



Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan B. Battaglia, senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visits SEAC, National Guard Soldiers performing artillery live-fire training Jan. 12, 2013, at Camp Roberts, Calif. (Photo courtesy of the SEAC)

# SEAC: 'Back to the basics' is not what our force needs to retune

*By Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan B. Battaglia*

The Joint Staff

**I**t is no secret that our enduring deployment cycle and focus on current conflicts have caused some degradation and receding of core competencies and skill sets, impacting traditional roles, missions and even methods of operating. Said another way, the heavy emphasis on prepping for the next deployment has provided misalignment to some of the simple tenets of soldiering and survival in an otherwise extended garrison or unit setting.

These realities, along with our ongoing challenges of military life, equate to a buzz phrase that has recently

resonated across the force. I suspect you have heard it already: back to the basics. The phrase has taken on several meanings with regard to reintegration, readiness, military standards and so forth.

I will be the first to admit that it is certainly a catchy phrase. And since its beginning, it has indeed taken on momentum. However, I would like to inject through every service member, command and military family that merely going "back to the basics" does not accurately or totally offer a holistic glide path to returning our all-volunteer force.

## **‘Back to the basics’ an incomplete concept**

Like me, a significant number of senior leaders in uniform today grew up in an environment similar to the one that we are about to return to — a moderately concentrated and regimented garrison way of life. Back to basics is used to employ the return of some “old school” methods of operating — leadership 101; basic training principles, practices and behaviors; and a culture that we know works, because it worked for us (that is, the older generation). We had basics instilled into our daily regimen and way of soldiering that were effective then and, in some cases, can still be effective today.

During the 1980s and 1990s, our military became extremely proficient in garrison survival (daily operations), field exercises and rotational peacetime-like deployments. Quite frankly, garrison life enabled us to build on a solid foundation through persistent repetition of what I would describe as key tenets of soldiering and fine-tuning within a disciplined military lifestyle.

Over time, these old school basics developed and shaped a fighting force in proficiencies such as advanced tactics, law of land warfare, code of conduct, field craft, barracks and dormitory inspections, marching, weapons-handling, gear accountability drills, knee-to-knee counseling, physical fitness, professional development, drill and ceremonies, and other fundamental areas that are crucial to maintaining relevancy, resiliency, proficiency, and good order and discipline. Actually, I believe that on the heels of the Vietnam War, the garrison (military/unit/daily) life we maintained paid significant dividends in preparation and readiness for our military to defend the nation today.

So no argument there: The basics did work for us during that time. Yet that was a time and place practically devoid of technology. Some remain convinced that if we simply return to the basics in the areas I describe above — basics that we lived and breathed during the post-Vietnam era — we could effectively ride on the crest of the wave in this forthcoming enduring life (post-Operation Iraqi Freedom and post-Operation Enduring Freedom) in a similar garrison environment that we, in some cases, have already re-entered.

Before we jump back in time, let us take a quick look through a different lens, the receiving end — that is, a young enlisted force. For example, when I told an NCO, “We’re going to go back to the basics,” his reply was, “Sergeant Major, whose basics are you referring to? Back to your basics? I have no idea what those basics are. Are my ways that jacked up that we need to go back to yours?”

As we throw around this phrase, what does it imply? First, it implies that the older ways, methods, practices and leadership were much more effective in that era than today. It implies, too, that the basics, practices, methods of operating and soldiering used by today’s generation of service members are falling short of the mark. It implies

that we are returning a younger generation (the majority of our force) to a place that they have already been, but in reality they have not been and they cannot go.

As a 33-year military professional, there are some basics that I grew up with that were quite effective, but I certainly would not reintroduce them as applicable methods now. Indeed, we can return our troops to the basics, but it must be blended with their version, their style. Words do mean something, and while I do not completely disagree that there is value in going back to the basics, the concept in general is linear and half-baked.

