



Staff Sgt. Donovan Galbreath, assigned to 1st Squadron, 40th Cavalry Regiment (Airborne), 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, U.S. Army Alaska, demonstrates Modern Army Combatives Program grappling techniques 6 February 2020 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska. (Photo by Justin Connaher, U.S. Air Force)

Lethal Weapon

Combatives and Mental Skills Training to Ensure Overmatch in the Close-Combat Fight

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We must improve human performance and decision making by increasing training and assessment; starting at the Soldier level.

—Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army Gen. Mark A. Milley and Acting Secretary of the U.S. Army Ryan D. McCarthy

As the competitive advantage over near-peer adversaries shrinks, the U.S. Army is revising modernization priorities in accordance with the Department of Defense (DOD) Close Combat Lethality Task Force to reestablish dominance on the battlefield. Regarding the close-combat soldier, developing the capability for improving fundamental combat skills and overall human performance to secure battlefield dominance falls to the Soldier Lethality Cross Functional Team. Collaboration between the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) and Ready and Resilient (R2) performance centers offers a solution to make soldiers more lethal and survivable in the close fight. More than building relevant fighting skills, the partnership between MACP and R2 performance experts (PEs) accelerates development of performance attributes fundamental for winning in close combat—courage, confidence, focus, composure, and decision-making. Expanding the examples from such collaborations offers an approach to integrate existing Army resources to achieve the immediate goals of the lethality priority.

Prioritizing Close-Combat Overmatch

A major concern for Army leaders is the erosion of the long-held competitive advantage of the Army over expected adversaries.¹ This competitive advantage—termed *overmatch*—is decreasing across multiple warfighting domains. Overmatch erosion is expected to most impact close-combat soldiers fighting in the urban operational environment of future megacities.² Characterized as ground engagement by dismounted, squad-sized formations with a line-of-sight enemy, the extreme violence of close combat makes it the most physically and mentally challenging performance arena for a soldier.³ Building overmatch for close-combat soldiers must include improving the physical and mental attributes needed for winning in this most trying of warfare areas.

The Army response to overmatch erosion is the establishment of the Army Futures Command that synchronizes six modernization priorities: long-range precision fires, the Next Generation Combat Vehicle, future vertical lift, the Army network, air and missile defense, and *soldier lethality*.⁴ The lethality priority invests in advancements for the individual soldier, such as load-bearing exoskeletons and communications equipment. Soldier lethality also includes optimizing human performance and decision-making through enhanced training that brings soldiers to their optimal physical and mental capacity. Given the demands of close combat, the lethality priority—with the emphasis on human performance optimization—is the most relevant for the close-combat soldier to win future conflicts. The lethality priority can most impact human performance development through the existing Army hand-to-hand combat training program—the MACP. The MACP stands out for physical conditioning and building relevant fighting skills. And more than any other Army training experience, the MACP develops courage, confidence despite setbacks, focus amidst distractions, composure under extreme circumstances, and decision-making under time

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constraints—all of which are critical to performance and winning the close fight.

Developing Close-Combat Attributes

Leveraging hand-to-hand combat training to build close-combat attributes has a long history in warfare but was reintroduced with vigor in World War I. Shocked by the demands of trench warfare, leaders introduced boxing and grappling to ready soldiers with close-combat fighting skills but also to wake the fighting spirit in each soldier.⁵ Leaders believed that a soldier who could manage fear and remain aware during the competitive aspects of hand-to-hand combat training was likely able to do the same in the close combat of trench warfare. Although combatives was not an integrated feature of Army training for most of the twentieth century, other major conflicts—such as World War II and the Korean War—caused

U.S. Army Rangers toughen up with a little all-in wrestling and unarmed combat 20 August 1942 during training at a British commando depot in England. (Photo by Associated Press)

resurrected programs to develop physical and mental skills that build close-combat attributes.

