



NCOs Train Unit Sustainment Battalions up to the Goldminer Standard

By Pablo Villa – NCO Journal

Command Sgt. Maj. Jessie Bates will grant you the vision of ideal warfighters.

That's the one of able-bodied Soldiers with a sheen of sweat on their brow and a gleam in their eye who use their array of weapons and equipment with aplomb while dispatched to fight the nation's enemies. It's a familiar image, plastered on recruiting posters and the focal point of many television commercials.

But, Bates says, that image is missing one thing.

"People get all excited about the warfighter — being a hero, shooting their guns and all that," he said. "That's what they do, they go out and they kill the enemy. But they could not kill the enemy unless they are being sustained — sustained by a brigade sustainment battalion or a combat sustainment support battalion. They can't do their job without it."

Bates is the command sergeant major for the Goldminers Team, one of the many teams in the contingent of teaching units of the Operations Group at the Na-

tional Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. The Goldminers are charged with coaching units who train at the NTC in the art of sustainment. The team of 38 Soldiers moves about "The Box" — the 1,200 square miles of arid NTC training ground — with visiting units guiding them during their 14-day rotation on sustainment matters such as staff organization, fuel supply, water supply, maintenance and recovery operations, medical operations and ammunition resupply.

Their mission isn't one that gets the type of attention that comes with the crackle of automatic weapons or the daunting roar of a rolling Stryker convoy. But, Bates says, it's every bit as important.

"You always hear all the stories of us going down and charging forward into battle," Bates said. "All these great Americans and great maneuver units that we have in battle, at the end of the day none of it happens unless they have fuel, munitions, food, water, medical supplies. None of that stuff happens. We may get that initial thrust, but if the enemy decides to resist and we're there for more than 72 hours, now all of a sudden, you need help."



Command Sgt. Maj. Jessie Bates has been the command sergeant major for the Goldminers Team of the Operations Group at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., for a little more than a year. (Photo by Pablo Villa / NCO Journal)

‘Sustainment is a warfighting function’

The Operations Group plans intensely detailed training scenarios for units rotating through Fort Irwin. Operations Group NCOs have long been a large part of that success, since they are the focal point of the post’s observer-coach-trainer, or OCT, contingent. This group has quietly guided thousands of visiting Soldiers through the arduous tempo of a rotation in The Box. These OCTs work to train units to a demanding standard using realistic scenarios and providing meaningful feedback to Soldiers from the platoon to brigade level.

The scenarios laid out by the Operations Group are based on guidance from U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. They are meant to test the mettle of visiting units and prepare them to win the nation’s wars. The OCTs are part of various Operations Group teams, such as Scorpions, Sidewinders and Tarantulas.

The Goldminers are charged with training units on sustainment, which is an intrinsic component of a unit’s success, said Master Sgt. Tremaine Hennington, the Goldminers’ senior enlisted trainer for combat sustainment support battalions, or CSSB.

“Sustainment is immensely important to the operation,” he said. “No one thinks about it as long they are getting their ammo, their food, their fuel. But the moment that doesn’t happen, chaos breaks loose. ‘I don’t have this, I don’t have that. I can’t do it.’ That makes us an integral part of the entire operation.”

Along with training the CSSB of visiting units, the Goldminers also work with their brigade support battalion, or BSB, in the art of sustainment and distribution of logistics across the battlefield.

“Sustainment is a warfighting function,” Bates said. “The warfighters wouldn’t be able to do their job unless we’re able to teach the sustainers how to sustain themselves after their initial unit basic load. That’s 72 hours. After that, the load is gone. But the Soldier still has to be sustained with fuel, water, food, transportation, anything with logistics. It doesn’t matter where we are, we still have to get supplies out to the warfighter.”

Training. Not grading.

When a unit begins a training rotation at Fort Irwin, it is greeted by the team of 38 Goldminer Soldiers.

Most of the group is composed of NCOs. All have combat experience and are deemed exemplary at their respective military occupational specialty.

“What they do is they take that experience that they have, and they share, they observe, they coach and, most importantly, they train,” Bates said. “That’s what the ‘T’ is for in OCT. They train the personnel that are in those given positions. The NCOs that are on my team, they’ve been successful. The Army has recognized that they have been successful. It’s a logical choice to have the best of the best — the ones who have actually done the job before — come out and train the personnel who are rotating through here.”

