



Pfc. Dakota Miller from the Combined Arms Center, counts his steps in the pace count lane during the TRADOC Best Warrior Competition, Fort Gordon, Georgia, July 18, 2018. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Daniel Luksan)

The Expert Soldier Badge creates a better Army

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All military occupational specialties in the United States Army play pivotal roles in the success and direction that enables the U.S. Army to accomplish its mission. To facilitate continued success, the Army is fine-tuning a means to retain and improve the knowledge and proficiency of *Warrior Skills Level 1 Tasks* for non-infantry Soldiers, named the Expert Soldier Badge. Many Soldiers, including veterans, continue to voice their opinions about the ESB and the motives behind the badge. It is a mixed consensus gathered through regional anecdotal surveys and more formal means conducted by Army periodicals and blogs. Speaking in general terms,

their positions are mostly based on their own MOS: infantry, against; non-infantry combat arms, mixed; combat support mixed, or general support, favorable.

Other Badges

The two Army expert badges currently in existence are the Expert Infantryman Badge, and the Expert Field Medical Badge. The EIB was introduced in 1944 and played a major role in the Infantry branch by separating its members through demonstrated excellence and allowing them to take pride in objective proficiency of certain core infantry tasks. While the Combat Infantry Badge is

awarded to infantrymen and Special Forces Soldiers for satisfactorily performing infantry duties while assigned to an infantry unit engaged in active ground combat, to close with and destroy the enemy with direct fires (HRC, 2018) also exists, the EIB gives infantry Soldiers the opportunity to take pride in their uniform, especially as a volunteer, performing their craft under strenuous conditions. Awarding the EIB requires infantrymen to pass all events in the Army Physical Fitness Test with at least 70 points in each event, execute certain tasks to standard, and ultimately finish with a 12-mile road march.

The Army looks at its ability to execute certain tasks as an art. The pass rate for the EIB is typically 14 percent across the Army, one of the lowest among any other badge, including any other Army school or badge. In awarding the EIB to deserving participants, the Army acknowledged those who succeeded. The EFMB also has a long and honorable past. Introduced in 1965, the test consists of a written exam and combat medic performance-oriented tasks. The pass rate for the EFMB in fiscal year 2013 was 19 percent, making it one of the more prestigious badges in the Army (History of the EFMB).

The significant amount of training and certification required to acquire either an EIB or EFMB certification restricts many would-be participants from earning these prestigious awards. Some Soldiers go their entire career without the opportunity to certify. For infantrymen, earning the EIB allows them consideration for promotion, making its acquisition that much more prized. The infantry branch and Soldiers across the Army hold the EIB in high esteem, especially in light of its great history. The EFMB, like the EIB, consists of grueling tasks to include APFT, a ruck march, and hands on evaluated tasks. The high score requirement is a major factor which separates the EFMB from EIB standards (History of the EIB).

Opinions Vary

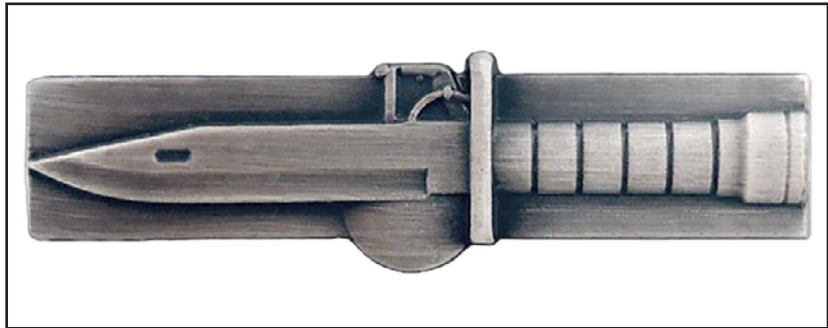
Soldiers from different MOSs and backgrounds argue that the prospect of an all-MOS-encompassing badge detracts from the EIB and EFMB's meaning and history. Many contend its introduction would simply provide Soldiers a participation badge, while proponents argue it would create and promote a more lethal formation.

Such controversy begs the question: If the ESB's introduction would increase skill-level-one task proficiency throughout our ranks, why is it not receiving overwhelming support? Just as there is the EIB and EFMB, should there not be a way for the rest of the Army

to validate its proficiency? Many naysayers in the ESB's introduction fear it will become an institutionalized vehicle for rewarding mediocrity -- a visible and ubiquitous participation trophy. To avoid this, each evaluated task and event should maintain standards which exceed the minimum skill-level-one task requirements. Possible requirements could include ensuring high minimum scoring and time standards for day and night land navigation, ruck marches, and the APFT or, upon its introduction, the Army Combat Readiness Test.

