

Training Notes



A LIEUTENANT'S GUIDE TO RANGER SCHOOL

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Before we get into the weeds of this thing and start arguing over such vital details as, say, the perfect number of socks to carry during Mountain Phase or the most efficient method for eating a Beef Patty MRE (Meal, Ready-To-Eat), I figure that I should lay out both this article's purpose, structure, etc, as well as my own personal qualifications. After all, who has either the time or desire to sit around listening to some schmuck blather on and on, only to find out that his opinions and advice are either outdated or otherwise defunct? Not many people that I know. That said, if you trust that what I have to say might be beneficial and/or don't care about the mechanics behind this article, feel free to skip on down to the next heading for the actual meat and potatoes. For the rest of you with less inherent faith or actual curiosity, continue reading. Either way, let's get to it.

My purpose is simple — to share my thoughts on how best to prepare for your

Ranger School experience (be it 61 days or otherwise) during and after the Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course (IBOLC). The information contained in this article is compiled from my own experiences, thoughts, and observations, as well as those of my peers and Ranger buddies alike. The document's structure is simplistic, breaking the scope of preparation down into four categories: military, physical, mental, and miscellaneous. I have endeavored to do my best to keep items organized in the most appropriate category; however, many bits and pieces could fit under two or more of the sectional headings. As you no doubt have noticed, my tone is conversational. This article is neither formal nor academic; hopefully, it is straightforward and practical. The point of using a casual voice is twofold: one, to keep you awake, and two, to convey information as clearly as possible. At times, my style may come across as pompous or arrogant, but that is not my intent. I am merely being candid and frank. I am not the

authority on all things Ranger, but as you shall see below, I do have some experience with the school. Leveraging all that is explained above, it is my intent to give a reasonably comprehensive look at how to prepare yourself, without going into a day-by-day breakdown of every hurdle you must clear. For that, I suggest picking up a copy of *So This Is Ranger School*, available at most military supply stores on or around Fort Benning.

Now, regarding my own résumé, brief though it is. I commissioned out of the U.S. Military Academy in May of 2010, having attended the Army's Mountain Warfare School (summer phase) while a cadet. Arriving at Benning in July, I attended both Stryker Leader and Air Assault courses while on wait status for IBOLC. I was a member of Delta Company, 2nd Battalion,

Ranger students patrol through a Fort Benning training area during the Benning Phase of Ranger School.

U.S. Army photos



11th Infantry from October to early February 2011. My Ranger School experience began at Camp Rogers on 28 February with Class 05-11 and lasted a grand total of 118 days. I was privileged with an extended stay in Dahlonga where I recycled over a period of five weeks (Best Ranger Competition break) prior to beginning Mountain Phase a second time. I graduated with Class 06-11 on 24 June 2011. Now you know the experience of your author and can more readily gauge the worth of his advice. Once again, I am no subject matter expert. Take my advice at your own risk.

Military

“Task, condition, standard, and time hack.”

One of the most common things that you hear Ranger instructors (RIs) say (and say and say again) is that, despite what you may think, Ranger School is not a course on small unit tactics. That is why all of your class days prior to graded patrols in each phase are designated as techniques training, not tactics training. There are simply too many perfectly acceptable ways to, say, clear a room for the Ranger Training Brigade (RTB) to definitively rule that one way is superior. Every unit in the Army trains a certain way, and they all get the job done when it's go-time. Hell, practically every RI has his own method for clearing a room. Yes, Army tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) exist, and they teach specific methods with specific points of execution. But as you know from your commissioning source and IBOLC experiences, those TTPs are more of a base foundation, a guideline for what right looks like. As a result, RTB neither hopes nor wants to grade students on tactics. Rather, RIs expose students to numerous techniques which have proven successful in the past and then evaluate based on a Ranger's demonstrated leadership. Of course, mission accomplishment and acting in accordance with the five principles of patrolling (*cough cough* common sense *cough cough*) is also a priority. The point is that it is important to remember at all times that Ranger School is the U.S. Army's premier leadership course. Leadership, not tactics.

