



The U.S. Army is updating its basic training curriculum with an eye toward instilling improved discipline, better physical fitness, and an enhanced appreciation for Army values and the ethics of the professional Soldier. (Graphic by NCO Journal)

# Back to Basics

## Big Changes to Recruit Training

*By Dayton Ward*

**B**asic Combat Training or the "[Ten-Week Journey from Civilian to Soldier](#)"<sup>1</sup> is the foundation upon which the Army builds professional, principled warriors. More than 100,000 men and women undertake this training each year.<sup>2</sup>

As our nation faces evolving and more complex challenges, it is vital to turn a critical eye toward the processes affecting this most fundamental aspect of military training. Recognizing this need, the Army is in the midst of evaluating and improving how it creates Soldiers and ensuring recruits who graduate basic training are ready to tackle the responsibilities the Army will soon place upon them.

### Assessing the Situation

According to Command Sgt. Maj. Edward Mitchell, [Center for Initial Military Training](#), Fort Eustis, Virgin-

ia, the Army takes an assessment of its basic training curriculum every three years per U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command policies.

"With these normal assessments and discussions with key leaders, we are getting after the 'Soldierization' process," Mitchell said.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 2015, the Army surveyed more than 27,000 Soldiers across the officer and noncommissioned officer ranks, asking them to identify the most common deficiencies in recent BCT and Advanced Individual Training graduates. Topping the list was a lack of discipline among new Soldiers, such as arriving late for duty assignments or failing to wear uniforms correctly. Also highlighted was a failure to show respect to senior-ranking Soldiers and failure to follow orders.<sup>4</sup>

The second most identified concern was Soldier fitness. This perception stems from standards designed

to help recruits complete BCT, with the idea that Soldiers continue to progress toward passing the Army Physical Fitness Test in AIT. Survey respondents described a pattern of Soldiers arriving at their first units of assignment unable to pass the APFT.<sup>5</sup>

Armed with this information, senior leaders and NCOs convened at the BCT Program of Instruction workshop at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, from October 31 to November 3, 2017. They identified specific areas of required improvement in both BCT and AIT. Led by Maj. Gen Malcolm Frost, commanding general of CIMT, the workshop spotlighted BCT's need to focus on the goals of producing disciplined, physically fit Soldiers ready for advancement to their next stages of training.<sup>6</sup>

"I equate this to baseball or football because I played sports. You want [Soldiers] 'in the game.' You don't want them on the sidelines," Mitchell said. "The changes we're making are what the Army wants and needs, and that's a better Soldier on the field."<sup>7</sup>

Reviewing and updating the initial training Program of Instruction is a result of the Army facing changes on multiple fronts. Army recruiters face the formidable task of recruiting up to 80,000 viable candidates during FY 2018 in response to expected personnel turnover as well as the National Defense Authorization Act, which called for an increase to the Army's total force strength by 7,500 Soldiers before the end of 2018.<sup>8</sup>

However, according to DoD statistics,<sup>9</sup> seven out of 10 people in the 17-24 age demographic are ineligible for military service. Primary disqualifiers for potential recruits include obesity, criminal record, past drug use, or failure to meet minimum educational requirements.<sup>10</sup>

Once recruits begin training, the Army wants to ensure efforts focus on developing and preparing Soldiers for more advanced training, so they arrive at their first units ready to serve at a high level.

"Get back to the basics of what we teach Soldiers," Frost said while speaking to workshop participants. These fundamentals, including physical fitness and proficiency in numerous skills such as weapons and communication, are at the heart of this push to streamline and improve BCT.

Also included is a renewed emphasis on battlefield first aid as well as enhanced training requirements to better match U.S. Army Medical Command guidelines.

"The MedCom POIs have changed," Mitchell said, motivating BCT changes to keep standards consistent. The expanded training covers battlefield first aid techniques such as treating for shock and dealing with open wounds or fractures.<sup>11</sup>

Another inclusion is renewed attention to Modern Army Combatives Program concepts, which is already a requirement for training in all units per [Army Regulation 350-1: Army Training and Leader Development](#). According to Mitchell, recruits who demonstrate apti-

tude during combatives training can compete for Level 1 certification, the lowest of four possible skill levels, before graduating BCT. Soldiers holding this certification are qualified to teach MACP's core hand-to-hand combat techniques.<sup>12</sup>

Instilling these concepts at the earliest possible training stages makes for better-prepared Soldiers, regardless of their military occupational specialty.<sup>13</sup>

"It doesn't matter what MOS you are. Your entire life and career can come down to just 60 seconds, five minutes, or 15 minutes in intensive combat," Frost said. "It can happen to any of us who deploy at any time, and to any Soldier who comes out of Basic Combat Training."<sup>14</sup>

## Putting the Plan into Action

A "pilot program" conducted by training leaders at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, features drill sergeants testing the revised BCT curriculum.

