



# NCOs Make Training for Background Operations a Focal Point

*By Pablo Villa — NCO Journal*

**S**gt. 1st Class Marcos Moreno knows there are faster ways to fix Army vehicles. But the observer-coach-trainer for the Goldminers Team won't teach them to you during your time at the National Training Center.

That's because those timesaving methods — which might be easy for Soldiers working in-garrison with an array of tools and relatively comfortable working areas — are often not available and offer no advantage when units are downrange working in grueling conditions.

"Once you have been in the Army so long, you do know shortcuts," Moreno said. "But you don't want to teach them any type of shortcuts. You want them to actually go by what the book says. Somebody took the time to write the book about whatever maintenance issue it is. It's the right way to go about doing things."

Moreno is one of 38 Goldminer Soldiers, one of the slew of teams in the contingent of teaching units of the Operations Group at the NTC at Fort Irwin, Calif. The Goldminers are charged with coaching units who train at the NTC in the art of sustainment. The team of 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,

medical operations and ammunition resupply.

Moreno's team, which includes another NCO and a captain, coaches Soldiers on how to perform maintenance and recovery operations on their vehicles. It is a facet of the Army, he said, that is taken for granted even relative to the already inconspicuous aspect of sustainment operations. But, Moreno said, it's as important to units as boots and bullets.

"In the Army, you're going to need some type of vehicle to get you somewhere," he said. "If you don't keep up and maintain that vehicle, it is going to leave you halfway to your destination. No one thinks about how hard that is. And we don't want them to have to figure it out for the first time downrange."

## 'A long list of things to know'

The Operations Group plans intensely detailed training scenarios for units rotating through Fort Irwin. Operations Group NCOs are the focal point of the post's observer-coach-trainer, or OCT, contingent. The group has quietly guided thousands of visiting Soldiers through the training scenarios and provides 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. That training has to involve all of a unit's functions, even those that may be taken for granted.

"It is critical that our personnel are doing their job," said Command Sgt. Maj. Jessie Bates, the command sergeant major for the Goldminers Team. "It is critical that units can provide maintenance when the Strykers break down. It is critical they can provide parts. Everything we train here is important. But maintenance, it's this extra piece that we kind of take for granted. But it makes the brigade combat team an effective and lethal machine in battle."

The challenges that come with providing that piece are immense, Moreno says, and the trainers begin by diving into those all-important books.

"It takes a lot of reading," Moreno said. "There is a long list of things to know. We stay updated on FMs (Field Manuals) that come out with different types of vehicles. We always get a chance to come over here and research to tell them, 'Hey, this is the right way to do it,' or, 'These are the tools that you need.'"

But that's merely the beginning. Aside from ensuring that vehicles are in good working order, deployed units will also invariably need to recover vehicles that have broken down or are damaged by enemy fire while away from their base camp. Moreno said that is not as simple as, "Let's just hook up and roll out."

"We provide training for recovery missions," Moreno said. "We have a recovery lane. It involves taking action on contact. We have personnel getting fired at just to get them in the mindset that not all the time are you going to just go out there and recover the vehicle. You have to do your security operations. You have to have your gun trucks supporting your recovery mission. You have to have dismounts to clear the area before you start hooking up or recovering what it is, whether it's an MRAP, a Humvee, a tank, whatever it may be."

Moreno's team also drills units on how to conduct entry control point, or ECP, operations. Scenarios include repelling attacks from vehicles and dismounted personnel attempting to breach the ECP.

There is also extensive training on daily maintenance operations and how to conduct them in austere conditions.

"A lot of the personnel have a hard time doing that in a field environment," Moreno said. "Whether it's equipment that they didn't get issued or it's equipment they have never used, we get them to utilize all the equipment that they have that they never thought they could use out there, which is where it's meant to be used — in a field area. We do help them out on maintenance-related issues they may have. Even though they have a tank and motor sergeant, sometimes they have never dealt with that issue because, in-garrison, yeah, you break an engine or a transmission or whatever it is

and you have the garage. Out there, you don't work on a concrete pad. You work on dirt. You never deal with the severity of the type of equipment that breaks down here. So we help them out in those areas.

"For maintenance operations, the main weakness we see is having a plan. They go to field exercises before they come here and that plan doesn't always work. So they're starting from scratch. So usually you try to get them to go by what the book says, try to head them in that direction because you know the Army has a book for everything."

### 'The last thing we do'

As it does with Moreno, the notion of going by the book sits well with Staff Sgt. Carlos Lorenzo Acevedo. Acevedo is the lone OCT for the mortuary affairs arm of the Goldminers team.