With the above discussion behind us, we can now move on to identifying a number of actual military skills/tasks that are necessary for success while in Ranger School:

1. The Ranger Common Task Certification List (aka Commander's Validation Letter) — This is a list of 36 basic military/physical tasks that your commander must sign off on stating that you are trained and proficient in everything from basic weapons operations to the Ranger Physical Fitness Test (RPFT). Between the training you received at your commissioning source and IBOLC, you have probably demonstrated at some point your ability to handle each of the tasks. Still, it is a good idea to know just what those tasks are, as you will see them all again at Ranger School. The list can be found on the RTB Web site (<https://www.benning.army.mil/rtb>).

2. Terrain Models — Multiple times, whether at IBOLC or RTB, I have heard my instructors say that the building of terrain models is a dying art. Don't be a part of that supposed trend! Do not go to Ranger School without both a comprehensive terrain model kit of your own and an understanding of how to build clear,



Ranger students prepare for a mission during the first phase of Ranger School.

effective, and detailed models. What is meant by detailed can be found in your Ranger Handbook. In my Ranger experience, few things did more to clarify (or, conversely, completely muddle) a mission than the quality of the terrain model. That said, you can have the best model ever made, but it won't matter if you don't or can't incorporate it into your order. Take seriously the opportunities for practice that IBOLC affords you!

3. Casualty Evaluation (CASEVAL), Buddy Aid, Etc — Medical training is important for Ranger School and beyond. I don't think I need to say much more than that!

4. Platoon Sergeant (PSG) Duties and Responsibilities — Just because you are a second lieutenant doesn't mean that you won't be graded as a platoon sergeant. Understand what the job entails — accountability (status cards), supply requests/distribution, all things casualty-related (mass-casualty plan), patrol base activities/security. Use your team leaders (TLs)! When the platoon leader (PL) and squad leaders (SLs) are worried with planning and execution, TLs enable you to monitor the platoon and its condition. And if one of them isn't worth a damn, fire him!

5. Forward Observer (FO)/ radio-telephone operator (RTO) Duties and Responsibilities — What do these entail? Planning fires, calling up reports, preparing the 9-line, contributing to mission/route development via de-confliction with adjacent units and coordination with higher, calling for fire, maintaining communications, etc... Both the FO and RTO, while ungraded positions, are force multipliers on patrol. Know how to use the multiband inter/intra team radio (MBITR), the advanced system improvement program (ASIP), and the Defense Advanced GPS Receiver (DAGR). Your ruck is going to be heavy as hell. You might as well be able to use what you're carrying.

6. The Orders Production Process — Warning orders (WARNOs), fragmentary orders (FRAGOs), operation orders (OPORDs), etc... This is one area in which you, an IBOLC graduate, should have a leg up on the rest of your squad/platoon. The troop leading procedures (TLPs), the five-paragraph format, METT-TC (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available,

time available, and civil considerations), OAKOC (observation and fields of fire, avenues of approach, key terrain, obstacles, and cover and concealment), etc. — you should have a working knowledge of all that, thereby allowing you not only to produce orders but also teach your fellow Rangers to do the same. Believe me, your ability to both spin everyone up on orders production as well as delegate and supervise will greatly increase your squad/platoon's efficiency. And increased efficiency often leads to more sleep.

Physical

“Not for the weak...”

It goes without saying that you should report to Camp Rogers as physically fit as possible. But, no matter your level of fitness, do not allow adrenaline, excitement, nervousness, or whatever to cause you to overdo it. The course is 61 days — that's a marathon if I've ever seen one. Treat it like one. Below are a few physical areas that I've singled out:

1. Climbing a Rope — If you made it through your commissioning source without learning to climb a rope, you are unfortunate. If you make it through IBOLC without doing so, you are wrong. Not only is this a valuable skill, it is something that you are guaranteed to run into at Ranger School, courtesy of the Malvesti and Darby Queen obstacle courses. There are ropes on Taylor Field. Grab a buddy and get him to teach you!