As part of the increased focus on discipline, the updated basic training program devotes more time to educating recruits about Army values, more close order drill and ceremony competitions, Army history, and barracks and bunk inspections. These subjects received less attention in recent years, as the need to train new Soldiers for rapid deployment saw those hours of instruction shifted toward combat skills.<sup>15</sup> The modified program incorporates additional drill and ceremony training. For example, drill sergeants have an opportunity to use platoon movements to and from the barracks to reinforce aspects of close order drill, and competitions between platoons offer opportunities to show off recruits' new skills. The Army hopes this renewed emphasis on discipline, knowledge, and increased competition will build esprit de corps as recruits learn and work together.<sup>16</sup>

Bolstered standards, designed to address the physical fitness issues, require recruits to score a least 60 points in each Army Physical Fitness Test event. The previous standard called for a minimum score of 50 points in each event. These changes bring graduated recruits closer to the desired fitness standard at the start of AIT and prepare them for their first assignment.<sup>17</sup>

"If you graduate basic training on Friday and go to AIT on Monday, you're at 60 points on Monday at AIT," Frost said. "Would we send a Soldier to their first unit assignment who wasn't qualified on their weapon? No, we wouldn't."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the knowledge and skills recruits acquire during BCT will be brought to bear during three distinct phases of training, each culminating in a field exercise: the Hammer, the Anvil, and the Forge. Each test compels recruits to incorporate everything learned in each phase of training, and the grueling, 81-hour Forge exercise brings together all the knowledge absorbed during BCT.



According to Frost, completing the Forge is a graduation requirement, upon which recruits "earn the right to become a Soldier."<sup>19</sup>

According to Mitchell, the pilot program continues at Fort Jackson, but BCT changes will not apply to Army training centers until after the modified curriculum receives a thorough evaluation by the fall of 2018.<sup>20</sup>

"We have to make sure that we test everything within this pilot," Mitchell said. "We have to make sure the pilot is complete, and we have stress-tested everything we want within this POI revision before we push it out to the rest of the ATCs."<sup>21</sup>

## Drill Sergeants Return to AIT

These planned changes impact more than just the recruits and Soldiers. Those who deliver this training will see a transformation as well.

On March 9, 2018, 84 NCOs graduated from a new 10-day course held at Fort Jackson designed to "convert" AIT platoon sergeants into Army drill sergeants. These graduates were the first drill sergeants sent to oversee AIT platoons in more than a decade. This change emphasizes the rich history and symbolism of the drill sergeant's role and status in Army training.<sup>22</sup>

"Putting drill sergeants [in AIT platoons] ... does not mean the AIT platoon sergeants are not leaders, or that they cannot train," Mitchell said. "It's just that we're going to make sure when you see that hat, it evokes a different reaction and creates a different environment."<sup>23</sup>

Along with the BCT disciplinary and fitness changes, bringing drill sergeants back to AIT will help Soldiers make a smoother transition from an Army training environment to their first operational assignment.<sup>24</sup>

As Mitchell put it, "When you see somebody walking around with a drill sergeant hat on, you understand that's the best of the best, and you need to go ahead and shape up, because you know he's going to make an on-the-spot-correction."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to converting 600 AIT platoon sergeants, the Drill Sergeants Academy program incorporates facets of AIT platoon sergeant training to provide drill sergeants with a more comprehensive understanding of their enhanced responsibilities in the AIT environment. Areas of focus for this additional instruction include drill and ceremony, rifle marksmanship, land navigation, and administrative and personal financial matters.<sup>26</sup>

"Every single Soldier understands what being a drill sergeant is about," said Command Sgt. Maj. Buck O'Neal, command sergeant major at Army Medical Department Center and School, Joint Base San Antonio, Texas. "They know they are the standard bearers. Without a doubt, this will positively affect everyone on the campus."<sup>27</sup>

## In Closing

Given the stakes in today's complex world, it is necessary to reexamine the institutions and processes charged with transforming civilians into Soldiers. Only through such assessment and evolution can today's Army continue to prepare itself for tomorrow's battles. ■

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## Notes

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