## **‘Bridging the basics’ makes more sense**

There are many methods, practices and technologies used by today’s military professionals that we, an older generation, are still attempting to catch up to. Today’s basics can streamline efforts, stimulate innovative thought, produce savings, offer quicker access inside enemy decision cycles, save lives, create rapid reach back and, in many cases, generate better results. We cannot afford to replace today’s basics with yesterday’s more primitive ones. We would be consistently challenged in keeping pace with soldierly advancement and adversarial threats.

I think examples help to define the message, so what follows are administrative and operational examples that should explain where older methods still hold value and, when bridged with today, can be made better and more relevant.

During the 1980s, our Leave and Earnings Statement was delivered in hardcopy through the chain of command down to the individual owner. Monthly, and timed with the section or company training schedule, before anyone was given his LES, the sergeant or first sergeant, as a normal obligation in his duties and responsibilities, sat down with each member of the unit and went through the LES line by line. This was common practice for everyone. It empowered the NCO or section leader in leadership abilities and practical training, and gave him insights into the lives of those who worked for him. It gave us subordinates lessons in budget and finance. This basic practice provided an invaluable skill of deciphering arguably one of the most important pieces of paper I ever received as I grew through the ranks. Moreover, the practice happened systemically as it was built into the training schedule.

The LES was merely the tool that provided the face-to-face engagement, but that piece of paper created active leadership engagement, which ended in financial education, knee-to-knee counseling and leader confirmation that troops were tracking OK or needed assistance. There was no group setting or even communication through electrons for that meeting — it was face to face.

As you know, service members now receive an electronic LES courtesy of technology, which saves time and money. But this advancement has led to the degradation

of leader-to-subordinate face-to-face interaction. In fact, since this basic leadership practice has been shelved, we find many of today's service members disapproving of discussing their personal finances with their supervisors, considering it nothing short of an egregious invasion of privacy. The basic skill of reading one's LES is no longer considered a priority, lost in the battle for free time and privacy during those "down times" or periods of platoon sergeants' time.

Of course, while we are back in the garrison at home station or port, any free time is precious, and to some it should not be wasted on items that can be accomplished with the touch of a button on the computer. We should remind ourselves, however, that leadership and the welfare of the force is more about problem-preventing than it is about problem-solving.

Review of the LES allowed leaders to help shape and make decisions rather than just react to them, all in the best interest of the service member and his or her family. Regardless of the environment, this is leader engagement; it worked back then and can work now — and it can work even better using today's technology of the online LES. Therefore, you see this is not just back to the basics as much as it is bridging the basics.

An operational example is combat casualty care. Medical and field triage practices and casualty care used decades ago are still applicable and in use today. For instance, something as basic as the four lifesaving steps — start the breathing, stop the bleeding, protect the wound, treat for shock — remain unchanged.

Yet today's medical professionals — our corpsmen, doctors, and medics — have developed practices and policies leading to a higher probability of saving the life, limbs and eyesight of our wounded service members. Moreover, with today's medics and doctors, their innovative thinking, coupled with technology, has allowed us to advance the restoration of life from the first responder at the point of injury to the state-side medical treatment facility. Again, this is a prime example of bridging the basics.

I do agree that we should bring back some of the shelved garrison-shaped methods and basics of soldiering to bridge our force in this postconflict period.

Warfare does remain fundamentally a human endeavor. Technology and its gravitational pull cannot be viewed as a panacea. So in deterring and defeating our adversaries, we must remain leader-centric technology-enabled and -fostered through decentralization of command, control, and execution.

So let's focus our efforts more on bridging the basics of yesterday with today to make a better force of tomorrow — Joint Force 2020. Everyone, from the E-1 to O-10, in this profession of arms has ownership and responsibility in how our force sustains itself. This makes us all a part of the challenge. But, more importantly, it makes us all part of the solution. ■

*Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. Bryan B. Battaglia became the second senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 2011.*

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