2. Rucking — If you've recently graduated from IBOLC, you should have no real issue in this department. That said, you can expect to carry a heavier weight than you ever have: in the winter at “Mountains” the heaviest rucks (FO/RTO) top out at around 120 pounds. Be prepared to handle that type of load over multiple kilometers and still be able to assault the objective.

3. Field Hygiene — Lack of sleep and malnutrition are going to be doing a number on your immune system to begin with. Don't weaken yourself further through poor hygiene. Wash your hands when given the chance. Use showers/laundry facilities when made available. Keep your canteens clean and use iodine tablets appropriately. Brush your teeth as usual, even when in the field. Foot care? Use powder, change boots/socks when possible, and let them

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air-out at night. At a bare minimum, wipe down your face, groin, knees, and elbows every night. Tell the medics if anything is wrong so it can be addressed before it becomes serious enough to require your removal from training.

4. Eye Protection — Ranger School is a valuable experience and is worth a hell of a lot, but it isn't worth your sight! Multiple times on patrol I had limbs almost gouge me in the eye, and that was with eye-pro. Yes, your lenses will get scratched and fogged and all that. Deal with it. Don't be short-sighted or you might end up blind... and still be tab-less!

Mental

“Not for the faint-hearted...”

When it comes to mental preparation, most of it must be left to the individual. People can (and will) give you advice all day long on techniques and tricks they used to get through to graduation, but in the end it comes down to Y-O-U. Everyone is different, with different outlooks and different perspectives. It is on you to make the decision that you just aren't going to leave without that tab, whether that means “61 and done” or doing multiple tours in each phase. What I can say is that state of mind is important. Equally important is finding out what it is that motivates you so that you can motivate yourself on the bad days — and you'll have them. For me, it was pride. Upon recycling Mountain Phase, knowing that I was facing a full five weeks before the next class arrived, I wanted out. For those counting, that would mean a total of 11 weeks spent on Camp Frank D. Merrill in Dahlonga, Ga. To heck with that! But then I thought of how I would feel, trying to explain to my family, my friends, and my peers that my ability to lead my future platoon just wasn't worth the extra time. My pride just wouldn't allow that. And that did it for me; I signed on the dotted line, accepted my recycle, and now am extremely thankful that I did so. So, my

point is that you have to find that thing that drives you, that keeps you going at it. Now, as I said before, people will offer advice all day long, whether you want it or not. And I'm no different. Assuming from the fact that you're still reading that you're willing to take it, I'll go ahead and offer a piece of my own: *use it or lose it, your choice...*

Over my mountain recycle, I decided on three words to embody my mental approach to what remained of my training. This personal mantra, as it were, was: positivity, proactivity, and perseverance.

1. Positivity — Optimism and pessimism are both contagious, the latter more so than the former. That said, they are also both the result of a conscious choice regarding how you decide to view your world each day. When you wake up each morning, you have to choose what mood you're going to be in. It is easy to complain and it takes no leadership ability at all to do so. Exert some self-control — don't just react to external stimuli. While at Ranger School, keep the positive in mind — “Hey, it's not raining today! Okay, so it's raining now...but it's not hailing! Oh yeah, we're getting hot breakfast tomorrow. Bring on those blueberry pancakes!” Or, perhaps, all you've got is the fact that you've successfully completed one more day and are a step closer to graduation. Well, make a pocket calendar and keep track of those days as they pass. Small victories — that is the key. Stay positive, both internally and externally, and you will see benefits both in your own morale as well as in the motivation and willingness to cooperate displayed by your fellow students. And it won't hurt your peer evaluations either.

2. Proactivity — In Ranger School, there is always a lot to do and not enough time to do it in. So why wait around to be given a task or, worse yet, bicker about whose turn it is to complete said task? Be proactive! Volunteer! Whether in leadership or not, you should always look ahead to what tasks are next and help facilitate their completion however you can. Why?

- * It saves time, your most valuable resource;

- * It will get you off the line, keep you awake, and keep you informed as to what's happening;

- * It preserves and inspires teamwork and selflessness; and

* It's what leaders do! And Ranger School is the Army's premier school for what?

