

Basic Combat Training: Flashbacks and *Forecasts*



Photographs: U.S. Army

In a professional Army constantly on the move, the infrastructure of training centers and schools that turn civilians into soldiers ... is now more vital than ever.

Col. Robert B. Killebrew
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By Col. John M. Collins
U.S. Army retired

Basic combat training (BCT) is no more vital now than it was at any time in the past. Current challenges are unprecedented, as Col. Killebrew so aptly points out, but BCT responsibilities remain constant. Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, the U.S. Army's hard-charging Chief of Staff, fortunately is blessed

Basic trainees drilling in their first week at Fort Richardson, Alaska, in 1954.



with a solid training base, whereas predecessors during the “bad old days” before and during the Vietnam War turned civilians into soldiers by accident rather than design. This brief flashback tells why that happened and what present day policymakers must do to keep it from happening to our over-committed warrior Army in the midst of momentous transition.

BCT companies that lack superlative cadres and resources make no more sense than elementary schools with inferior instructors. Rookies should look right down the barrel at the best the Army has from the moment they set foot on government property. They not only deserve professional troop leaders, precision, efficiency and bullwhip discipline, but are disappointed if realities and expectations fail to match, as former recruits will confirm.

Favorable first impressions are crucially important, because military slums and substandard sergeants sour idealistic young men the day they don uniforms. Poorly informed policymakers and priority-setters in the Pentagon, far removed from related realities, nevertheless exposed neophytes to such deplorable conditions that hordes of high-quality recruits adopted “Include me out” as their implicit motto during the “bad old days” in the 1950s and 1960s.

Hingeless furnace room doors, hanging ajar, creaked crazily with each errant breeze. Soot-stained paint peeled in great strips from rickety frame buildings, pocked with broken windows that wore rusty, torn screens. Waist-high weeds half-hid a faded sign, which faintly proclaimed “Courts and Boards.” Stairways, splintered by countless abrasive boots, sagged drunkenly. Prehistoric plumbing clung precariously to latrine walls adorned with high-water marks from overflowing commodes. Pathetic flower-



At Fort Dix, N.J., a drill sergeant puts a trainee through his paces in 1972.

beds and rocks that needed new coats of whitewash made the scene even more depressing.

The remainder were reserves on extended active duty, whereas nearly all 82nd Airborne Division officers were Regulars during that day and age.

Discards near the end of lackluster careers commanded each training battalion. One rum-soaked recluse sowed magnificent shade trees with blocks of salt to eliminate leaf-raking chores come autumn. A second gem, president of a special court, imposed light sentences on incorrigibles from Hell’s Kitchen because they had never been Boy Scouts. Another melancholy light colonel committed suicide.

“Senior” second lieutenants commanded most training companies, where life was an endless nightmare for three or four frazzled noncoms, who commonly shepherded 200 recruits 18 to 20 hours a day. Similar ratios pertained across the country—66 to one, for example, at Fort Ord, Calif. At least one of those sleepwalking NCOs usually

COL. JOHN M. COLLINS, USA Ret., joined the Army as a private in 1942 and retired as a colonel in 1972 after wartime service in Europe, Korea and Vietnam. He was senior specialist in national defense at the Congressional Research Service from 1972 until 1996 and has been a Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at National Defense University ever since. He has written 12 books about military matters.

was a private first class or a private fresh from basic combat training and advanced individual training, which, taken together, totaled just 16 weeks.

Company commanders screened incoming recruits to identify acting NCOs who could help get trainees into the right uniform with the right equipment at the right time. That hit-or-miss proposition lacked objective selection standards or any systematic way to channel latent leadership. Harold Carter, the world's third-ranking heavyweight fist-fighter in 1956, was a better-than-average platoon guide; no one ever stepped out of line. Even so, Carter and his cohorts, replete with NCO armbands, were poor substitutes for legitimate noncoms.

