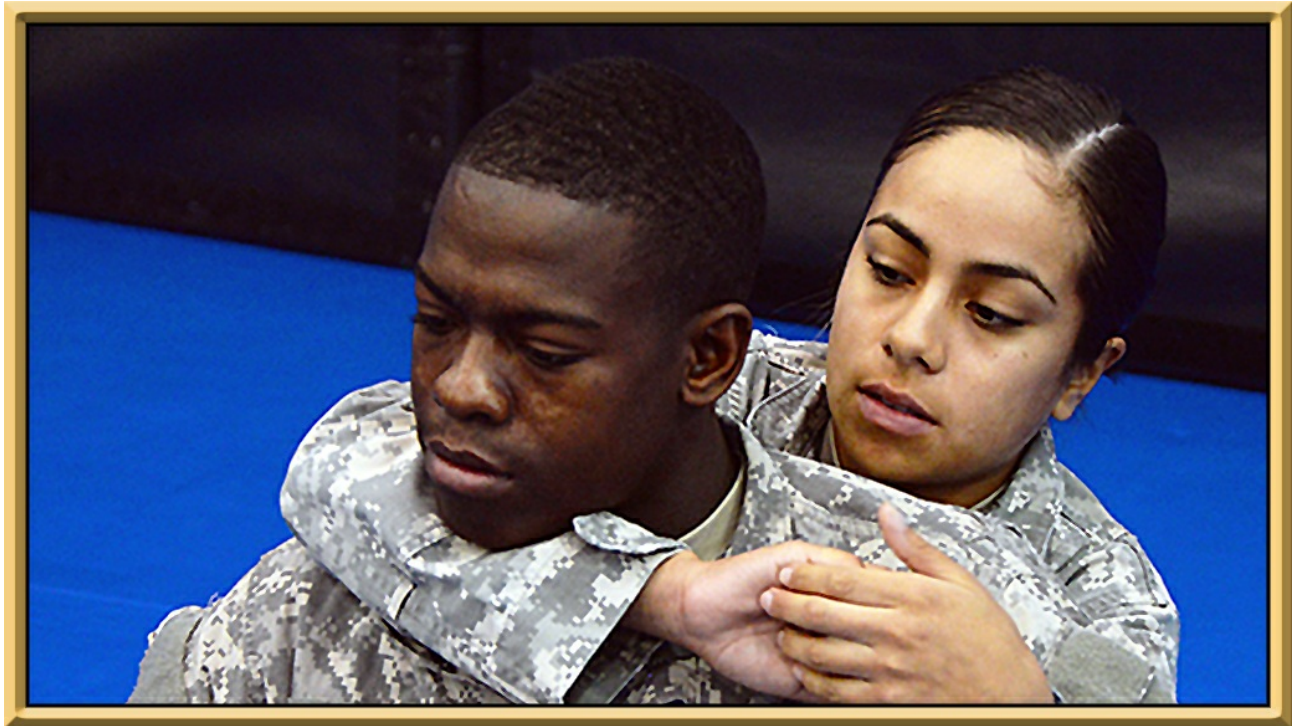


# Combatives Plays Important Role at Fort Hood

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By Clifford Kyle Jones - NCO Journal

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The Modern Army Combatives Program's story began at Fort Benning, Georgia, but a significant part of its future is being written at Fort Hood, Texas.

The Fort Hood Combatives School's chief instructor, Sgt. 1st Class Colton Smith, is also a professional mixed martial artist and signed with the World Series of Fighting after several Ultimate Fighting Championship fights and a victory on the reality show "The Ultimate Fighter 16." The post's combatives team won the All-Army Combatives Championship three years in a row. And the school's reputation draws professional fighters and aspiring mixed martial artists from throughout the region, including from Austin and Waco.

"At Fort Hood, we've been blessed with III Corps commanders and sergeants major who understand that [combatives] is a big deal," Smith said.

Smith believes strongly in the myriad benefits of the combatives program to Soldiers, some obvious and some subtle. Clearly, Smith has benefited from the fighting skills the combatives program imparts on Soldiers, and he attributes most of his professional success to his time being trained in and training combatives.

“I’m obviously very passionate about it. I don’t do combatives or promote combatives to be a professional fighter,” he said. “I *am* a professional fighter; however, that’s because of combatives. I’ve been able to fight at the top level because of the Army Combatives program, no other reason. The Army Combatives program has taught me how to fight against some of the best athletes in the world and still be a Soldier at the same time.”

Even outside the cage, though, Smith says combatives has benefited every aspect of his life. He has attended Ranger School, Sapper School, Airborne School and Air Assault School. He also completed all four levels of the Army combatives program, before levels 3 and 4 were merged into the master trainer program, and he completed special operations combatives training.



“I’ve been blessed to go through a lot of the military’s training, ...” he said. “What’s changed me the most, as a leader, as a man, as an athlete, is the Army combatives program. There’s no other skill in the Army that’s going to teach you the discipline that Army combatives does, as well as the confidence.”

That confidence is one of the most important benefits of the combatives training, Smith said.



“When you have a Soldier who’s never been in a fistfight before, and he has to achieve the clinch in the option 3 drill, you see his confidence rise,” he said.

