



Preparing a Battalion for Combat:

Physical Fitness and Mental Toughness

Lieutenant Colonel William C. David

In late July 1993, soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry Task Force, 10th Mountain Division, left Fort Drum for Mogadishu, Somalia. It was to become the ground element for the 10th Division brigade serving as the Quick Reaction Force for the United Nations command in Somalia. The task force would be the only U.S. maneuver element in country.

Among its other significant actions in Somalia, over a 17-hour period on 3 and 4 October 1993, the task force fought its way from the Mogadishu airfield to downtown and extracted ground elements of Task Force Ranger following the downing of two helicopters. This battle was marked by fierce fighting.

I am one of those who believe that only a really extraordinary infantry battalion could have accomplished this challenging and dangerous mission, and the 2-14 Task Force was clearly extraordinary. I therefore encouraged the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bill David, to write an article on what is required to make a battalion truly first-rate. The result was a series of articles, covering physical fitness and mental toughness, marksmanship, maneuver live-fire training, and combat leadership lessons learned.

This article is the first in the series; the others will appear in subsequent issues.

Colonel David's story is both simple and complex. The insights and lessons, for the most part, are timeless and broadly applicable. This is the story of a battalion commander leading his soldiers as they prepare for combat and in the combat itself. He describes how he built on the basic Army training and doctrine formula and added particular emphasis in core areas to develop a winning team.

This is a personal account, not one drawn from secondary sources.

It will become apparent to readers that the battalion's performance was the result of combat-focused training, careful planning, aggressive execution, and an unwavering commitment to the soldiers' welfare. The story of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, is a lesson in mission focus and readiness.

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Light infantry operations place the human body under great stress. They involve prolonged exposure to the elements, broken sleep on rocky ground, bug bites, rashes, abrasions, contusions, and a ration cycle that is never guaranteed unless you carry rations on your back. These operations require foot movement over extended distances while carrying loads that would tire a pack-mule.

At the completion of any movement, soldiers must still have a reserve of both strength and stamina to fight the close, violent fight against a well-rested enemy. No matter how badly they may hurt, soldiers have to be able to climb, crawl, and sprint long after their adrenaline is gone. Their lives and the lives of others depend on it.

Infantry operations therefore require a high state of individual and unit physical fitness. But physical fitness alone is not enough. Soldiers must also have the mental toughness to reach down inside themselves for an extra burst of strength or speed when their bodies are telling them "No."

Physical fitness and mental toughness are interdependent and inseparable. One is of little use without the other. Together, they are required for every operation an infantry battalion will ever be called upon to execute. They are the essence of light infantry operations and, for this reason, are one of the battalion's core performance areas.

After taking command of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, and making an initial assessment, I knew it was in pretty good physical shape. All the required divisional standards for individual and unit physical training were being met. Like most units, we had a large number of soldiers who wholeheartedly embraced the value of physical fitness and took the initiative to maintain exceptional levels of condition. But we were not aiming for the upper levels in collective physical performance, and as a result, I believed we had not reached our potential in this area and could do even better.

As I talked with soldiers and looked back over the battalion's previous training, I discovered there was also room for improvement in the mental aspect of conditioning. Because mental toughness is an intangible quality, it is virtually impossible to quantify or measure. But even if they can't define it, units that really have mental toughness know that they have it.

This was the type of unit I wanted. Our soldiers had to know in their hearts that they were the toughest soldiers on the block. If companies couldn't go over, under, or around the wall, I wanted them to have the mental fortitude to break it down. When the tactical situation went to hell, I wanted them to have the strength of spirit to find a way to win through a brute force of will.

When it came to physical fitness and mental toughness, the battalion was at the *good* stage, but we weren't getting our extra ten percent. If we were to become high performers in this core area, we were going to have to adopt a training regimen that would stretch our physical and mental capacities in parallel.

Doctrinal and Regulatory Guidance

There is no argument within the Army about the impor-

tant link between physical fitness and combat readiness. For all the right reasons, every division in the Army establishes individual and unit physical fitness standards that provide an important institutional performance baseline.