Dispirited cadremen shook recruits out of the sack in the darkness before first call, marched them from barracks to field, stood idle for hours in chilling rain or broiling sun while regimental committees conducted formal training, then marched them home again. Only on Saturdays and after retreat, when committee members scurried for hearth and home, did their thankless work begin in the barracks: teaching, guiding, counseling and supervising. "OK, men, give me your undivided attention. This is how you mop a floor, swab a latrine, make a bunk, stow belongings, police the area, scrub webbing, burnish brass, blouse trousers, spit shine shoes, fall in and fall out, stay in step, field strip rifles, perform the manual of arms, roll horseshoe packs, inflate air mattresses, puncture blisters, sterilize water, clean mess kits, stand inspection and stand guard."

Time off was infeasible, except briefly between training cycles that were as monotonous as metronomes. Indistinguishable days blended into each other until the comatose cadre lost track of time. Cumulative exhaustion turned dedicated noncoms into zombies, while less conscientious associates quit in place. Sharp-tongued sergeants, who forgot that the stream of identical questions was as fresh as an Alpine spring to each crop of greenhorns, displayed less patience than a karate chop.

Pampered teenage patricians, who found the Reserve Forces Act of 1955 a slick way to avoid the draft, simultaneously lived a sheltered life in brand new barracks on a cloistered part of the post. Those fortunate few, who spent six months in special units not affiliated with the active Army, were diapered and breast-fed by a full complement of genuine noncommissioned officers hand-picked for "outstanding leadership and personality characteristics, demonstrated proficiency in assigned duties, physical, mental and moral qualities of a high order, and a well-groomed appearance." Those stalwarts allegedly were drawn "from overstrengths presently at training installations," according to poorly informed U.S. Continental Army Com-



A drill sergeant shows a soldier how to adjust the sling of an M-14 rifle in 1965.

mand (CONARC) pamphleteers.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor visited Fort Dix during that period to inspect basic training and determine problems firsthand. Regimental and battalion officers, at the post commander's behest, trucked red-helmeted cadre from site to site to project an affluent appearance.

Training remained a farce after he left because, when the great man asked piercing, forthright questions, neither the "can do" regimental commander nor any of his commissioned subordinates had enough guts to say, "We're woefully understrength and starved for essential resources



A private learns the M-14 rifle's proper firing position at Fort Bliss, Texas, in 1968.

while Reserve Forces Act dilettantes wallow in wealth.”

Perceptive Under Secretary of the Army Stephen Ailes, who viewed counterproductive results from his lofty perch in the Pentagon, instigated several cultural revolutions that gave the Army a better handle on quality control at basic combat training centers beginning in 1963:

- First, he directed CONARC to standardize all seven installations (Forts Dix, Gordon, Jackson, Knox, Leonard Wood, Ord and Polk).

- Officer promotion boards in the Pentagon put U.S. Army Training Center assignments on a par with tactical troop duty.

- USATC priorities catapulted into second place, “just below first-line major overseas units and on-site air defense units” in the United States.

- Training platoons, companies, battalions and brigades were to be filled only “by officers of the grade specified in the table of distribution.”

- The limit on second lieutenants dropped from “as many as two-thirds” to no more than 25 percent.

- The CONARC staff briefed every senior officer en route to a BCT billet. Majors and below attended orientations that lasted two weeks.

Red-faced Army leaders, whose predecessors had been training troops since 1775, swallowed their pride and, despite categorical denials, plagiarized U.S. Marine Corps manuals. Basic training centers assumed the air of genteel boot camps, with pseudo-Marine techniques and standards. Drill sergeants, resplendent with distinctive insignia and cocky pre-World War II “old Army” campaign hats, looked suspiciously like Marine martinets.

Each training company received an even dozen of those dandies, three per platoon. Beer bellies were taboo. Selectees, none over age 39, had to be physically fit, mentally awake and morally straight, with saber-sharp military bearing and at least 15 months retainability. E-4s were eligible only if in promotable status. Pentagon-level personnel managers looked for prospects across the United States and told overseas commands to report outstanding NCOs who soon would rotate home.

Third Army concocted a highly competitive, five-week drill sergeant course that stressed fundamentals of troop handling and basic training skills. Graduates had to average 70 percent or better on academic exams and score at least 300 points on the physical fitness test. A quarter of the pilot class washed out, but 71 go-getters graduated at Fort Jackson, S.C., on July 27, 1964.