Famed instructors such as William Fairbairn, with Allied Special Operations in World War II, and John Styer, with the U.S. Marine Corps in the Korean War, emphasized that combatives was as much about building close-combat attributes as it was developing hand-to-hand fighting skills.⁶ Combatives regained institutional traction in Army doctrine in the latter half of the twentieth century. Starting in 1971 and continuing with revisions into the twenty-first century, Army field manuals noted that combatives developed a range of close-combat attributes intended to sustain mental balance in combat

and “not allow fear or anger to overcome ability to concentrate or react instinctively.”⁷

The surprising demands of hand-to-hand combat and close-combat fighting in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, perhaps similar to World War I, likely played a role in fostering a renewed emphasis on combatives in the Army. Several reports indicate that one in five soldiers (19 to 22 percent) from infantry brigade combat teams experienced hand-to-hand combat during the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁸ Additionally, leaders recognized the need to foster mental qualities for winning in the close-combat fight; Gen. Peter Schoomaker, former chief of staff of the Army, as well as commandants from the Maneuver Center of Excellence, advocated for increased combatives training.⁹ Research studies with leaders and soldiers throughout the Army further support the belief that combatives builds close-combat mental attributes.

In a survey of fifty field-grade officers (nineteen responded), the majority (82 percent) believed combatives was useful in building soldier confidence and unit esprit de corps.¹⁰ To complement the officer survey, a group interview with training noncommissioned officers found additional support for MACP as a mechanism for soldiers to build confidence and learn to cope with the fear of being hit (i.e., getting punched by an opponent).

Another study conducted in-depth interviews with seventeen soldiers about their personal experiences in hand-to-hand combat encounters during war. When these soldiers talked about their training, they emphasized that combatives was critical not only for developing technical fighting skills that saved their lives but also in fostering an overall confidence and a warrior mindset.¹¹

The most expansive study on the value of combatives for developing close-combat mental strengths was a survey of over three thousand U.S. Military Academy graduates about their mandatory first-year boxing class.¹² Ranging in graduation years from 1963 to 2001, the survey respondents indicated their boxing class contributed to developing qualities important for close-combat soldiers. The table summarizes the study findings and

Table. U.S. Military Academy Graduates' Perspectives on the First-Year Boxing Course

| Boxing helped me increase my ... | To a “great” or “very great” extent |
|---|--|
| Physical courage | 73.1% |
| Self-confidence | 72.8% |
| Capacity to fight through tough times | 69% |
| Capacity to be poised under pressure | 65.2% |
| Ability to control my fear | 60% |

(Table by authors)

reveals the various qualities that the participants believed were enhanced in their mandatory course. Given the similarities between boxing and MACP (e.g., competitive, an actively resistant training partner, aggressive physical contact), the study is especially relevant to the current MACP and stands out because a large number of Army officers view their training as valuable for building close-combat attributes.

No one has specifically examined how combatives develops close-combat attributes, but unlike any other type of Army training, combatives is unique in challenging the physical courage of a soldier in the immediate face of

an adversary. Although foot marches are physically trying and live-fire exercises or stress shoots contain an element of elevated stress, these events fail to match the fear, challenge, and consequences associated with facing a willful opponent in an immediate visceral contest—when failure and defeat are very possible outcomes. Combatives, more than any other training environment, provides a setting where soldiers can actually be challenged to exhibit the behaviors associated with the qualities of courage, confidence, focus, composure, and decision-making. For close-combat soldiers who win by closing the distance with an enemy and fighting in situations of extreme violence, such training—and the mental qualities developed in the course of training—are



especially relevant. The challenge with any training in the Army is to ensure it receives appropriate emphasis.

The Soldier Lethality Cross Functional Team seeks to improve human performance optimization through innovative means. With constrained resources, an enduring challenge for any Army modernization priority, finding collaborations of existing Army resources is one approach to addressing the aims of the lethality priority. The collaboration between division MACP and the R2 performance centers offers an example of existing resources. Rather than relying on the inherent experience of combatives to build close-combat attributes, the MACP teamed with R2 to foster a more deliberate approach to building both fighting skills and the human-performance qualities most needed for winning the close-combat fight.