3. Perseverance — Simply put, don't quit. Ever. Just keep going. Whether in terms of looking for ways to contribute or while trying to plan a mission in 15 minutes at 0300 in wind and freezing rain on the side of a mountain — do not quit! Remember, surrender is not a Ranger word! Enough said.

Miscellaneous

"...set the example for others to follow."

What follows are those items that either I couldn't place elsewhere or those that I felt deserving of special mention:

1. The Ranger Creed — falling within the first few pages of your Ranger Handbook, this creed is something you know you need to know. So know it and be prepared to lead in reciting it from day one. Think about its message and use it to motivate yourself and to help you motivate others. It's what you've volunteered for.

2. Boot/Socks — Your feet are your most crucial asset in terms of making it physically. Therefore, take care of them by wearing the right boots and socks. Use your 16 weeks in IBOLC as a period of trial and error. Talk to your peers and instructors, but ultimately do what is right for you. If that means dropping a few hundred dollars on special moisture-wicking socks, so be it. Just make sure that your footwear is approved by RTB. Points of consideration should include: boot durability, weight,

ankle support, ability to drain/dry, etc...

3. Ruck Packing/Wear — How you pack your ruck will have a large influence on how enjoyable your Ranger rucking experiences are. Though there are a myriad of opinions on how to do it, your packing method should be that which works best for you. And you should pack the same every time. That way, when it is o-dark thirty and you have lost your headlamp, you will be able to quickly locate articles from your packing list without searching every pouch. Once again, use your time at IBOLC to develop your own technique. If you need help, find a buddy with more experience who can show you how to raise and lower the frame, readjust the straps, etc. Personally, I would suggest two things: one, find some way of tying down your two-quart canteens. I've done it with the transport tightening system (of one-rope-bridge fame) and can tell you that not having roughly eight and a half pounds flopping around makes a difference; two, attach your butt-pack to the outside-center of your ruck. Not only will this provide you a good amount of extra space, it will also be your easiest-to-access compartment, allowing you to preserve the organization of the main pouches.

Parting Shots

Below are a few last tidbits that I felt like including, though with significantly less explanation than those above.

- Have a good terrain model kit with laminated graphics. Some office supply

stores around Columbus sell Ranger School terrain model kits that you can supplement as desired (suggestions include colored yarn, plastic Army men, colored chalk).

- Sew name-tapes onto your ACU tops, bottoms, and covers to prevent their disappearance.

- Stash a cache at home for you to use while on your Darby eight-hour pass. Include items that you will need to resupply (zip-locks, 100-mph tape, 550, batteries, etc.) to reduce time spent in Ranger Joe's/Commando's/Post Exchange. Also, pack your own care package for Mountain Phase.

- Watch cap (aka "snookie") — Report with no less than four, even during the summer. Don't argue, just do it.

- Be sure to take some cash (small bills) for the dog-x after each phase.

One of my Ranger buddies, an SF medic/combat diver/HALO jumper, loves to say that success in the Army relies on your adherence to three simple rules:

- 1) Look good;
- 2) Know where you are;
- 3) And if you don't know where you are, look good.

While I can't say that I place the most faith in that career plan, I do wholeheartedly agree with another of his claims — that all you need to do in Ranger School is never quit and always be a "good dude." It might take you more than 61 days, but those two rules won't steer you wrong.

As I mentioned at the start, it is my intent that this document provide light-hearted yet practical advice for the aspiring Ranger student. Hopefully, that intent was realized and I've got you thinking. No composition, no matter how long, can hope to fully enlighten you as to what expect from your Ranger School experience — certainly not one of such brevity as this. But is that not at least partially the point of the course — forcing you to face the unknown, to make decisions under pressure and without all the information?

Sounds like a pretty good test of leadership to me.

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Photo by John D. Helms

U.S. Army Ranger candidates pull themselves along a suspended rope during the bridge and vertical haul line exercises that are part of Mountain Phase of Ranger School.