The 10th Mountain Division has a standard in this area. Individual and unit physical fitness standards, as outlined in the division's Training Regulation 350-1, are on a par with those of other divisional units. The minimum standards for divisional units, for example, are outlined as follows:

- Physical training conducted five days a week.
- Quarterly four-mile run in athletic shoes in 36 minutes or less, normally conducted as a formation run. (This is also the XVIII Airborne Corps standard.)
- Semiannual 12-mile road march in three hours or less while wearing individual combat gear and a fighting load of 15 to 35 pounds.
- Semiannual Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) with a minimum overall score of 225, with at least 60 in each event. An average score of 250 is established as a unit goal for PT excellence.

I believed that meeting the division's physical fitness standards were important in guaranteeing that our soldiers would have the physical and mental capacity to do all the things we could reasonably expect to be called upon to do in combat. But in a light infantry battalion, where the highest state of physical fitness is so essential to battlefield success, meeting these standards is only an important first step. The soldiers had to be capable of doing more.

Five days a week for physical training was the right frequency, but we had to be sure we were doing the right things to put real teeth in our PT program. For a properly conditioned soldier, a four-mile run in 36 minutes is no more challenging than a walk in the park. And if unit PT is properly planned and executed, individual fitness levels improve over time so that most soldiers, even on a bad day, can score higher than 265 on the APFT.

The 12-mile road march in three hours is a tough challenge that indicates overall condition, and it has its place in a unit PT program. But it does not accurately replicate all the physical endurance demands of light infantry operations: The prescribed loads for the march are much lighter than those normally carried by soldiers in the field, and meeting the three-hour time limit requires soldiers to maintain a run-walk pace that is too fast to be sustained much farther than the finish line. As a result, the event falls short in developing mental toughness to any significant degree.

Getting the Ten-percent Difference

The process began as a leadership challenge to convince the chain of command that we should, and could, get more out of ourselves in this core performance area. I was confident that if physical fitness and mental toughness could be embedded as a core value of the battalion, then natural interaction among the chain of command in our daily routine would lead us to the ten-percent performance improvement I wanted. This approach had three important components.

To get at the physical fitness piece, we built on an existing

SIGNIFICANT OPERATIONS OF TASK FORCE 2-14 INFANTRY DURING OPERATION CONTINUE HOPE

8 AUG 93: TM B/2-14, TAC CP, HHC(-) respond to no-notice alert to secure the site and recover wreckage/casualties at the scene of a command-detonated ambush that destroyed one HMMWV and killed four MPs. No friendly or enemy casualties.

15 AUG 93: TF 2-14 IN conducts pre-dawn raid that results in the capture of three perpetrators of the 8 AUG ambush. No friendly or enemy casualties.

13 SEP 93: TF 2-14 IN(-) attacks to clear two large compounds in the vicinity of Benadir Hospital. Intelligence sources had indicated that these compounds contained large weapons caches and quartered personnel involved in attacks against UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) forces. The operation escalates into a four-hour firefight with the Somali National Alliance (SNA) Militia. TF 2-25 AV provides attack helicopter support. TF 2-14 IN suffers three WIA. Enemy casualties are estimated at 60 killed or wounded.

20 SEP 93: TM A/2-14, TAC CP, HHC(-) conduct pre-dawn raid to capture SNA Militia believed responsible for mortar attacks against the Embassy/University compound—the major UNOSOM and U.S. Forces installation in Mogadishu. TF 2-25 AV provides attack helicopter support. TM A/2-14 receives RPG and automatic weapons fire on withdrawal from the objective area. A brief firefight ensues. No friendly casualties. Enemy casualties are estimated at five killed or wounded.

25 SEP 93: TM C/22-14 IN responds to a no-notice alert to conduct a crash search and rescue operation of a downed QRF UH-60 aircraft. The operation escalates into a six-hour firefight with the SNA Militia. TF 2-25 AV provides attack helicopter support. TM C/2-14 IN suffers three WIA. Enemy casualties estimated at 200 killed or wounded.

