TRAINING NOTES

Improving Combat Readiness

Developing and Implementing Effective Training

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A cursory glance at defense articles in recent years will indicate a disturbing trend that reflects declining readiness and poor unit performance at the Army's combat training centers (CTCs) such as the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin. A wide variety of observers report that units rotating through the CTCs often lack skills in such fundamental areas as logistics, battle command, and communications.

We should all ask why. The Army training methodology outlined in Field Manuals (FMs) 25-100, *Training the Force,* and 25-101, *Battle Focused Training,* is unparalleled by most major corporations. Our officers and NCOs spend hours learning the training system at basic and advanced training courses. Why, then, are soldiers and units arriving at the CTCs untrained in basic individual and collective skills?

Developing and implementing a solid training program has always been a challenge. A host of constraints ranging from unit turbulence, last-minute taskings, and unplanned visits can play havoc with the best plans. Junior leaders become unavailable due to new requirements. Red cycles, and other large-scale taskings, consume battalions for weeks at a time. Busy leaders sometimes fail to provide adequate resources. They don't give trainers the time they need to prepare. Perhaps they don't think through their plans enough to make sure all the details have been worked out. Whatever the reason, the cumulative effect of these constraints contributes to a loss of focus and, more important, to soldiers less trained than they should be.

Certainly the Army today is doing more with less. A recent Congressional Quarterly Report confirmed that a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military services are busier than ever. These additional deployments have brought a new focus on operations other than war. While some claim that peacekeeping operations do not degrade the warfighting skills of individual soldiers and leaders, the fact remains that units preparing for or conducting peacekeeping shift their primary focus to nontraditional tasks instead of honing traditional warfighting skills.

Undoubtedly, 15 consecutive years of declining buying power has taken its toll on training opportunities. The lack of funding for base operations causes commanders to shift money from training accounts, and the result is that units arrive at the NTC at a lower skill level.

Another reason for declining performance at the NTC is the lack of emphasis on training fundamental combat skills at company and platoon level. As new conditions have limited the mass home-station train-up model, we have not adjusted company level training programs to make up the difference. Now is the time to shift our focus.

With the average daily cost of a full-scale NTC deployment now exceeding one million dollars, this should not be the first place that soldiers learn how to boresight and zero their individual and crew-served weapons, Bradley fighting vehicles, and tanks. Moreover, to get the most payoff in this age of limited training opportunities, units should arrive trained on such fundamentals as land navigation, squad and platoon tactical maneuver, command and control, and logistical sustainment.

To that end, this article offers some recommendations for battalion and company leaders on developing and implementing a training program based on the fundamentals. Second, it suggests a number of training management techniques that will help leaders develop a more effective program.

A few years ago at a division quarterly training brief, the division commander asked a battalion commander to depart from the briefing chart and elaborate on several individual and collective training events. Specifically, the general wanted to know how the battalion and company mission essential task lists (METLs) related to individual skill training and platoon battle drills. Furthermore, the general wanted to

know the frequency of training on each task, and how that frequency had been determined. He asked the commanders to discuss the performance standards that would provide specific measures of effectiveness. Finally, he wanted to know how the commander would certify trainers and how soldiers would receive feedback. In retrospect, it was a fair question and the battalion commander should have answered easily, but the pause and the stricken look on his face made it painfully apparent that the general's probing question had uncovered uncharted territory. Taking the unfortunate commander's silence as a reflection of a lack of training expertise, the general proceeded to deliver a long tutorial on the fundamentals of training management.

As FM 25-101 indicates, determining what to train on should flow from the METL process. Commanders should feel comfortable with their METLs and, more important, the METLs should reflect the critical collective tasks that make up the unit's wartime mission. Some argue that peacekeeping tasks should be included in the METL, but I would argue that they should not. The Army has always supported the nation by performing tasks outside of warfighting requirements. But this does not detract from the fundamental purpose of Army units, which is to deter or to fight and win the nation's wars. While a unit may temporarily support peacekeeping operations, firefighting, or any other non-related tasking, it is important that we do not lose sight of the primary purpose that our organizations serve.

