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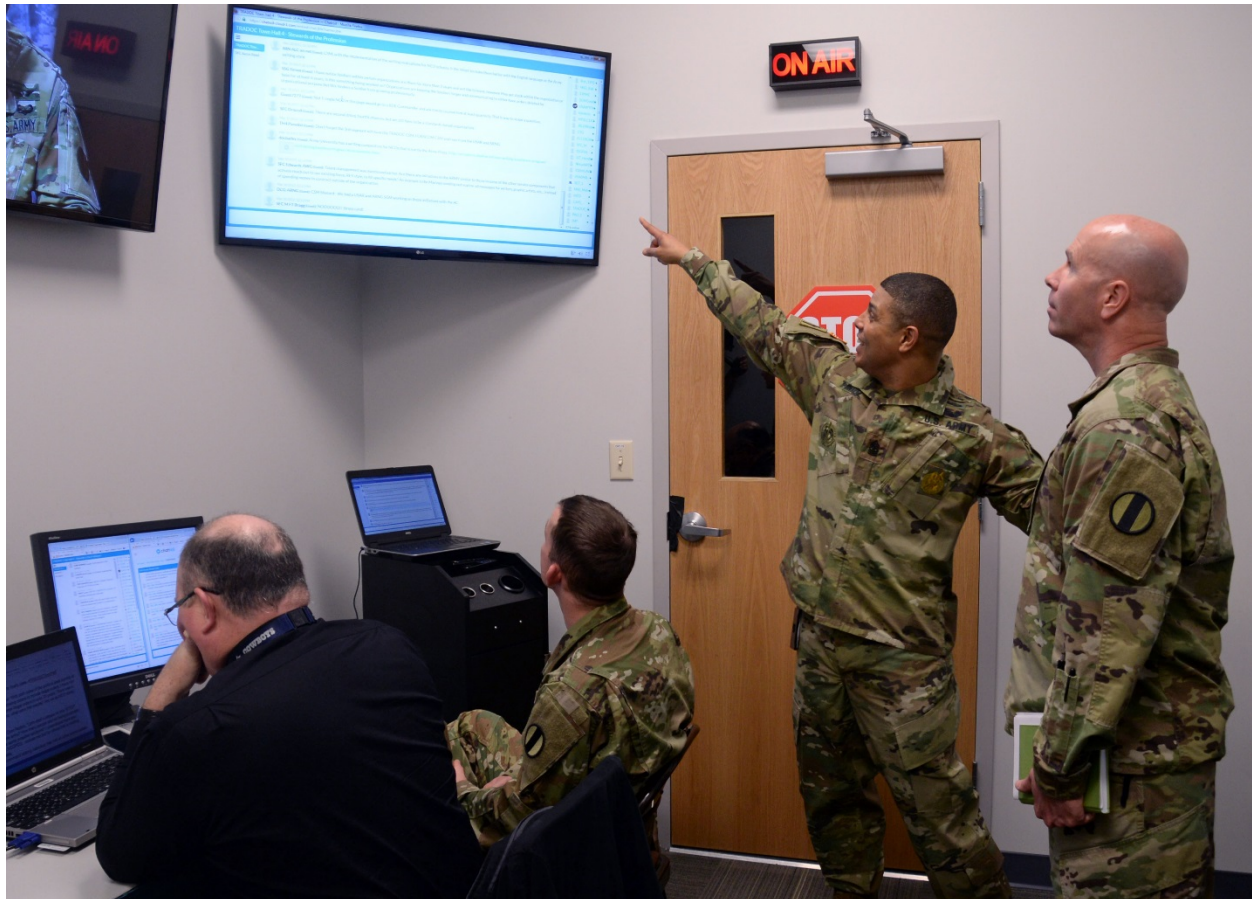
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Possible new Expert Action Badge draws interest during TRADOC town hall

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While TRADOC's State of NCO Development Town Hall 4 was going on live behind the door, Sgt. Maj. Nagee Lunde shows a question in the online chat room to Sgt. Maj. Mark Shannon. Others in the room also monitored the chat room and answered questions.

There was a lot to discuss at TRADOC's fourth State of NCO Development Town Hall. But what seemed to grab the most attention and questions from noncommissioned officers was the proposed Expert Action Badge.