Smith says that as he watches Soldiers move through combatives courses and graduate to the next levels, he can see their leadership abilities grow along with their confidence. The physical presence and resilience they’re building can’t help but be reflected in their character, as well.

And that saves lives. Of course, Soldiers trained in combatives are better able to defend themselves in hand-to-hand combat, but they also have the confidence to de-escalate many situations without resorting to violence or weapons, Smith said.

Downrange in Iraq and Afghanistan, Smith said, “You’re around people and you don’t know who the enemy is a lot of times.” Having combatives skills and confidence in them can mean the difference between opening fire and creating enemies and entering a tense situation

confident enough to diffuse it, winning hearts and minds.

But if those people are the enemy, it might also be the difference between life and death.



“You never know when [someone is] going to attack you, grab you, grab your weapon,” he said. “You get shot at? Your weapon gets hit, now your weapon is down: What are you going to do? You don’t know, because a majority haven’t learned how to properly fight.”

Sgt. 1st Class Jeremie Oliver, an instructor at the combatives school who also serves as a cornerman during Smith’s professional matches, said, “We’re not teaching people how to fight. I think that’s the biggest misconception.”

Instead, he says, combatives training boosts mental capacity and makes Soldiers more comfortable in their jobs regardless of military occupational specialties.

“There are a lot of Soldiers who come through our program — the level 1, the level 2 — who come back and say, ‘I never realized I could be put in an adverse situation and still move forward,’” Oliver said.

Overcoming adversity isn’t always about physically fighting your way out, Oliver said. He pointed out that the combatives school has offered specialized training to military police intended to simulate domestic violence situations, among the most dangerous calls law enforcement officers receive. But the combatives school was tasked with teaching officers how to calm two people down without resorting to violence.

“It’s not all about shooting somebody or beating somebody up,” Oliver said. “There are

escalations of that training. And I think the Army needs to push that. We can use these techniques and spur on training. The horizon is unlimited.”

Although Smith and Oliver served in the infantry, many of the other instructors at the combatives school have varied backgrounds, Smith said.

“It’s not just infantry or combat-arms [Soldiers] who are doing combatives or teaching combatives,” he said. “Some of my best instructors come from the soft-skilled MOSs.”

Smith said instructors at the school include an ammunition handler, a cardiology specialist, a medic and a Soldier from the signal corps. They are hand-selected by the school, because of their background in martial arts or other disciplines or because of their passion for combatives education and training, Smith said.

They are all encouraged to take advantage of training opportunities at Fort Hood – including Air Assault School, the Combat Leaders Course and the Small Arms Master Gunner Course. All of the instructors are Army Basic Instructor Course certified, and a stint at the school offers opportunities to attend Ranger School, Sapper School and Airborne School.

“When they leave here and they go back to their units, they’re going to be better Soldiers because of it, ...” Smith said. “They’re going to go back to their unit and be not only a force-multiplier because of their combatives techniques but a force-multiplier because of the extracurriculars they’ve done.”

The Fort Hood Combatives School is a Morale, Welfare and Recreation facility, one of the few operated by Soldiers, Smith said. As an MWR facility, the school offers services to Soldiers and their dependents, and its reputation has drawn visitors from law enforcement, the Secret Service and several “three-letter federal agencies,” Smith said.

“They understand what we’re doing here is working,” he said.





Staff Sgt. Luis Carter has been an instructor at the combatives school since 2014.

“Of course I can’t speak for the other posts, because I’m not there, but I will say that we do have the *best* combatives program out there,” he said and smiled.

He attributes the success of the Fort Hood program to the dedication of the staff.

“We all enjoy what we do here,” Carter said. “Everyone brings something to the table, whether it be they wrestled, whether they boxed, whether they flat out just have the desire for combatives. And I think that is what is the most important component. We all *love* what we do. We’re here all day from the time PT starts to 20-hundred.”

For his part, Carter practiced jujitsu for 10 years before starting at the school. Since being selected as an instructor, he has picked up boxing and muay thai skills.

From its inception in the early 2000s, the Modern Army Combatives Program has focused on what were determined by the Army to be the most effective martial arts skills, including elements from jujitsu, judo, wrestling and kickboxing.

“Those are the most practical applications for hand-to-hand engagement, whether you’re downtown at the bar defending yourself or your battle buddy or you’re overseas in Iraq and Afghanistan and in close quarters,” Smith said.

As the head of instruction, he has worked to hone those skills while developing other techniques and martial arts. He says he has worked with civilian instructors and other agencies to enhance instruction for the school's students and its instructors.

"It's a perishable skill, it's just like land-navigation or weapons firing," Smith said. "I'm really big on remodeling and looking outside the box to make our Soldiers more lethal."

For instance, civilian muay thai experts often teach classes on the Thailand martial art's striking and grappling techniques during the lunch hour.

"We're here during lunch!" Carter said. "During lunch, we're still training. This is life. This is more than just a job. We do this all day. I think that's where we separate ourselves from most combative schools.

"There isn't any one of those students who can't come here after work and say I need help and we're going to be on the mat with them," said. "They can come in at 5:30 in the morning, crust in their eyes, haven't brushed they're teeth, haven't eaten breakfast: 'Sergeant, I need help.' No problem, I'll put my PTs on, let's go get on the mat."