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By LTG Mark Hertling

What's Going On In Basic Training?



The staff sergeant was shaking his head as he walked toward me from across the company orderly room. “Sir,” he said, exasperated, “I just met the four new privates coming to my platoon. Their eyes are as big as grapefruits, they look nervous as all get-out, and I bet none of them will score higher than 250 on the PT test tomorrow, which will blow the company average. Who knows how they’ll do on the range next week.”

Student soldiers carrying M16 rifles in stacked position at the side of a building prepare for building entry and clearing while an instructor gives advice.

Sound familiar? I'd say that's because comments like these are a recurring refrain from any noncommissioned officer (NCO) who just received new soldiers from the training base. In fact, what I described actually happened to me when I was a company commander in 1981. (At least one of those "newbies" recently retired as a command sergeant major!)

Transforming a civilian into a soldier in the short period of time available during initial entry training (IET) is a tough mission, especially given the unique skills, attributes and values we need our soldiers to possess for the current operating environment. But every day, drill sergeants and advanced individual training (AIT) platoon sergeants—those individuals who walk the trail in what has to be the toughest job in our Army—make miracles happen, training more than 35,000 trainees in the basics that our team leaders, NCOs and junior officers will further refine for specific missions once these young soldiers reach their first unit of assignment.

But what's going on in basic combat training? Before outlining some of the things happening in all IET, it might be best to describe the kind of new recruit we're seeing and how we're trying to incorporate the lessons learned from continuous conflict in two separate theaters with the needs of the operational force.

The Millennial Generation

To best understand why we're making some changes, it's important to first know about our newest generation of soldiers. The 18- to 22-year-olds who make up the majority of our trainees are an interesting lot. Like every generation, they have unique characteristics, significant strengths and some weaknesses.

The bulk of our recruits were in elementary school when the World Trade Center buildings were hit by terrorists. They willingly joined an Army that has been continuously at war through their teens; they knew we wanted them as a result of the "Army of One" and "Army Strong" advertising campaigns.

These new recruits communicate—and recreate—differently from previous generations as a result of the technology that is omnipresent in our society. They question or-



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ders as American soldiers have always done, but sociologists tell us that they do so not because they are being confrontational, but because they are interested in improving the outcome. They form teams to solve problems in different ways, probably due to the way they use technology to communicate.

The majority of our new soldiers have played with a Wii or PlayStation, but they've never fired a weapon. While some have played organized sports, most report a lack of physical exercise regimen, and few have ever been in a serious physical confrontation such as a fistfight. They have likely come from a single-parent or divorced household, and only a minority report that they have ever been part of a formal team, club or group.

Consistent with economic indicators, these men and women join the Army for financial reasons. In a recent survey, 57 percent reported that they joined to "provide for themselves or their families" or to "build the foundation for a civilian career (for example, earn money for college/learn a useful skill)." Drill sergeants report these "pay-check" soldiers are among the most motivated throughout the training cycle. They are less likely to quit because they fear the financial repercussions, and they are proud of themselves for providing for their families.

Some—21 percent—joined the Army "to be challenged/make something of themselves," and the third-largest group reported that they joined "for patriotic reasons/because they want to be a soldier." In stark contrast to stereotypes about the millennial generation and unflattering media images of those filling our ranks, these newest soldiers have something in common: Most of them are responsible young men and women seeking a test or trial that will change their lives.

From what I have observed, these are the smartest soldiers we have had in 30 years. They pick up concepts, understand culture, find information and apply it quickly (when given the chance and the mentoring), and "team" better than any group I have ever seen.

LTG Mark Hertling is the deputy commanding general, Initial Military Training, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. He served as the commander of Multinational Division-North and the 1st Armored Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2007–09.

SFC Gabriel Lopez, a drill sergeant with Company F, 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, makes sure all soldiers are accounted for during the company's march to the bayonet assault course at Fort Jackson, S.C.



Suzanne Kappler/Fort Jackson Leader

On the downside, however, most of our trainees arrive at basic combat training (BCT) or one-station unit training (OSUT) in the poorest physical shape we have ever seen among “draft-aged youth.” This is not because of poor recruiting; our friends in Recruiting Command are getting some of the very best from our society. This trend is a direct result of the current abysmal physical conditioning and nutrition habits of Americans in general; our soldiers simply represent the society from which they come.

A study on our arrival statistics completed at one of our Army training centers mirrors the shape of our society. At that site, about 20 percent of arriving males and 5 percent of arriving females were obese. Another trend also shows some disturbing facts: In 2000, about 4 percent of males and 12 percent of females could not pass the 1-1-1 diagnostic test (one minute of push-ups, one minute of sit-ups, and a 1-mile run). By 2006, these numbers had grown to about 22 percent of males and 40 percent of females, using the same standards.

The increased body weight and poor conditioning also result in greater injuries during initial training. Femoral neck stress fractures—a very serious injury—were rare in 1998, with only three occurrences for males and six for females in an entire year at one of our training sites. By 2008, there were 30 males and 49 females who had experienced this malady at the same site.