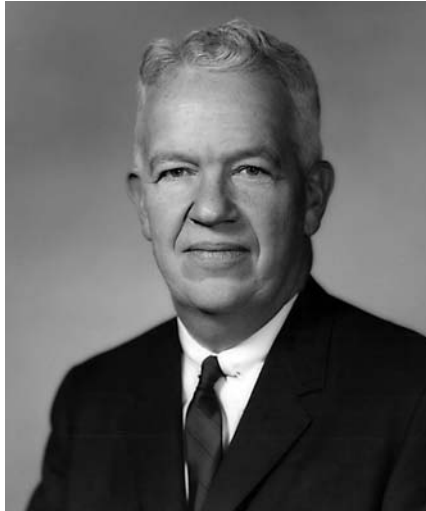
Three Army officers next converged on the U.S. Marine

Corps Recruit Training Depot at Parris Island, S.C., for a detailed briefing on aims and operations, with special attention to “that portion of Marine instruction which ... instills *esprit*.” The Honorable Stephen Ailes, newly anointed as Secretary of the Army, viewed the results in October 1964 along with Third Army’s commanding general, CONARC’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Individual Training, and the acting Chief of Information.

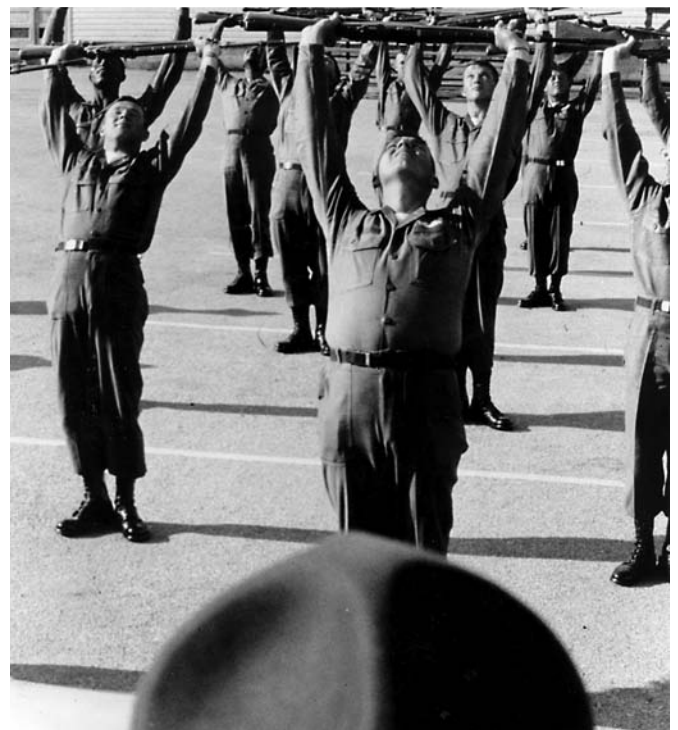
That full dress rehearsal properly impressed those dignitaries but, to make doubly sure, 10 drill sergeants subsequently attended finishing school at Parris Island with instructions to absorb Marine Corps expertise in smart appearance, discipline, physical training and marksmanship (the last stipulation probably made Medal of Honor recipient Sgt. Alvin York, a peerless Army sharpshooter, squirm in his grave). Competition with 73 classmates was so keen that the group average was the highest in three years. Ten more guinea pigs graduated in March 1965 and, like the pathfinders, became instructors at Army drill sergeant schools, which soon blossomed at every basic training center except Fort Gordon, Ga., Fort Lewis, Wash., and Fort McClellan, Ala.

Drill sergeants, in the true tradition of noncommissioned leadership, prepared lesson plans, arranged for training aids, pitched 232 hours of formal instruction and contributed expertise during 120 additional hours. They scheduled and conducted make-up classes, maintained trainee records, monitored performance, evaluated pro-

gress and provided feedback. The course was demanding, but the graduates were well-prepared to take on the role of drill sergeants in their own right.



