

Back to the Basics

Maintaining a Training Focus Amid Current Distractions and Deployments Is a Leadership Challenge in Itself

by Captain Mike Henderson

“Keep it simple, because simple is hard enough.” - CPT Eastman, Commander, A4-37 Armor 1993

In the Army of the 21st century, one subject seems to be at the forefront of discussions from private to President of the United States. That subject is operational tempo or OPTEMPO, a subject hotly debated among politicians and soldiers alike. The Army’s leadership is working to determine ways to better compensate troops in order to improve retention and recruiting, so OPTEMPO is on everyone’s mind. However, leaders at the company level and below feel that authority and discipline are being sacrificed for retention and recruitment, and that Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers has taken a more prominent role than basic soldier discipline and training.

This article’s purpose is not to solve OPTEMPO issues or to advocate a closed society that only deploys its military in the event of total war. Rather, I hope to offer food for thought on how we, as an Army, should get back to the basics. In this time of frequent deployments, low operational budgets, and recruiting challenges, it is time to get back to the basic fundamentals of soldiering.

In my short ten years in the Army, I’ve served in three TO&E units, in Korea, at Fort Riley, and at Fort Hood. Each unit did some things well and other things not so well. One problem each unit shared was training distracters, which turned into excuses not to conduct training or to train on a much-reduced scale. Of the three units that I served in, I worked for five different battalion commanders, with five different leadership styles. Each had his strengths and weaknesses, but the commanders I felt were most effective were the ones who emphasized training and



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reinforced this with a constant command presence at training. Consequently, those who were present for training were the ones who best reduced the impact of outside training distracters.

A basketball coach once told me that a team should conduct as many drills as possible handling the ball; it’s a philosophy that I subscribe to. If you command a tank company, your soldiers should spend as much time on a tank as possible, mastering the automotive system, the digital system, and the fire control system. If you command an infantry company, your soldiers should

master their assigned weapon and the equipment associated with that weapon. This philosophy is not earth-shattering, but if you ask a few soldiers and leaders if they spend enough time doing what they signed up to do, I’m sure many would answer “no.”

I offer the following suggestions, none original, all learned from past leaders. These are the most effective unit training techniques that I took away from the units in which I’ve served. I’ve broken them down into random categories where I think they fit and provide a benefit.

“...We do not have enough time to attempt to get fancy. If we master the basics, execute violently, and kill what we shoot at, then we’ll be successful....”

Basic Soldier Discipline

1. Conduct drill and ceremony training for 30 minutes weekly right before sergeant’s time (because we are soldiers and this is a great method to develop junior leaders).

2. Conduct guard mount when applicable (i.e. motor pool guard, EPA detail, AHA guard, or when pulling post red cycle duties). The leader can assign one soldier more than the tasking requires and reward the sharpest soldier with a day-off and/or a battalion coin.

3. Conduct daily in-ranks inspections, again with recognition of the best soldier in the group.

4. Conduct semi-annual Class-A inspections, followed by payday activities, but re-inspect those who don’t meet the standard.

5. When soldiers realize that they will be recognized for meeting or exceeding tough standards, they become warriors of excellence instead of mediocrity, and junior leaders feel that they are making significant contributions to the unit. When excellence is the norm, it becomes infectious throughout the entire organization and the unit polices itself at the lowest level.

War-Fighting Skills/Readiness

1. Roll a platoon no-notice during command maintenance. Issue a five-paragraph operations order and task them to conduct maintenance and MOS training in the field for a day. Supervise and perform spot-checks, but let the platoon execute with some autonomy.

2. Ensure soldiers master their weapons when they go to the range, instead of familiarizing to check the QTB block. This means that leaders are present and concurrent training is well-planned and supervised. Hold small unit leaders accountable when soldiers fail to qualify, while recognizing those leaders whose squads and crews exceed the standards.

3. CTT training is frequently an after-thought but important. Brigades and battalions must make a conscious effort to plan resources and protect this vital training. CTT is another opportunity for junior leaders to excel. The most en-

joyable times that I had in command were the days when NCOs were training soldiers in the fundamental skills of being soldiers and tankers.

Lane Training

Lane training should focus, especially at the platoon level, on the basic battle drills and the seven forms of contact. We do not have enough time to attempt to get fancy. If we master the basics, execute violently, and kill what we shoot at, then we’ll be successful.

The chain of command must be the evaluators of lane training, and leadership at all levels must be held to high standards of performance. All units will make tactical mistakes, but some tasks must be executed to standard all the time. For example, units must LD on time, must execute assembly area procedures correctly, and must be ready to move at stand-to. These tasks are based on discipline and there should be consequences when they are not done to standard.

TACSOP Revision

How many times have you as a tank platoon leader or tank company commander been asked by an O/C at a combat training center for a copy of your standard operating procedures? How many times has your answer been that it is currently “under revision”? How many times as a leader have you thought to yourself, “Man, I’d better get the SOP rewritten or just plain written before we begin our NTC train-up”?

I’m sure that 90 percent of the Armored Force can answer yes to at least one of the three previous questions. Now ask yourself, why? Wouldn’t a uniform tank platoon and company TACSOP, Army-wide, make more sense than someone spending valuable time to rewrite or create a new TACSOP, therefore reducing the confusion when task organization takes effect across task force and perhaps brigade and division boundaries?

Who will the proponent be? No one, these documents already exist. Remember the small green platoon and company SOPs that were handed out during the Basic Course? Those should be standard across the board, as should

the scout platoon SOP. The only document we need to create is something for the medium-weight platoons and companies.

The information published in *FKSM 17-15-3* is doctrinally sound. Perhaps a few items require revision, i.e., from my copy (Feb 91), the CSS portion, in reference to ammo, the changes to up-graded equipment like IVIS log-on procedures, and load plans for the M1A2. As we enter the new operational environment, we’ll have to make some additions/deletions to *FKSM 17-15-3*, but they should be minimal. Operating standards for Stability and Support Operations (SASO) should be added, and tasks such as running hasty checkpoints, vehicle and personnel search, and reaction to a mine strike should be included in an SASO annex to the SOP. Unit commanders should not rewrite or create new TACSOPs; it’s a waste of time. Why force platoons and companies to learn a new SOP when AOB and ANCOC use *FKSM 17-15-3* as the standard training document?

I don’t mean to lecture; I’m as guilty as the next person of failing to make the most of my time as a commander, but as many will agree, you really don’t know how to be a commander until you pass the guidon to your successor. I merely want to advocate to the force that, in this time of change, we can still maintain our fighting edge and tough discipline in spite of the high OP-TEMPO, red cycles, and periodic lack of funds. The training opportunities are out there, but we as leaders must concentrate hard to find those openings, and our senior leaders must protect us from any outside influences because even the simple things are hard.

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