3-4 OCT 93: TF 2-14 IN responds to a QRF alert and, over a 17-hour period, performs linkup and extracts ground elements and casualties of TF Ranger following the downing of two TF Ranger helicopters during an earlier operation. TF 2-25 AV provides attack helicopter support throughout. TF 2-14 IN losses total two KIA and 24 WIA. Total U.S. casualties are 18 KIA and 78 WIA. Enemy casualties are estimated at more than 300 killed and 600 wounded.

NOTES:

1. The SNA was the political apparatus in support of "Warlord" Mohammed Farah Aided following the 1991 overthrow of President Siad Barre and the subsequent civil war. The SNA Militia was the active military arm of this organization. Its leadership was composed primarily of former Somali Army officers. Many of its soldiers also had military experience.

2. All Somali casualty estimates are based on information provided at the time of the engagements to the Headquarters, UNOSOM, by local human intelligence sources and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

value system—very noticeably present in combat arms units—that stressed carefully planned, balanced, and tough PT every day to improve overall physical conditioning.

To address the mental toughness piece, we regularly stretched ourselves by scheduling grueling unit activities to force everyone through the physical and mental "wall" that is familiar to any marathon runner. And to support this effect, we held ourselves rigorously accountable to every regulatory tool at our disposal.

When the battalion was in garrison, PT was regarded as the most important unit activity of the day. We jealously guarded this time and rarely let other activities interfere. At each weekly training meeting, daily PT was briefed in detail down to platoon level. I looked closely for the proper mix of running distance and time, speed work, road marching, and strength development.

Although unit sports activities were highly encouraged, they were not allowed during PT hours. PT was not the time to play games. It was a time of hard work for everyone. At the outset of my command tour, this philosophy met with con-

siderable resistance by the chain of command and engendered a lot of professional discussion until all key leaders understood my intent.

To model the behavior we wanted, the command sergeant major and I did vigorous PT every day and made sure the battalion saw us doing it. We regularly spot-checked physical training to make sure it was being conducted as briefed. Impromptu after-action reviews (AARs) at the conclusion of PT sessions did a lot to help soldiers better understand the concept of what we were trying to achieve.

Battalion runs were conducted on Friday mornings on an average of every two or three weeks. As the unit's physical condition improved, we began to use these runs to work on our mental conditioning as well. We gradually increased the length of the runs to eight miles. Following extended periods in the field, we temporarily reduced this mileage to five or six miles.

The battalion executive officer (XO) and a small cadre of noncommissioned officers were put in charge of straggler control to ensure that everyone in the unit had an opportuni-

ty to share in the same experience. The XO's group noted all fallouts by name and policed them into a group to complete the run at a slower pace.

The fine-tuning adjustments of establishing command interest in all activities associated with PT and increasing the length of battalion runs really got the ball rolling. The companies had to conduct vigorous daily PT to avoid incurring the unwanted attention of the battalion commander during one of his unexpected visits. But when I was not around, pride drove units to maintain this rigor, because any deficiencies were bound to show up when the battalion rolled down the road for the next eight-miler.

The program soon began to sustain itself. In fact, after a while, my biggest concern was whether we were working as smart as we were working hard. To ensure that the chain of command was maintaining a responsible approach, the medical platoon leader produced a weekly report of all battalion physical profiles. This report was disseminated to the orders group and reviewed every Friday at our command and staff meeting. If we noticed an increase in lower-body stress-related injuries, we backed off on the mileage or the intensity of our PT sessions until the problem was resolved.

For developing mental toughness, the 25-mile road march was one battalion activity that had a big payoff. We marched in full combat gear with a field load in a rucksack and all TOE equipment. This was the infantryman's marathon. It did more to instill true mental toughness than any other single training event we conducted.

Our goal was to execute one 25-mile road march every quarter, but seven off-post deployments in 25 months limited us to doing it about twice a year. Nevertheless, we always had a 25-mile road march on the long-range planning calendar to keep our PT program focused on this high-performance challenge.

We put mile markers along the road-march route and conducted the march at a sustained pace of 17:30 per mile. The battalion took one 30-minute and two 20-minute rest halts during the nine hours it took to finish. The soldiers could complete the first 20 miles on their conditioning, but the last five required guts and determination. Completing the march was a real badge of honor. When it was over, all the soldiers knew they had accomplished something few other units would attempt.