We are also seeing recruits from a society that is increasingly removed from the values and standards of discipline that we claim as an important part of

our professional ethos. While our trainees will learn to recite the seven Army Values, the Soldier’s Creed and the Warrior Ethos soon after arriving, we realize that the complete inculcation of these values and elements of character requires better shared definitions of these cultural norms and a lifetime of experience in the profession of arms.

These positive and negative characteristics, statistics, and trends are causing us to take a different approach to how (and what) we teach; the ways we begin the inculcation of values and emphasize discipline; and the way we conduct a physical-training program that will help soldiers reach higher readiness levels while minimizing the risk of injuries as they prepare to join their operational units.

Lessons from Combat and the Operational Force

In more than eight years of continuous combat, we have relearned what we must emphasize in training. Considering the unique type of conflict we’re in (and which we’ll be in for the foreseeable future), we have also discovered new

tasks that some of our soldiers need for survival on the battlefield as well as what they will need in order to deal with the trauma they will have experienced upon return from deployment.

Unfortunately, the focus on tried-and-true tasks and the addition of new ones causes a time problem. Without the elimination of tasks that are no longer relevant or that require excessive time or resources with which to gain proficiency, or the transferring of those that are more appropriately taught and trained at the first unit of assignment with unit teammates, we have difficulty training those tasks that make up the basics for today’s soldier. The issue is this: We have about 660 hours available for training critical tasks in the BCT program of instruction, yet we have more than 780



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SPC Glenn Robertson, in charge of radio communications for 4th Platoon, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry Regiment, calls in a nine-line medevac during a training mission at Fort Benning, Ga.

A drill sergeant with the 194th Armored Brigade instructs soldiers in training.



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hours worth of training tasks and requirements. Trying to train more skills without refining or eliminating others will only contribute to continued poor training, ignorance of the critical basics that every soldier needs to know, or additional “task paralysis.” For that reason, we recently conducted a top-to-bottom review of the entire BCT program of instruction.

In line with the planning for that review, we also wanted input from the field, so we sent out a survey to more than 220,000 officers and NCOs asking them about our “product” and about the newly arrived soldiers. Given the combat experience of our force, we specifically asked combat-experienced officers and NCOs what tasks we should train and what tasks we should refine or eliminate in the constrained time period of IET.

We received more than 32,000 responses from NCOs and officers in the active Army, National Guard and Army Reserve. Many of the respondents provided additional insights—suggestions, some rather interesting commentary and pretty candid thoughts—that gave us more than 10,000 pages of ideas.

The respondents stated that the most important skills they wanted their soldiers to know upon arrival from basic training were the handling, firing and maintaining of their individual weapons; the application of combat casualty care; the preparation of the mind and body for the mental and physical demands of deployment and combat; the maintenance of situational awareness (“Every Soldier is a Sensor”); voice communication skills; and map reading and land navigation skills.

Survey respondents also provided interesting feedback on which tasks and skills they thought we should elimi-

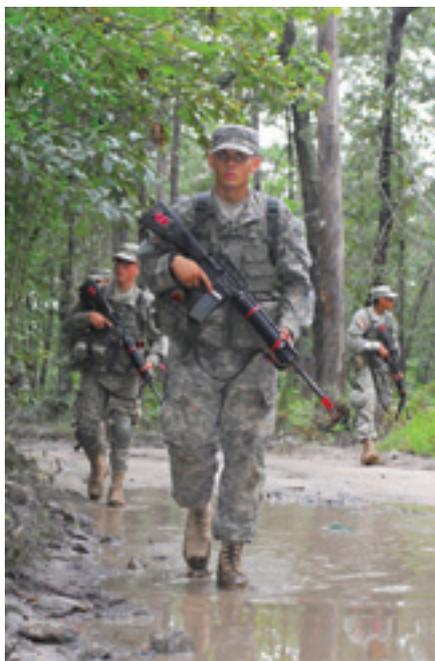
nate either because they were no longer relevant in today’s environment or because they would be more appropriately trained within the first unit of assignment after the unit had conducted a mission-essential task list analysis.

While most respondents thought our current balance of muscular and aerobic training is sufficient, a significant number were unaware of an Army regulation stating that soldiers reporting directly from IET with minimum Army physical fitness test (APFT) levels and excessive body fat have until the end of their first year to attain APFT and height/weight standards. While everyone wanted their soldiers to report in better shape, most realized that the 10 weeks of BCT plus the additional conditioning conducted in AIT will still require shared effort with our brothers and sisters in the operational force. One NCO even stated that although he wanted to prepare his new soldiers for the physical demands of the mountains of Afghanistan, he knew that would be hard to do at the Sand Hill training area of Fort Benning, Ga.

Many respondents requested additional combatives, with many commenting that we should get away from “grappling” and get to more relevant fighting techniques. Interestingly, more than 30 percent said that we should replace bayonet training with pugil training. A large number of leaders said they wanted to know more about the soldiers they were receiving from IET—more information than “passed the APFT; qualified with the weapons; attended required training.”

While this is only a snapshot of the survey input, combining this data with the operational lessons from multiple theaters and commanders allowed us to contribute to a more complete and much-needed review of how we train new soldiers.

