assessing unit training proficiency and prioritizing unit training."¹⁷ Therefore, the Army should empower company commanders with easy, direct access to training resources. Company commanders are the commanders closest to individual Soldiers. They possess the authority of an officer and commander and can assume risk. Placing authorization to resource training at this level uses the principle of command and control and significantly reduces the levels of permission needed to train. This moves resources closer to Soldiers while maintaining command and control of training assets, and it also balances risk mitigation.¹⁸

This process should include giving company commanders direct and unimpeded access to their own property. For instance, to use and shoot 60mm mortars, the battalion commander may have to sign the risk assessment. The 60mm mortar is an asset given and used at company commanders' discretion. It is their property — part of their unit. The same is true for vehicles. Vehicles are company commanders' property, but their use can be denied by battalion mechanics. Company commanders should be authorized to use their vehicles without the dispatch process if they want to assume that risk. I do not believe that many commanders would ever do this, but it keeps their property under their control.¹⁹

As for fluid teams, the long-term solution is to align Soldier movement with training cycles.²⁰ Zealously protecting a unit during its training cycle is paramount to seeing the fruit of quality unit training. The Army Marketplace for officers is a step in the right direction to make movement cycles more predictable; perhaps extending similar programs all the way to lower enlisted, or simply having movement cycles for enlisted Soldiers, may stabilize units and help preserve unit integrity and gains made during training. A detailed Soldier movement program is beyond the scope of this article, but synchronizing Soldier movement and training cycles is a goal worth pursuing.

Conclusion

The challenges of our current training culture are highlighted in the example of a football team. The resources are often barricaded behind permissions to the point that it may artificially limit training opportunities. In addition, units may change too frequently to fully realize gains from unit training. No successful team would choose to train this way, and we should not choose to train this way either.

FM 7-0 and FM 6-22 contain cures to our training ills. For us leaders, and particularly commanders, it gives the following directive: "It is a commander's duty to fight through distractions and protect training. It is the higher echelon commander's responsibility to defend their subordinate organization's approved training from unfore-casted requirements and to underwrite associated risk to lower priority missions. Regardless of the quality of planning and preparation, there will be challenges to the execution of training. The fight to train ethic separates great trainers and units from the others."²¹ To be great trainers, I recommend authorizing company commanders to access training resources directly, cutting down on the number of permissions required to train, zealously preserving units, and ceasing to dismember units through details and taskings. If we allow the Infantry to train, we will expertly fulfill our task and purpose with unmatched lethality and win our nation's wars by closing with and destroying the enemy.

Notes

¹ In preparation for this article, I polled 104 junior officers (first lieutenant through captain) from three classes of the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC). Those polled identified the top four reasons preventing them from training as follows: "higher unit taskings," "Soldiers pulled away for other things" (i.e., unable to maintain unit integrity), "lack of resources," and "not having the ability to resource my own training" (i.e., difficulty resourcing and scheduling training). I polled this demographic because these ranks are tasked by commanders to do the leg work for scheduling and resourcing. They make the products, request the necessary signatures and permissions, submit range packets to range branch, and are usually the OICs during training. They are part of training from start to finish, are often the most involved with the process, and have a good sense of what works and what does not. A copy of the poll is on file with *Infantry* (usarmy.moore.tradoc.mbx.infantry-magazine@army.mil).

² Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, 1-1.

³ Ibid, 3-4.

⁴ Fifty-eight percent of junior officers polled did not agree that the Army prioritizes training in garrison, and only 0.9 percent said that there were no obstacles preventing them from training more.

⁵ Sixty-one percent of junior officers polled described the process to resource and schedule training as either "difficult" or "very difficult."

⁶ Example permissions:

Acquire Land and Ammo:

Company -> Battalion Land and Ammo

Battalion Land and Ammo -> Brigade Land and Ammo

Brigade Land and Ammo -> Division Land and Ammo (or equivalent)

(Once for Land, and Once for Ammo) = 6 permissions

Dispatch Process:

Company -> Mechanics

Mechanics -> Company Executive Officer

Company approval = 3 permissions

Range Branch Packet Approval:

Company -> Battalion for Deliberate Risk Assessment

Company -> Range Branch for Range Packet = 2 permissions

⁷ According to my poll, most squads and teams had two or fewer days in a standard week to conduct MOS-specific, tactical training, and a large percentage of platoons were unable to find more than two opportunities to work on platoon tactics outside of a field training exercise (FTX), STX, or LFX during a training cycle.

⁸ For example, the language used in FM 7-0, 3-7, declares that changes to training within the four-week window shows a lack of leadership.

⁹ I pulled information from the Range Facility Management Support System for multiple infantry installations and

counted the number of available land resources within the four-week window. While I cannot give exact numbers or percentages due to confidentiality, a sizable number and percentage of training areas, ranges, and ESTs go unused each week.

¹⁰ This assumes twice-a-day repetitions and one night repetition for an STX, and three repetitions for day and night each for an LFX (dry, blank, live, day and night for a total of six). A training unit then receives nine repetitions with STX (three) and LFX (six) training. This set of nine repetitions repeats for each unit training at echelon. For example, a squad will perform their nine repetitions from their STX and LFX and repeat unit training for both platoon and company STX and LFX (two more sets).

¹¹ Seventy-seven percent of junior officers polled believe that this constant flow harms their units.

¹² FM 7-0, 3-4, C-1, 1-3.

¹³ The top two polled reasons junior officers could not train more is because higher echelons pulled their Soldiers to fulfill taskings, often for last minute or same-day details.

¹⁴ If S3s disperse the task evenly across the battalion, then they are pulling Soldiers from many squads. Now, many squads are missing Soldiers and cannot train as a squad. However, if the designated unit on duty takes the tasking that week, then the rest of the squads are intact and can train as a squad.

¹⁵ FM 7-0, 4-4.

¹⁶ Seventy-eight percent of junior officers polled prefer this method.

¹⁷ FM 7-0, 3-3, 1-2.

¹⁸ Ibid, 3-4.

¹⁹ This would mainly be used for those times when the dispatch process is taking too long and possibly jeopardizing training. It would be unwise, and not recommended, to use this authorization to override a denied vehicle which possesses a hazard to Soldiers.

²⁰ Move Soldiers during the Red Cycle (FM 7-0, 3-3, 3-5). Seventy percent of junior officers polled prefer that their platoon remain “frozen,” or the same, throughout the duration of the training cycle.

²¹ FM 7-0, 1-4.

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