Every summer, the battalion conducted Combat Olympics, which was one and one-half days of full-contact, bone-crunching, intercompany competition based on both military and athletic competitions. This was not just organized athletics under a different name; it was a carefully constructed event intended to force as many soldiers as possible into the competition.

Rules, uniform requirements, and schedules were worked out to the last detail. Any violation resulted in disqualification for the company team. To prevent team stacking, multiple events were run simultaneously. Company internal organization was always extended to include every soldier. We used a weighted scoring system that was based on the scale of each event. At the end of the competition, trophies

were presented in a battalion formation to individual, team, and company winners.

The Combat Olympics left just about everyone in the battalion battered, bruised, and physically spent, but the soldiers thrived on the competition. The tougher and more physically punishing it could be, the better. Not surprisingly, the margins separating the individual, team, and unit winners from the runners-up were very slim, usually less than ten percent.

The battalion also put on boxing smokers and participated in the post intramural sports program. While these activities were done more for fun, they reinforced the values we were trying to embed in the unit—that physical fitness and mental toughness are inseparable components of being an infantryman.

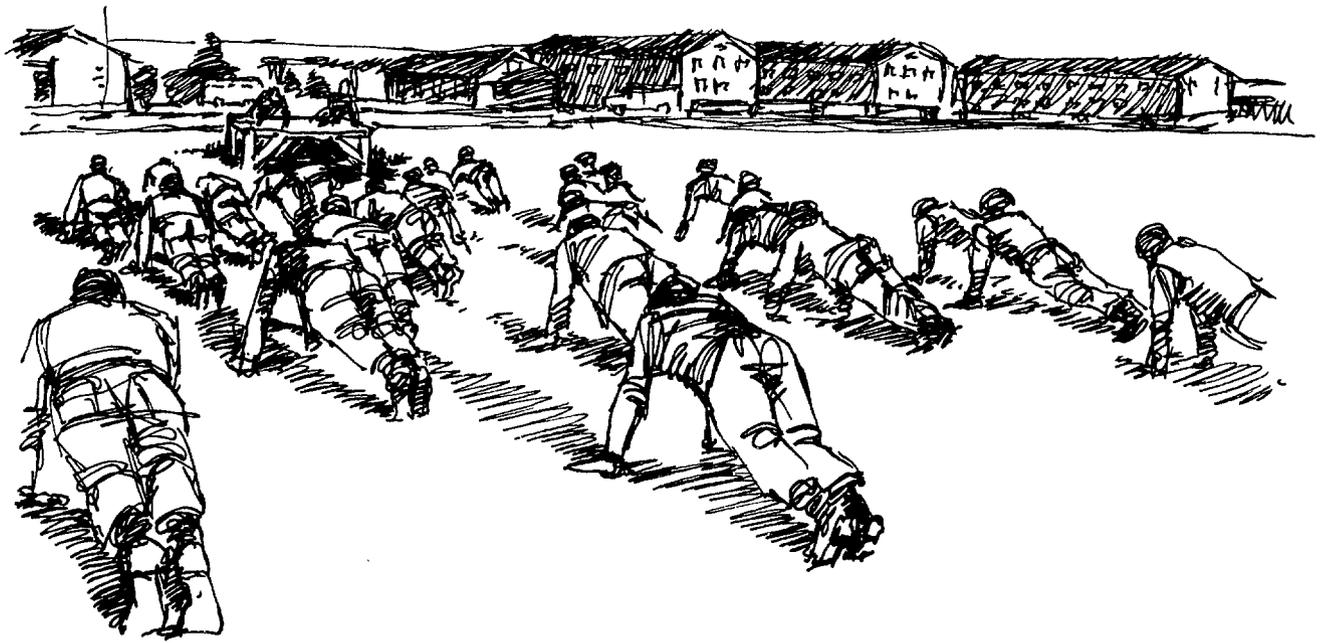
Two regulatory tools provided immeasurable support for this effort: the Army Weight Control Program and the Medical Evaluation Board process. Both are excellent ways to address factors that impede unit performance. But these are also programs in which the battalion commander must take the lead. Company commanders and first sergeants cannot do it on their own. They are often too close to the personalities involved to make the tough, impartial decisions these programs require. Nor do they have the necessary time and experience to shepherd the administrative requirements of these programs through to completion. It takes the full weight of battalion commander and staff to make them work effectively.