Benefits

There are a number of positive effects that may occur with proper implementation of the new badge. First, it would reinforce skill-level-one tasks in which every Soldier should already be proficient. Second, it would establish a commonly understood basic Soldier task execution standard, ensuring a more solid foundation for growth and development. Third, it would start a deep



According to former Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport, command sergeant major of Army Training and Doctrine Command, the early-stage concept for the Expert Soldier Badge has the M9 bayonet and M67 fragmentation grenade found on the Combat Action Badge, but no wreath. (Panzino, 2017) (Graphic by NCO Journal)

and meaningful history that can add value to existing expert badges. Finally, the ESB would provide a platform for recognizing excellence and a means for converting mediocrity to excellence.

The proposed badge covers three to four weeks for both the preparation and testing phase. The events, gleaned from [Soldier Training Publication 21-1-SMCT](#), *Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks Warrior Skills Level 1 Tasks*, include a choice of thirty warrior tasks and battle drills first introduced to trainees during basic combat training (STP 21-1-SMCT, 2017). Among the requirements are land navigation, the APFT, a 12-mile ruck march, and testing units can add up to five events from their Mission Essential Task List (Koester, 2017). The ability to add five METL tasks is crucial to the badge's acceptance because it allows units to ensure execution excellence of tasks specific to their field (Myers, 2018).

In my 12 years of service in the Army, every previously assigned unit operated and executed its missions in its

own way. Throughout my career not one first-line supervisor insisted I use SMCT Warrior Skills Level 1 Tasks as a reference or use it to maintain any kind of proficiency. I can say with certainty this is commonplace. Though most Soldiers understand the purpose of WTBDs, execution standards are not uniform across the Army.

This example demonstrates the ESB's importance and its potential for positive change across the formation. Its introduction will ensure a larger number of junior enlisted and NCOs will use existing training manuals, which are especially useful resources for ever imminent hip-pocket training opportunities. ESB proponents increasingly use this as an argument in support of the ESB implementation, maintaining that the introduction of the badge will raise the bar. This, they contend, will result in higher levels of proficiency over a larger number of Soldiers (Koester, 2017). NCOs further pose that it would increase MOS competency across the Army and help maintain tactical and technical proficiency while boosting Soldier lethality.

Based on personal observation over my career, I have witnessed many Soldiers, and that a growing majority, settling simply to meet the minimum standard rather than displaying motivation to excel and seek to improve their Soldiering craft. The implementation of an ESB would provide a means of reward for excellent Soldiers who achieve the high and demanding standards encouraged by the Army. Giving MOSs not represented by available skill badges to separate themselves from their peers. By instituting the ESB, the Army fills a void left by a lack of leaders' initiative to train themselves and their subordinates.

Similar Program

The 434th Field Artillery Brigade at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, has implemented a strict drill sergeant certification that closely resembles ESB testing. Soldiers across the Army consider drill sergeants among the top 10 percent in their respective MOS. They are expected to pass and be proficient in 20 warrior tasks and battle drills from the Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks Warrior Skills Level 1 Tasks to certify as drill sergeants.

Results show that being a first-time go to all stations is not in keeping with this "top 10 percent" assumption. Battalions award Army Achievement Medals to Soldiers who achieve a first-time go, which demonstrates

that such an achievement is worthy of recognition. Yet Soldiers argue the ESB is a pat on the back for something the Army expects Soldiers to know already.

Regardless of MOS, drill sergeants from all backgrounds have proven that being true subject-matter experts is difficult, given the existing high operational tempo in the training environment while maintaining proficient in drill and ceremony, rifle marksmanship, and other tactical tasks not included in the certification process. This is indicative of how competitive and difficult the ESB will be and how rarely graders will award the badge.

Concerns

Conversely, many units are concerned the ESB will overload their NCOs who already struggle to ensure Soldiers meet and maintain readiness levels. Units have such a high operational tempo that many opponents question how the Army can expect them to consistently train and stay proficient in all thirty tasks while maintaining the ability to execute to standard and in the proper order as listed in the skill-level-one SMCT. However, high performing units such as the 82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne Division and others expect NCOs to maintain their current priorities as well as those inherent in ESB's proper execution (Myers, 2017).

Conclusion

In the process of my research, I initially regarded the ESB proposal as a waste of the Army's time for many of reasons proposed by ESB cynics. After research and reflection on the rich tradition of the EIB and EFMB, my opinion took a complete turn. The addition of the ESB will force the Army's formation to be much more proficient on Warrior Skills Level 1 Tasks, the basis of all Army operations. The addition of the badge will provide nothing but a positive effect across the Army. It will be a platform for Soldiers outside of the infantry and medical branches to show their worth and validate their proficiency in the warrior tasks. Assuming Soldiers grade tasks to standard as laid out in the SMCT, the pass rate will not be as high as many expect; it will not be the participation trophy naysayers predict (Myers, 2017). This will ultimately reinforce NCOs in the performance of their job and ensure the Army conducts quality training and becomes better postured to continue winning the nation's wars. ■

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