PVT Jesse Black, Company A, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry Regiment, leads soldiers along a patrol route at Fort Benning, Ga.



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What's Changing

With a better understanding of the current generation of soldiers we're training—and of the requirement to incorporate effects of combat lessons linked to the demands of the current operational environment and from the operational force—we are incorporating changes into basic combat training.

To best improve the physical conditioning of the average trainee while best preparing that soldier for the first unit of assignment without causing physical damage, the Army Physical Fitness School has expanded the program of standardized physical training based on an extensive scientific study we have recently completed.

The recent publication of training circular 3-22.20, which outlines new ways to conduct physical readiness training, also provides detailed programs and specific instructions for drill sergeants, platoon sergeants and IET cadre as they train their charges, and as we all walk the very fine line between physical improvement linked to stress and physical injury linked to overstress.

Fort Benning has helped us revise the basic rifle marksmanship and the advanced rifle marksmanship (ARM)

strategies and programs. All soldiers will fire more ammunition than ever before during stressful combat-like periods as we continue to adapt and adjust the training based on what we have learned from our combat experience. For example, during qualification, soldiers going into the Infantry military occupational specialty (MOS) will qualify with advanced optics and M4s (the weapon that the great majority of them will have in their first unit); soldiers going into all other MOSs will qualify with the basic Army weapon, the M16A2. All soldiers will fire more rounds than before during ARM, with the Infantry OSUT soldiers performing additional tasks. The focus will be on all soldiers being confident, comfortable, familiar and qualified with their personal weapon.

The Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning has also taken on a review of Army combatives and will likely increase emphasis on fighting skills that are more relevant to combat situations. In addition, we have already revised the pugil and bayonet training periods of instruction, eliminating the Bayonet Assault Course for a more active pugil fighting course and applying the skills of "fighting with a weapon" to replace some of the more outdated bayonet movements.

The medical community has also learned much during recent operations; as a result we are revising the Tactical Combat Casualty Care Course with BCT (what used to be called Combat Lifesaver). Extensive combat experience helped us revise our training program, and we have adapted the most critical tasks, especially those related to stopping the kind of hemorrhage we find in the most traumatic injuries on the battlefield.

We are studying the best ways to train soldiers by connecting them to digital devices and applications. Given the plethora of handheld information systems and the variety of applications that could be adapted to tasks we train repeatedly, we believe that these relatively simple and inexpensive devices can help train and reduce the time to gain mastery in some of the more unique requirements within basic and advanced individual training.

West Point's Army Center of Excellence for the Professional Military Ethic—the Army's proponent for values and ethics training—is helping us find new ways to improve the precision and rigor in training the Army's values. In the past we have depended on PowerPoint and drill sergeants' war stories to help the inculcation of values, but in the future we will incorporate new techniques for passing these most critical aspects of our profession to our newest members.

We have already begun sending selected drill sergeants and most AIT platoon sergeants to resiliency training at the University of Pennsylvania (a program that will soon exist at Fort Jackson, S.C.). We will begin setting a

Army Chief of Staff GEN George W. Casey Jr. addresses soldiers with Company C, 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, 198th Infantry Brigade, during a break in training at Fort Benning.



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Drill Sergeant Wayne Scarpulla salutes during the 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment graduation formation in April 2009 at Fort Jackson.

baseline with new trainees within the first few days of BCT on the Army Chief of Staff's program of comprehensive soldier fitness by issuing the global assessment tool; new trainees will also see instruction on sustainment and enhanced resilience training. These initiatives will certainly contribute to all aspects of a new soldier's strength.

With the Army's Digital Training Management System, we are developing techniques to provide critical information about graduates of BCT and AIT directly to the commanders at the first unit of assignment and beyond. This will help transfer relevant training information as well as important information about soldier dependents.

Along with the review of the program of instruction for basic combat training, we've also reviewed and revised the warrior tasks and battle drills. Using the directive to "train fewer tasks, well," we've made these tasks more specific and relevant to each individual soldier—of all ranks and MOSs—and it's clear that continuous training of these tasks is a shared responsibility with leaders in operational units. There is also an additional "task" linked to a soldier's requirement to train toward adaptability, which incorporates measures of growth and cultural and operational environment awareness. We have placed these new tasks and drills on the Army Training Network to help eliminate any confusion about the standards. Now, when a soldier recites the Soldier's Creed and states that he is "proficient in the warrior tasks and drills," there is the capacity to put substance behind the statement.

What Stays the Same

Introducing and training our soldiers in the basic tasks, while providing them with the fire of our culture, is the primary job of all the U.S. Army professionals who are part of the generating force and the training base. Our creden-



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tials are established by the actions of the soldier-graduate of our initial entry training.

Before soldiers leave the training base, we must also ensure that they possess the trait of adaptability. We must ensure that they know their training has only begun and that when they reach their first unit of assignment, they must quickly become part of their new team, understand and train to the new specific mission they are given, and contribute to the unit. We will remain synchronized with the operational Army, training the basic tasks and skills our soldiers need as they prepare to deploy as part of a larger unit for their operational missions. Providing the best soldier from the generating force to the operating force, in support of Army force generation, is driving these changes in basic combat training. ★