The battalion scrupulously enforced the weight control program. Regardless of position, each soldier in the battalion was weighed quarterly, without exception. I personally reviewed the results of all company weigh-ins. Those who failed to meet the standards were immediately enrolled in the program, and their progress was openly reviewed at least once a month during command and staff meetings.

In addition, all soldiers who fell out from battalion runs or road marches were weighed on their return to the battalion area, and these results were reviewed at command and staff. While most soldiers had bona fide physical or medical reasons for failing to complete the event, this technique helped keep the system honest by identifying habitual fallouts and the odd man who was not detected during weigh-ins.

Putting the medical platoon leader in charge of the battalion profile log enabled us to maintain control of all our physical profiles. Those who routinely "rode sick call" were easily identified. If their medical complaints showed signs of becoming chronic, these soldiers were referred for "Fit for Duty" medical examinations. When it could be supported, they were entered into the Medical Evaluation Board process. A separate column on the weekly profile report was used to track every step of their progress. These results were also reviewed at command and staff.

Achieving high performance in physical fitness and mental toughness is a goal that is within reach for every unit. It took six or seven months of hard work before I realized that



the battalion had passed from being merely good in this area to being at a higher level. It occurred when the battalion deployed to Fort Stewart in July 1992 to take part in a ten-day XVIII Airborne Corps exercise.

Obviously, coming from the temperate summer of upstate New York, our soldiers needed a high level of physical fitness to acclimatize quickly to the Georgia heat. Despite everything we had been doing in physical training, however, I was fearful that the battalion's performance would be degraded until the acclimatization process ran its course.

The weather could not have been more brutal. Temperatures rose above 100 degrees every day, amid torturous humidity. The effects of weather on the soldier were exacerbated by their combat loads and the heavy weight desert camouflage uniforms (DCUs) we wore in our role as the opposition force.

As the exercise wound down, I discovered that neither the weather nor the high operational tempo had significantly reduced the battalion's performance. Although the soldiers had been pushed hard, they remained physically strong and mentally alert. Moreover, we did not sustain a single heat casualty over the ten-day exercise.

This told me the battalion had arrived. We were getting our ten-percent improvement. Better yet, as our soldiers observed from other units that had not fared as well, they knew it too. We were clearly on the right track. Little did we know at the time, however, that about a year later this core performance area would be tested even more severely.

The Payoffs in Combat

Throughout the task force's tour in Somalia, fatigue was a constant problem. Daily temperatures ranged from the low-to-high 90s with humidity between 80 and 100 percent. Our standard operational uniform consisted of either heavy

or medium weight DCU, load-carrying equipment, M17A1 protective mask, Kevlar helmet, Level II body armor, and assigned individual or crew-served weapon.

The combined effects of uniform and weather for extended periods, particularly through the heat of the day, were enough to sap the strength of the fittest man. Environmental stress, interrupted sleep patterns, and diet also contributed to the cumulative effects of fatigue. A high level of physical fitness and mental toughness was therefore essential in combatting this ever-present and insidious enemy.

Being quartered in the Mogadishu University compound gave the task force a relatively secure base of operations that allowed us to sustain our physical training program. Even with the demands of the mission, companies conducted vigorous PT at least four times a week, sometimes more. Weight sets in each company area gave the soldiers an opportunity to improve their upper-body strength on their own time.

With few competing time demands other than the mission, individual and unit physical fitness actually improved during our tour. Before redeployment, company APFT averages ranged between 265 and 285 points. All our attention to physical fitness and mental toughness, both at home station and in theater, had tremendous payoffs in every facet of the task force's Somalia experience.

Without question, a high level of fitness improved force protection all around. The soldiers had the mental and physical fitness to stay in the proper and complete uniform, regardless of their physical discomfort. Any deviations from the prescribed uniform were based upon conscious decisions of the chain of command, not from personal whim.