Collaborating to Build Close-Combat Attributes

The R2 performance centers (formerly comprehensive soldier and family fitness centers) are an integration of Army efforts that strengthens soldiers, optimizes performance, enhances resilience, and sustains personal readiness at twenty-six Army installations across the world. The performance centers are manned by DOD contracted performance experts (PEs) with advanced backgrounds in sport and performance psychology and other applied behavioral science backgrounds. PEs directly support local units by providing education and training in mental skills with a focus on increasing self-awareness and self-management based on how the mind affects behavior and performance. The R2 PEs teach specific mental techniques that can be individually applied, and with practice over time, coached to others. Mental-skills training provides a common language for soldiers, instructors, and PEs that demystifies stress responses and normalizes the difficulties of performing close-combat tasks. As mental skills are ingrained

through repeated practice, soldiers develop confidence, composure, concentration, and resilience that apply to performance in a wide range of personal and professional arenas. An important part of any mental-skills training is the practice of such skills in challenging and stressful training environments. Fortunately, combatives provides a wide range of training situations that include appropriate levels of challenge and stress for soldiers.

The two primary courses offered by division MACP are the Basic Combatives Course (BCC) and the Tactical Combatives Course (TCC). The BCC (formerly Level I Instruction) is a five-day, forty-hour course that introduces fundamental fighting skills for the individual soldier and exposure to an aggressive, striking opponent. The TCC (formerly Level II Instruction) is a ten-day, eighty-hour course that builds on the BCC by teaching soldiers additional fighting techniques as well as fire-team-level scenario training with room clearing tasks against opposing forces. The TCC exposes soldiers to the same pain, aggression, and stress of the BCC but amplifies it with team dynamics and decision-making environments that build close-combat attributes more transferable to actual combat. In recent years, R2 PEs have teamed with division-level combatives programs to integrate mental-skills training within the BCC and TCC.

At Fort Drum, New York, PEs worked with the division-level combatives instructors to optimize performance within the stress and challenge provided by the combatives courses.¹³ Fort Drum combatives instructors believed mental strength was often just as important as physical strength during close combat and in achieving success during the challenges of combatives courses. For example, one instructor commented that “the hardest obstacles for the Soldiers to overcome are usually the fear of the unknown and the ability to implement the training they receive.”¹⁴ To address this fear, the R2 PE approach included explicitly educating and training soldiers on confidence, keeping their minds focused on the task at hand, and managing their energy. After the education phase, soldiers practiced exhibiting these mental qualities within the stress and challenge inherent within the BCC and TCC. Instructors found the mental skills training to be a valuable contribution, with one stating that the collaboration with R2 PEs “resulted in a great improvement in the way Soldiers deal with chaotic scenarios that we place them in. Soldiers are learning how to hone into the CSF2 [comprehensive soldier and family fitness] training,

Top left: Company A-2 junior Lawrence Shepherd (*left*) sneaks a jab to the body of Company A-1 sophomore Michael Matthews 21 February 2020 in the men's 147-pound title bout at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. (Photo by Eric Bartelt)

Bottom left: Sgt. Teshae McCullough gains side control on Staff Sgt. William Chandler 9 March 2018 while participating in the Joint Tactical Combatives Course on Chièvres Air Base, Belgium. (Photo by Pierre-Etienne Courtejoie, U.S. Army)

such as visualizing outcomes, using keywords to alter emotions and knowing how to bring their emotions into control when the scenarios are over.¹⁵ These comments highlight the value in R2 PEs collaborating with MACP instructors to specifically identify and build important close-combat attributes.

A second collaboration effort between Fort Drum division-level MACP instructors and R2 PEs included the use of video recordings of the soldiers' performance during the training events.¹⁶ Providing feedback through video is a well-established method for enhancing learning in a range of performance settings. With the videos of soldier performance, PEs pointed out specific behaviors that indicated not only failures in performance but also breakdowns in mental resilience or lack of appropriate mental-skill use (such as getting "tunnel vision" instead of remaining agile in controlling their attention). Video recordings of students also assist instructors with ensuring objectivity in performance assessments and maintaining archival footage for course improvements.

Similar to the effort at Fort Drum, R2 PEs at Fort Carson, Colorado, were invited by the division-level MACP instructors to develop and apply mental-skills training to enhance performance during the BCC and TCC.¹⁷ At Fort Carson, the collaboration between MACP instructors and R2 PEs resulted in a primary goal of enhancing a course participant's ability to maintain high-order thinking while operating in the complex and volatile setting provided by the TCC. The PEs provided mental-skills training to enhance student abilities through seamless integration into the existing TCC program of instruction. The skills identified between the R2 PEs and the MACP instructors were based on assessment that success in the tactical combatives environment required soldiers to communicate with their teammates, remain flexible in their decision-making, and regulate their physical reactions to stress. The challenging situations in MACP training created stress and fear that sometimes overwhelmed a soldier's ability to perform effectively. In close combat, this type of breakdown in performance is an unacceptable cost to both the soldier and the unit. When these breakdowns in performance occurred during the TCC, the PEs normalized this type of stress response and used the instances as an opportunity to reinforce mental skills that could mitigate the risk of freezing under pressure. Fort Carson MACP instructors were

impressed enough with the collaboration with the R2 PEs that they expressed their interest to communicate their approach to others in the U.S. Army.

