

Command Sergeant Major's Corner

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WINNING THE MOUNTAIN FIGHT — ADAPTABILITY AND LEADERSHIP

Infantry Soldiers prove their ability to adapt to any environment every day around the world. What enables Soldiers from Fort Wainwright, Alaska, to deploy to Iraq and experience only minor heat casualties? How does an organization from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, quickly become capable of combat operations in Afghanistan? There are a number of factors that contribute to the success of such organizations, but the individual Soldiers' ability to adapt and their junior leaders' ability to supervise and train them seem to be the most crucial. We have a variety of tools available to train properly and learn as much as possible about future operations; however, we should continue to develop our Soldiers' confidence and adaptability, and our junior leaders' leadership skills.

At the small unit level, mountain operations demand that our infantrymen hit what they shoot at. While many engagements may be at close range, mountainous terrain allows for engagements beyond our traditional qualification. The Long Range Marksmanship Course offered at Fort Benning — and available in a mobile training team format — bridges the gap between sniper training and traditional marksmanship training. Units can also leverage their trained squad designated marksmen and company snipers to develop and run training that will undoubtedly bolster other squad members' confidence and ability to engage the enemy at longer ranges. Squad leaders and team leaders can have a huge impact on their Soldiers' marksmanship by frequently confirming zeros, preferably on a known distance range, and enforcing effective weapons maintenance.

Adapting to the challenges presented by a harsh climate and altitude is not simply a matter of training, although preparatory training may accelerate adaptation. It is well documented that Soldiers who are in top physical condition adjust more easily to the rigor associated with high-altitude operations. Veterans of Operation Anaconda feel that long movements with combat load, preferably in a mountainous environment, should be the focus of physical training in preparation for mountain operations. Since few installations have such an environment, leaders must be creative when building their unit physical training plans, and should also be aware that rapid deployment from sea level to 14,000 feet has been proven to result in casualty rates of approximately 50 percent. Junior leaders, team leaders and squad leaders who supervise their Soldiers well are our most effective preventive measure against casualties associated with operating in harsh climates. Team leaders make sure Soldiers are wearing the right equipment in the proper manner and they constantly monitor each of their Soldiers for signs of heat or cold weather injury, as well as altitude sickness. Good supervision, coupled with an equally good

battle buddy system, will reduce casualties drastically. We must develop and practice these habits of effective supervision at home station, during everyday business; we cannot expect them to simply appear in a combat environment. The fire team

leader who constantly watches after his Soldiers when it is -30° F so they do not get frostbite will habitually make sure those same Soldiers are drinking plenty of water when it is 125° F. For other less obvious hazards, such as mountain sickness, the same leader simply needs to know the warning signs to take care of his Soldiers.

One of the most significant challenges infantry fire teams, squads and platoons face when operating in mountainous terrain are those associated with isolation. Mountain warfare is typically decentralized, making it a junior leader fight. Inclement weather and the enemy always have a vote and when they do, resupply fails, communications go bad, casualties increase, and the small unit is alone. Infantry squads who deal well with some or all of these variables do so because their leaders at all levels effectively cross-train those Soldiers. Privates graduating Infantry One Station Unit Training all receive combat lifesaver training, and the percentage of those who earn certification is steadily increasing. Units are training those same privates on tasks associated with calling for and adjusting indirect fire, unit resupply, and other tasks that have traditionally been trained to Soldiers of a higher skill level. Some organizations are even sending privates first class to the Warrior Leaders Course, grooming them to be team leaders ahead of their peers. The result is a better trained infantryman, who can not only do the job of others in his squad but also many of the tasks we normally rely on our medic, fire supporter, or communications specialist to do.

While many of the challenges encountered in mountain operations are unique, the ability to lead and adapt to those challenges is not. The leadership skills our junior leaders develop are crucial in preparing for operations in any environment. Our infantry fire team leaders, squad leaders, platoon sergeants, and platoon leaders make the difference because they recognize the crucial challenges associated with new situations, and they respond by training their Soldiers to meet those challenges. Adaptable leaders develop Soldiers who are not uncomfortable in new and constantly changing conditions, conditions where the Infantry has always led the way — and always will.

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