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# Defense Report

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## **Army Combat Training and Critiques —Another News Media Distortion**

The Army's National Training Center offers a most demanding training experience short of actual combat for its fighting units. The experience begins when soldiers arrive in a strange environment and begin an intensive two-week exercise against a specially trained and equipped mock foe. The foe, using Soviet doctrine and equipment, spends at least 140 days each year in the high desert at Ft. Irwin, Calif., maneuvering against each tested unit in turn. Every member of the tested unit performs his battle tasks under scrutiny of experienced evaluators and electronic monitors. This combination of eyes records nearly every activity—successful or unsuccessful—within the tested unit.

At the conclusion of the exercise, all members of the unit are assembled to review both the strengths and weaknesses in the tested unit's performance. These critiques emphasize needed improvements measured against a uniform, established standard. What distinguishes the well-trained unit from the poorly-trained one is the degree to which unit performance meets the established standards.

Recently, under the Freedom of Information Act, some news media obtained copies of unit exercise critiques and reported on them. Unfortunately for readers of these stories, the media failed to recognize or ignored the purpose of both the training and the exercise critiques. The stories simply were a litany of the errors and mistakes made by the soldiers, leaving the reader to infer that many Army combat units could not fight and win in a contest with the Soviets.

Certainly, some units should have done better. But, just as it is the rare newsman or woman who produces flawless copy without rewriting or editing, the opportunity to practice at war is essential to fighting units. Practice under watchful eyes which will evaluate performance objectively further enhances its value. Training and critical evaluation help to hone individual skills and develop unit proficiency. For the media to use the Army's unrestrained self-criticism presents a distorted picture and is unfair to the soldiers and units concerned. Learning from mistakes in training is cheap; the price paid for errors in combat is not.