

Training the Fundamentals in Basic Combat Training

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“Soldiers need to shoot, move, communicate, and be experts in their craft.”

— GEN Randy George
Army Chief of Staff

We are an Army in motion. Accelerating technological change, strategic competition with peer adversaries, and continued global demands for Army forces serve as the backdrop of an institutional transformation geared toward readiness for large-scale combat operations. But while the character of war is changing rapidly, it remains a fundamentally human endeavor.¹ Basic individual skill proficiency is foundational to Army readiness, and this proficiency begins in Basic Combat Training (BCT).

As leaders within the 3rd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment (BCT), we ensure basic individual skill proficiency by emphasizing the preparation of our drill sergeants and structuring the training to maximize learning. Our simple-but-focused approach has yielded consistently above average results as measured by end-of-cycle testing (EOCT), which occurs during the final phase of BCT to certify trainees’ proficiency in skill level 1 tasks. EOCT consists of 15 tasks taken directly from Soldier Training Publication (STP) 21-1-SMCT (*Soldier’s Manual of Common Task*) and assessed over four stations focusing on tactical movement and camouflage, maintenance and operation of an M4A1 Carbine, combat medical care and evacuation, and land navigation and communication. On test day, cadre external to the battalion grade trainee execution of each task on a GO or NO-GO basis. Trainees have two opportunities to receive a GO on each task. For



Trainees are tested on protecting themselves from chemical and biological contamination using their protective masks. (Photos courtesy of authors)



A drill sergeant with 3rd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment demonstrates to trainees how to maintain and employ an M4 series Carbine.

those who do not meet that standard, we administer a battalion-level test following the final field training exercise. Re-testing continues until the standard is met, and we have yet to encounter a trainee who does not ultimately meet the standard prior to graduation.

Preparation of Drill Sergeants

Our effort to ensure individual skill proficiency begins with the preparation of our drill sergeants. In addition to their institutional certification through the U.S. Army Drill Sergeant Academy, our drill sergeants progress through a two-week brigade-administered certification program prior to arriving at the battalion. This course of study certifies their preparedness to serve as drill sergeants in the 165th Infantry Brigade. With this foundation established, we implement two primary practices designed to sustain drill sergeant proficiency.

The first is simply that we require drill sergeants to conduct EOCT themselves on a semi-annual basis. Not only does this practice refresh their expertise on the tested tasks, but it also clearly communicates command emphasis. We first instituted this battalion-level practice roughly a year ago when EOCT scores across the battalion were subpar. Immediately, the battalion's EOCT performance improved and has continued to improve. The message was received, and we thus continue the practice. Second, companies recertify drill sergeants' readiness to teach EOCT tasks during cycle resets. The company first sergeants oversee this process, and the battalion command sergeant major spot-checks to ensure it is done to standard. The result of these efforts at both battalion and company level is drill sergeants who are prepared to effectively teach individual skill proficiency and succeed on EOCT.

Structure Training to Maximize Learning

We deliberately structure our training for EOCT to maximize learning. While companies maintain the flexibility to train for EOCT at specific times and places of their choosing, several principles are common to all and underlie the battalion's overall approach. First, we adopt a training approach that emphasizes retrieval practice. Retrieval is simply pushing trainees to recall how to conduct a task from memory, which is what they will have to do on test day. Cognitive psychologists recognize that retrieval — especially done repeatedly in spaced out sessions — is a highly effective tool for learning.² We achieve this with EOCT preparation by using practice testing as a learning tool. Progress is often slow at first, but repeated retrieval practice ultimately leads to better preparedness for EOCT.

The second principle emphasized across the battalion is mixing EOCT training with other training. This is a teaching technique scholars refer to as interleaving.³ Mixing up practice embeds what is learned more deeply into the brain. In the context of BCT, concurrent training while at marksmanship ranges or other training events is a great way to interleave EOCT practice with other skills practice. Like the principle of retrieval, the use of interleaving will make progress feel initially slow, but it will be more effective for long-term learning than massed practice.

The final principle underpinning our EOCT approach is to train under testing conditions. We replicate testing conditions during training. This builds trainee confidence in their ability to succeed on test day. Exposing trainees to testing conditions early and often reduces uncertainty and grants a degree of control over their performance in that environment. The result is an increase in what psychologists refer to as self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in their capacity to succeed at a given task.⁴ High self-efficacy has long been associated with enhanced performance across multiple contexts, including workplace environments, educational settings, and athletic endeavors.⁵ By exposing trainees to EOCT testing conditions early and often, we give them the opportunity to become more confident in their ability to succeed on test day. The result is a better prepared trainee and, ultimately, a better Soldier for the operational force.

Preparing drill sergeants and structuring training to maximize learning are the primary ingredients for producing BCT graduates with the individual skill proficiency necessary for large-scale combat operations. This formula has yielded positive results in our battalion's performance on EOCT. Ours is a simple approach to a vital mission here at the Army's flagship initial entry training center. We aim to make American Soldiers who are disciplined, fit, and have the basic skills needed to survive on the battlefield of 2030. Our Army and nation demand it.

Notes

¹ Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, October 2022.

² Peter C. Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel, *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), Chapter 2.

³ Ibid, Chapter 3.

⁴ Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," *Psychological Review* 84/2 (1977): 191-215.

⁵ Alexander D. Stajkovic and Fred Luthans, "Self-Efficacy and Work-Related Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 124/2 (1998): 240-261.

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