Stephen Ailes, Secretary of the Army in 1964.



A drill sergeant watches as trainees perform rifle drills in 1969.

gress, encouraged talented recruits, tutored slow learners, earmarked misfits for recycling or elimination, acted as role models and served as father confessors. Time on the job averaged 80 to 85 hours a week.

Drill sergeants in table of distribution units not only were "equal in priority to Vietnam," where Army combat roles had begun to blossom, but were "to be stabilized on the job for 18 months." Training center commanders originally extended "hot shots" (the top 20 percent) for two full years—long enough to shine for eight or 10 cycles, but short enough to avoid burnout, given liberal leave allocations. Departing drill sergeants picked their next assignments "to the maximum extent possible" and proudly displayed a green and white ribbon on their chests.

Payoffs were impressive. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, who then was commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, in a July 3, 1966, letter to Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold K. Johnson, commended drill sergeants with these words, "Officers and men connected with the U.S. Army training base [are] performing a major task in an outstanding manner." President Lyndon B. Johnson concurred when he told troops at Cam Ranh Bay, "You are the best prepared; you are the most skilled."

Troubles nevertheless were brewing in paradise even as those potentates spoke. Increasing commitments of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam by mid-1966 hoisted the average annual number of basic trainees from 105,500 to 157,000, and pundits predicted 60,000 more the next year. Drill sergeant requirements consequently outstripped supplies.

Secretary Ailes' retainers asserted that "the sure way to defeat the program is to award the title 'drill sergeant' to marginal personnel," but desperate circumstances at Fort Dix in November 1965 prompted its top man to open a drill corporal course for selected aspirants as soon as they finished advanced infantry training. U.S. Army training centers elsewhere soon followed suit.

Well-qualified instructors unfortunately remained scarce. Lt. Col. (later a four-star general) Richard Cavasos, one of Fort Jackson's battle-hardened battalion commanders, had been blessed with a full complement of "magnificent NCOs" in July 1965, but lost 21 drill sergeants by January 1967. None of the five replacements were infantrymen, two


posed serious disciplinary problems and his sergeant major considered 10 of 16 private E-2 drill corporals unacceptable.

Recruits at Fort Jackson's short-handed training center thereafter received Army traditions, military justice and other instruction via video tapes instead of through non-commissioned mentors, who previously provided personal touches. Basic training facilities at Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Campbell, Ky., which were in far worse shape, experienced shortages that approximated or exceeded 40 percent.

Conditions got worse before they got better. Basic combat training never fully recovered until the 1980s, long after U.S. military campaigns in Vietnam terminated. How many names were needlessly etched on the Vietnam Wall as a direct result will never be known, but even one would be too many.

The basic combat training base that rejuvenates the U.S. Army's all-volunteer force currently is rock solid, replete with first-class cadres, ample infrastructures and time-tested procedures. The NCO corps, which provides drill sergeants and other instructors, is the world's best. The recruits they train are all volunteers who, unlike draftees dragged kicking and screaming into camp, willingly seek military service.

Trouble, nevertheless, may be brewing in paradise, because tough, combat-based, initial-entry training that answers Gen. Schoomaker's call depends on perpetually high BCT priorities, which are by no means assured. Peacekeeping, peacemaking, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and drug interdiction missions, for example, have absorbed proportionately greater efforts by fewer forces ever since Operation Desert Storm subsided in 1991. Assorted duties in Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, Bosnia, Kosovo and maybe Haiti currently soak up

human resources like a gigantic sponge, with no prospect of sizable reinforcements and no end in sight. Occupants of the Regular Army, Army Reserve and Army National Guard consequently meet themselves coming and going on repetitive tours overseas. Temptations to cut BCT corners in response to personnel shortages consequently could become intense. Let us all hope that policymakers at the Army's pinnacle resist that urge, because substandard basic training would undercut capabilities across the board, just as it did during the "bad old days." 



Gen. William C. Westmoreland



Gen. Harold K. Johnson (left), Army Chief of Staff from 1964 to 1968.