When soldiers rolled out of the compound for any mission, they were alert and dressed for combat, remaining that

way until their return. Their very appearance meant business and was a silent deterrent to any hostility. Not a single one of our convoys or outposts was taken under enemy fire as a target of opportunity. I don't believe this was from chance. There had been too many other examples in theater to the contrary. Physical fitness and mental toughness gave the task force an increased tactical capability. We did not have to slow the pace of operations to that of the slowest man, because all soldiers were able to keep up with the main body. This was clearly demonstrated on numerous occasions, but one in particular illustrates this point:

In the pre-dawn hours of 13 September 1993, the task force (minus) conducted an attack to clear two large compounds in Mogadishu. Dominating the objective area was a hospital densely populated with hundreds of non-combatants. Not surprisingly, this hospital also doubled as a major Somali National Alliance (SNA) militia base of operations.

As morning twilight gave way to sunrise, the task force was completing actions on the objective and beginning its withdrawal. Suddenly, we began receiving RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) and automatic weapons fire from the area of the hospital and its surrounding streets. What followed was a major firefight between the task force and the SNA militia that lasted almost five hours.

Despite all planning and preparation, most meeting engagements begin with some element of surprise. Soldiers experience a jolt of adrenaline that lasts about 15 or 20 minutes. As their minds and bodies become adjusted to the situation, however, adrenaline-depleted soldiers often experience a deep fatigue. Veterans of close combat know best that unless soldiers are in top physical condition, they will have nothing left in reserve when the adrenaline runs out.

Even with the accumulated effects of fatigue due to loss of sleep, combat loads, heat, humidity, and adrenaline depletion, every soldier in the task force had physical energy when it mattered most. The soldiers used proper individual movement techniques over a two-kilometer route while under continuous fire. Casualties were carried along with no loss of speed and no disruption in the integrity of formations. If the task force had not been in such good physical condition, our movement discipline could easily have broken down, with higher casualties than the three we suffered.

Likewise, the unit's mental toughness was clearly visible in everything we did. But it was highlighted most dramatically in another action, on the night of 3 October 1993 when the task force was called out to link up with and extract ground elements of TF Ranger pinned down by the SNA militia at the site of the downed helicopter.

At 1745, the task force's quick reaction company and battalion tactical command post left the Mogadishu airfield in

an effort to break through to the Rangers with our entire element mounted on either high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) or five-ton trucks. Over the next 90 minutes, we encountered a series of almost simultaneous ambushes and found ourselves in a more intense fight than in any of our previous engagements. The SNA militia had effectively sealed off the area around the Rangers against any penetration by thin-skinned vehicles and inflicted three severe casualties on our force in the process.

Despite this setback, as quickly as another effort could be planned and coordinated, the soldiers were ready to go. At 2300, a second effort was launched with a large force involving most of the task force. Two rifle companies were loaded into armored personnel carriers provided by the Malaysian battalion in theater, and we were given a Pakistani tank platoon for additional support. The ensuing seven and one-half hours was a continuous fight of great intensity. This time, however, the task force was successful in breaking through to the Rangers and accomplishing the mission. (*See "Mogadishu, October 1993," in INFANTRY, September-October and November-December 1994.*)

Sometimes, close combat boils down to a test of willpower between adversaries. Because I had seen our soldiers' perseverance and determination in training, I was confident we would have the mental resilience to bounce back quickly from our unsuccessful effort. Moreover, I was confident that our soldiers would have both the mental and physical staying power to see the task through to the end, even when the situation appeared grim. On both counts, the soldiers proved me right.

After everything we had done in training, any doubts I harbored about being unrealistic or unfair in the demands we placed on our soldiers were put to rest in Somalia. The exceptional physical fitness and mental toughness of the battalion in close combat spoke for itself. The soldiers, in our casual conversations with them in the mess hall or field, candidly thanked the command sergeant major and me for insisting that the unit do the tough physical training that they felt helped keep them alive. Although they couldn't define it, these soldiers knew they were part of a physically fit and mentally tough unit.

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