He concedes his work entails an uneasy topic and one his fellow Soldiers don't commonly acknowledge. In fact, Acevedo says, he is often jokingly dismissed when new Soldiers who join the Goldminers Team take their initial tour through the building they call home at Fort Irwin. But that doesn't stop him from approaching his job with the utmost solemnity and seriousness.

"They make jokes," Acevedo said. "They come by and say, 'This is the mortuary guy. You don't need to know about him.' I'm the only OCT out here for mortuary affairs. It's hard sometimes. But it's an important job. We're the ones taking care of our fallen heroes. I take it very seriously."

Acevedo said knowing the proper processes when handling the deaths of Soldiers ensures the safety of the Soldiers conducting reviews of bodies and helps in proper identification. It also provides something to focus on while going about the grim work of dealing with a fallen brother or sister.

"When it comes to mortuary affairs, that's key to what we're doing," Bates said. "We make sure that the units, when they come through here, that their mortuary affairs team is prepared to take care of our battle buddies who give the ultimate sacrifice. We make sure that they're taken care of properly. That's one of the most important missions that we have when it comes to the sustainment piece."

Much like maintenance, Acevedo said the job offers the most difficulty when units are downrange.

"Usually in mortuary affairs, we don't do too much when we're at home station," he said. "It's when you're downrange; that's when you really do your job."

Acevedo sets up training scenarios for visiting units — most of which have only one mortuary affairs Soldier — that replicate what they'd experience on deployment. That entails being in a secure collection point awaiting word on a Soldier killed in action. When that call arrives, mortuary affairs Soldiers move to their designated flight lane to collect the body or remains of a fallen Soldier.

Once inside the collection point, the body is cleaned and inspected for improvised explosive devices or other ordnance that could pose a threat. After an inspection, a doctor is called to declare the Soldier dead.

With a death certificate issued, Acevedo says mortuary affairs Soldiers can go about the somber work of collecting dog tags, ID cards, personal effects — anything that can help identify the Soldier. Slain Soldiers are never positively identified in the field. That occurs at the Charles C. Carson Center for Mortuary Affairs at Dover Air Force Base in Dover, Del. But Soldiers try to offer evidence of who a Soldier is before the remains arrive back in the United States. Depending on the condition of the body, work at the mortuary affairs collection point takes from 30 minutes to an hour.

“Our motto is, ‘Dignity, reverence and respect,’ and that’s how we treat them,” Acevedo said. “From the point of the death to the point they get to their families, it has to be done in 72 hours.”

That rigid timeline and requirement for adherence to proper procedures is stressful enough, Acevedo said. It is compounded by the fact that Soldiers are dealing with the most frightening reality of being in the military.

“I’ve been doing this for 14 years,” Acevedo said. “It’s not for everybody. It’s a mental thing. It’s always a little hard to deal with the bodies. The first time I did it, I don’t know, I just did what I had to do. As soon as they get to us, it just becomes work. It’s your job, and you just kind of focus in.”

“The Soldiers coming here to train; we give them a class. We ask them, ‘Are you sure you can do this?’ We make sure they can handle it. If they can’t do it, we don’t force them. We get another Soldier. This is the last thing we do for our brothers and sisters. We have to do it right.”

## ‘There’s a lot of knowledge here’

“Our noncommissioned officer corps possesses a lot of experience,” said Master Sgt. Tremaine Hennington, the Goldminers’ senior enlisted trainer for combat sustainment support battalions, or CSSB. “I will tell you that this is the premier training center of the Army. I firmly believe it’s called that because these are some of the most difficult challenges you can experience. My opinion is if you come out here and perform well in these conditions, you’ll be ready to go under whatever conditions you face, no matter how arduous. Our non-commissioned officers help with that.”

Moreno adds that gathering so many battle-tested NCOs in one place to train the rest of the force is not only a boon for the visiting units, it also provides the OCTs with a chance to bolster their own knowledge of how all the pieces of the Army work together.

“We obviously have a lot of different MOS’s here,” Moreno said “We constantly all get together in one room, and there’s stuff that I didn’t know 92As did and there’s stuff they don’t know about what I do. We communicate a lot within the NCO ranks, so it gives us a look into the bigger picture of our mission. Working together with a lot of senior NCOs gives us a look at the whole picture. There’s a lot of knowledge here.”

Moreno also knows a prime method for maintaining that knowledge. It hits on a familiar theme that he applies to every facet of training.

“The Army gave you the book for a reason,” he said. “Read it. Somebody took the time to break it down to something easy to where you can follow directions. We try to get (visiting units) to go by it. Going by the book is what makes it safe and easy.” ■

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