Recommendations

The Fort Drum and Carson examples of integrating the BCC and TCC training with installation R2 PEs offer a model for the entire Army to address soldier lethality and improve overmatch in the close-combat fight. An immediate recommendation is the coordination between R2 leaders and division G-3 sections to specifically task, as their primary responsibility, a minimum of two PEs at additional R2 centers to support division-level combatives training centers to further pilot test the collaboration of integrating mental-skills training with the BCC and TCC to enhance development of close-combat attributes. PEs at other posts might initially reference the Fort Drum and Carson models, but PEs and combatives instructors at other posts bring sufficient expertise to develop their own approach to mental-skills training that optimizes development of close-combat attributes. More centralized guidance on the exact mental skills and engagement protocol with combatives training can be developed in the future, but initially, each installation should explore and foster their own best practices.

Additionally, the Synthetic Training Environment Cross Functional Team can enhance the MACP-R2 collaboration with virtual simulation technology to more closely replicate the conditions of the close fight by immersing soldiers in a more complex, diverse training environment. Repetitions in this type of training build the expertise and qualities needed to dominate the close fight. This recommendation supports the DOD vision for close-combat soldiers to fight twenty-five simulated battles during training before encountering actual close-combat operations.¹⁸ Further, lethality priority resources could support additional advancements in video feedback such as the Fort Drum example.

Video technology designed to improve training, learning, student assessment, and instructor feedback for tactical settings could enhance MACP-R2 collaborations. Performance-measurement software operating on mobile devices (e.g., tablets or smartphones) captures soldier training performance on video while simultaneously allowing instructors to use the mobile device to uninterruptedly make notes, tag soldier behaviors, and rate performance actions to support feedback and after action



reviews.¹⁹ Such video measurement capabilities provide instructors with tools for rigorous assessments of soldier performance that offer trend analysis for the soldier, unit performance, and insights into different performance capabilities within the training course. Additionally, video software technologies can assist in identifying behaviors associated with effective performance and close-combat attributes that might normally be missed in MACP training exercises. Some examples where video software technologies have been used to enhance training and support instructor assessment of students include the Army Reconnaissance Course, Master Leader Course, and simulation-based Army aviation training exercises.²⁰ Other recommendations include leveraging Army after action review institutions to assess, analyze, and communicate the best practices from each installation, which can be incorporated into centralized guidance for the collaborations between combatives centers and R2 sites. Lastly, the Army should invest in additional PEs to support combatives training below the Army division-training-school level. As graduates of the BCC and TCC

A group of soldiers from 210th Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (LI), attempt to stack lug nuts 6 February 2018 during an activity that tests concentration and team communication led by the Ready and Resilient Performance Center staff at Monti Physical Fitness Center, Fort Drum, New York. (Photo by Michael Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

develop lower-echelon combatives programs, additional PEs would be available to enhance training and optimize development of close-combat attributes.

Conclusion

Combatives offers a microcosm of the close-combat fight. The chaos, speed, physicality, and immediate threat of an enemy are ever-present—if not to the degree of actual combat. Combatives repeatedly tests soldier performance and teamwork under the pressure of an endless number of scenarios. Combatives is one of the few training environments that so powerfully generates the stress responses in a soldier. The MACP-R2

training collaboration provides opportunities to mitigate the performance risk from the stress response and provides the tools for soldiers to perform optimally. The MACP-R2 training collaboration is a best practice for ensuring soldiers have the attributes needed for the close fight. Rather than two separate requirements, combining

the two programs improves both the quality and the efficiency of training. Our Army has well-established combatives and mental-skills training programs. Leaders need only to direct the collaboration of these existing resources to impact lethality and readiness for the inevitable demands our close-combat soldiers will face. ■

Notes

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