With limited training time and resources, leaders should focus their training plans on developing and sustaining fundamental skills. With the turnover in many units averaging 12 to 15 percent per quarter—along with numerous demands on time—many units would be hard-pressed to advance beyond the basic skills. Moreover, focusing on the fundamentals enables the unit to attain a reasonable level of proficiency within the commander's standards.

How does one determine the fundamental individual and collective tasks? FM 25-101 states that leaders use battle focus to refine the list to include mission-related tasks that are essential to the soldier's duty position. Said another way, the fundamental tasks should encompass both leader and soldier skills that support the accomplishment of the unit's mission essential tasks. For example, combat arms units will perform five basic functions: shoot, move, communicate, secure, and sustain. Within these functions, individual soldiers, squads, and platoons must be able to perform the basic tasks and drills that enable the unit to accomplish its METL tasks. Leaders must reflect their proficiency in leader tasks while crews, squads, platoons, and companies must be able to perform the basic collective tasks. Company officers and sergeants need to understand the link between scheduled training and the individual and collective tasks and drills. This is critical to leaders with limited training opportunities because it allows them to identify and train the specific tasks that directly relate to fundamental skills.

In developing quarterly training plans, all commanders should establish the goals for individual and collective training and work to that end.

As a function of policy, battalion should focus on training platoons while companies focus on training individuals and squads. While centralizing training at the battalion level ensures an efficient use of resources and adherence to standards, a battalion seldom has the luxury of focusing on one event at a time. Because of limited resources in equipment and personnel, centralizing can work well for certain events, such as training the common tasks, the Expert Infantryman Badge tasks, or the Expert Field Medical Badge tasks.

But centralizing does little to develop company commanders, first sergeants, and platoon leaders. Decentralizing individual and squad training at the company level and below places responsibility where it belongs. Squad proficiency is the focus of the company and platoon leadership. Company commanders and first sergeants need to learn how to conduct multiple requirements while also developing and maintaining fundamental combat skills. This can be accomplished only through a decentralized program that reinforces junior leader initiative and responsibility.

In developing quarterly training plans, all commanders should establish the goals for individual and collective training and work to that end. Training on individual tasks is a prerequisite for honing collective capability. As soldiers and leaders attain individual proficiency, they advance to collective training events where the entire effort can be practiced through focused battle drills. As the quarter comes to an end, leaders must assess individual and collective proficiency on the fundamental tasks against the standards, and develop the next quarterly plan accordingly.

In planning and conducting training, I believe there are several common mistakes that leaders need to avoid. The first is underestimating the importance of individual training and rushing too quickly to collective tasks. In his highly acclaimed book *Common Sense Training*, Lieutenant General Arthur Collins observes, "individual training is the foundation on which unit effectiveness is built....it is the source of a soldier's confidence and trust in the Army." In a time-constrained environment, more effort—not less—should be placed at the individual level.

Other critical mistakes are conducting training that is not performance oriented and failing to adhere strictly to standards. Soldiers learn best by doing. A few hours in the turret of a Bradley, or learning navigation in the woods is far better than some boring class in the barracks common area. For training to be effective, Army standards must be rigorously applied. Much to a unit's chagrin, there is often a significant difference between home station training, where standards may have been relaxed, and a CTC, where standards are strictly applied.

A third mistake is not allocating time to train the trainers before conducting individual and collective training. This time helps ensure that leaders are profi-

cient and that they understand the standards. We should not assume that sergeants and lieutenants can perform the individual tasks soldiers need to know. Nor should we expect them to teach and provide feedback to soldiers without training for it. We should set our junior leaders up for success as trainers by thoroughly preparing them to coach and mentor the soldiers under their care.

Another common mistake is to make the conditions too easy. A few years ago, the commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley insisted that conditions be harsher in training before an NTC rotation than at the NTC itself. Once soldiers meet the standards at one level, the environment should be altered to include limited visibility, adverse weather, and NBC conditions. This challenges the troops and prepares them for the harsh demands of combat.

Leaders should not mistakenly assume that red cycles and periods of restricted collective training offer no training potential. They must aggressively seek and create individual training opportunities. For example, when the battalion is not protected from major taskings, the commander should implement an equitable system that enables companies to train individual skills while sharing multiple tasking requirements. Depending on the level of commitments, taskings can rotate among companies to free soldiers for individual training.