Those OCTs provide training that is coupled with TRADOC policies. Current doctrine has shifted from the previous focus on counterinsurgency to decisive action. The former notion was relied on heavily during the past 13 years as U.S. forces waged the War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. The concept of decisive action, meanwhile, has been in practice at the NTC since 2012. It is derived from analysis of Army combat engagements in the Middle East, which identified ability and skill gaps as well as expanded roles for leaders at all levels. These lessons have been blended with the Army's broader precepts of warfighting to create a common training scenario that can be applied to any unit. This scenario features a hybrid threat reflective of the complexities of potential adversaries, whether they are guerrilla, insurgent, criminal or near-peer conventional forces.

At the NTC, rotating units are matched against the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment playing the role of a peer force throughout 14 days of live-action scenarios that test all of the visiting unit's capabilities. Though the objective is ultimately to win the battle, the more pertinent facet of a unit's time in The Box is to learn how to use all of its capabilities and work together against threats while on unfamiliar ground.

"It's very important because, for one, you have got to know what you're doing," said Sgt. 1st Class Marlon Thomas, a senior BSB trainer for the Goldminers. "Two,

you can take all of this training back to home station to train other Soldiers. It gives you better insight as far as being prepared for combat. Everybody focuses on garrison stuff. But if you don't take the time to come out here and train in a tactical environment, you won't get that edge. That edge — paying attention to what you're doing out here, getting the training and keeping your eyes and ears open — that's what's going to make you better prepared for combat."

To reach that goal, Thomas and other Goldminer OCTs say they don't assign a grade to visiting units. They are there to provide additional guidance and training. They "enhance" what units are already doing and help hone their sustainment skills to be ready to meet the demands of the battlefield.

"I'm confident that we can get units to provide ammo, food, fuel and so forth," Hennington, the lead CSSB trainer, said. "But where we come most importantly into play is, can the unit defend itself? Because if they can't defend themselves, we can't push any commodities up to MSR (the Main Supply Route). We teach them how to do that here."

Bates adds that the purpose of not grading visiting units removes any semblance of an adversarial relationships between OCTs and Soldiers and allows them to focus on the purpose of the unit's rotation — getting mission-ready.



Sgt. 1st Class Marlon Thomas, left, speaks with Soldiers from the 4th Armored Brigade Combat Team of Fort Bliss, Texas, during the unit's training rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., in September 2014. Thomas is a senior brigade sustainment battalion trainer for the Goldminers Team of the NTC's Operations Group. (Photo by Pablo Villa / NCO Journal)

“Our ultimate goal out here is to help them be successful wherever they’re going to next,” Bates said. “That’s what the OCT does. We give them AARs after each event and we let them know, ‘Hey this is where we are, this is what you did, this is what you could get better at, this is what you’re good at already.’ We give them honest feedback. I will tell you that the units that come out here, they truly appreciate it because everyone would like to believe that they are on top of their game. But there will be things out there that you are going to miss or that you are not going to be focused on. Our job is to help you get focused on those different things. We teach the FMs, TMs, TTPs, best practices that have been used throughout the years. We’re just here to enhance what you’re doing already to help you get better at what your mission is.”

The Goldminer standard

Bates says that while officers have the responsibility of directing their units, it is NCOs who serve such a vital role in the Goldminers.

“What I share with commanders is there’s a reason why the Army provides a noncommissioned officer with every commander at every level,” Bates said. “The reason is the NCOs’ knowledge and experience can help an organization be the best it can possibly be. That’s the same thing here on the Goldminer team.

“We have a lot of noncommissioned officers, which we know are the backbone of the army. When they come out here, they bring that knowledge, they bring that experience, and they bring that motivation. They know that at the end of the day, they’re doing the things necessary to protect our country by making sure our men and women are properly trained and up to standard.”

That notion, he says, is in line with the Goldminers moniker, the precursor of which was in place at Fort Irwin in 1989, with roots that stretch back to 1986.

“It was originally named the gold team,” Bates said. “Then it went on to the idea of Muleskinners before they settled on Goldminers. What I try to share is that gold miners, they go out and dig in the earth to find the best quality metal there is. In our case, it’s our job to find the best sustainment training there is so that the BSB and the CSSB can sustain the warfighters. We are the gold miners in that instance.

“Our Soldiers, our NCOs, can do that. The men and women we have out here are the best leaders that we have to help develop the leaders that come out here to train. The reason that all armies around the world envy us is because of our noncommissioned officer corps. So having said that, what we do here at the National Training Center is very important to our warfighting function, making sure sustainers can do their job properly.” ■



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