Even if taskings consume most of a battalion's personnel and assets, the command sergeant major, with the help of the first sergeants, should ensure that taskings are conducted by squads and platoons whenever possible. This reinforces squad cohesion and gives the squad leader a hip-pocket training opportunity. Moreover, unless senior NCOs and junior officers are tasked out, these periods also provide leader development and certification opportunities for upcoming collective events.

Once the unit has mastered the fundamental skills, commanders must follow up with a sustainment plan to maintain proficiency. Depending on the unit, leaders must determine the frequency of training necessary for soldiers to sustain an acceptable proficiency level in individual and collective tasks. Because of their complexity, soldier skills in areas such as navigation, marksmanship, nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) tasks, and live fire and movement tend to deteriorate quickly. A training program that limits soldiers to biannual weapons qualification will satisfy the minimum standard but may not sustain proficiency on rifle marksmanship.

Because of constant personnel turnover, collective skills that call for a high degree of synchronized teamwork can also atrophy quickly. For example, as a commander of a long-range reconnaissance company, I found that we had to train collective communication, patrolling, and navigation tasks every month. While units vary, a good rule of thumb is that the more critical the task is to the unit METL, the more frequently it should be trained.

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Many techniques can be used to plan and conduct effective training. First, company leaders should develop a system for recording training. Similar to the record of training captured in the Unit Conduct of Fire simulation, leaders need to record individual and collective training attendance and performance. This system should reflect individual proficiency on fundamental tasks as well as crew, squad, and platoon proficiency on fundamental collective tasks and key battle drills.

Second, multiple time periods of at least three hours should be programmed for individual training. This will provide adequate time to teach new tasks and conduct hands-on performance. Moreover, it allows for repetition, which is key to enhancing confidence and building proficiency. Redundant training periods are important, because not all soldiers will be able to attend the scheduled training at the same time. Institutionalize the training events so there is a natural progression. For example, schedule individual training early in a week, such as Monday and Tuesday afternoons. As the week progresses, end it with a focused collective time period, such as Sergeant's Time, a period of weekly training where many units require the presence of all assigned personnel.

To get the most out of training opportunities, commanders should seek to multi-echelon their individual and collective training events whenever possible. For example, with a little foresight and the assistance of the local range control, a creative leader can expand a simple unit individual weapons qualification into a squad collective live-fire and maneuver exercise.

Given the limited training opportunities, the leaders absolutely must be involved. Coaching feedback from company commanders, first sergeants, platoon leaders, and platoon sergeants will go a long way in developing squad leaders and individual soldiers. As a general rule, meetings that involve company-level leaders should never take place during individual and collective training periods.

Finally, leaders should insist that either formal or informal after-action reviews (AARs) are conducted after every individual or collective training event. With the growth of the combat training centers, soldiers and leaders have learned to examine critically the effects of their actions. The more we apply the AAR process, the more rapidly we unlock the secret of self-discovery that leads to overall improvement. Moreover, it teaches junior leaders to conduct a critical self-analysis and inculcates in them a positive cultural indication that the Army is a learning, growing organization.

In the coming years, it would be unrealistic to expect the Army to gain any greater budget resources than it now has. But limited resources do not detract from the leader's responsibility to train a competent, ready unit. Whether the mission is humanitarian relief, a peace operation, or to fight and win the nation's wars, our responsibility as leaders is to ensure that our units are ultimately prepared to respond to the

nation's needs. This preparation begins by developing and implementing an effective training program. There will always be obstacles that make training difficult. But successful leaders, even in wartime conditions, have created opportunities to train their soldiers and leaders.

We must remember the unforgiving nature of combat. Leaders might think about General Douglas MacArthur's observation that, "In no other profession are the penalties for employing untrained personnel so appalling or irrevocable as in the military." Untrained soldiers die quickly in combat. We must wrestle with the never-ending struggle to meet all the requirements that seek to erode our combat readiness, and train our soldiers so they can move quickly, hit hard, and accomplish the mission the first time, every time.

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