The Expert Action Badge recently went through a concept evaluation at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. It is meant to test Soldiers on their Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, but many of the details are still to be finalized, including whether it will even keep the name of Expert Action Badge.¹

Though the Expert Infantryman Badge and Expert Field Medical Badge already exist, the Army wants to create a badge that validates the warrior skills of the vast majority of Soldiers who aren't in infantry or medical MOSs, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Gragg, command sergeant major at the U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Virginia.²

"We've had a badge since 1945 for the infantrymen to validate their infantry arts," Gragg said. "We've had a badge since 1965 for medical personnel to validate their medical arts. What we don't have is something for the other 75 percent of the Soldiers who are out there to validate their proficiency in their basic Soldier skills. So what we want to do is offer them the opportunity to validate their basic Soldier skills to a professional level."

The idea for the badge was unveiled in March by Command Sgt. Maj. David Davenport, command sergeant major at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. The online forums for the town hall showed many NCOs were skeptical, with many complaining that the badge would be too easy to get.

"I know there are some thoughts out there that it's going to be, 'Everybody gets it,'" Gragg said. "No. It's not a participation trophy. The infantryman does his infantry tasks every day, but yet only about 25 percent of them get the badge when they go compete for it. All we're saying is that on an annual basis a unit would be able to offer the opportunity for their Soldiers to compete and certify in their Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills to a professional level and earn a

badge saying, 'I am expert in my skill set.' Not saying you're going to get it because I can guarantee you there will not be a 100 percent pass rate."

The badge would be an opportunity for superior Soldiers to step up and show their skills, said Command Sgt. Maj. Scott Schroeder, command sergeant major at U.S. Army Forces Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. ³

"Everybody should go out and seek opportunities for excellence," Schroeder said. "I have much more respect for somebody who steps up, goes out and works to earn an Expert Action Badge, and perhaps fails, versus somebody who just says, 'I'm not going to do that.'"

As the online discussion forums sometimes became heated, Gragg asked NCOs to control their emotions and look at the big picture. The big picture is the Army comes away more prepared to take on modern conflicts. ⁴

"We get to the base of the mountain, and from there you can only see the peak of it," Gragg said. "But once you get to the top of the mountain, you can see the entire picture. I would ask them to climb the mountain and see the entire picture. We're not trying to cheapen anything. What we're trying to do is enhance our Army. We're trying to increase Soldier readiness. We want that infantry brother, when he or she is out there on a guard post, when the guard comes to relieve them, that the individual who comes up and is assigned that weapon knows exactly what's going on with that weapon. That the infantryman can say, you got it, and walk away and feel comfortable knowing that he can sleep well tonight.

"The outcome is readiness because that is priority number one," he said. "What we want to do is increase readiness overall. Right now at the concept event we have going on at JBLM, we have 53 Soldiers going through it. Of those 53 Soldiers, 25 of them didn't even know how to wear their protective masks properly. I understand that's a leadership challenge, but often when leadership fails, a policy has to be inserted to ensure that leadership does their job."

With many of the complaints focusing on the new badge perhaps degrading the importance of the infantry badge, Davenport reiterated that the badges aren't competing against each other.⁵

"It's not to say one has more value than the other," Davenport said. "It's about improving individual proficiency, getting that expertise and rediscovering a culture of training your Soldiers."

As the concept stands, Soldiers attempting to earn the badge would do 30 Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, plus five mental tasks to be chosen by a commander. Gragg said they are making adjustments to make sure that those who earn the badge demonstrate exceptional proficiency, not just the basic ability to complete the tasks.² There will also probably be some surprise extra events.

"[These extra events are] not necessarily something that is a Warrior Task and Battle Drill, but we are using those to determine the flexibility of the force to see how far we can take this event to make sure that we get the professional Soldier that we want," Gragg said. "You're going to have to work your butt off to get this badge, and when you get it, you'll be proud of it, because you have demonstrated exceptional performance over an extended period."

Several NCOs suggested a name change for the badge, an idea that Davenport said he appreciated.⁶

"We solicit that kind of feedback," he said. "That's why we are moving from the PowerPoint concept and putting it in Soldiers' hands, organizations' hands, to see if it does create value for our Army. Does it improve readiness? The naming of it is subject to change. That's good constructive feedback right there."

Though the Expert Action Badge has yet to be approved by the Army and is at least several years away from getting final approval and being available for Soldiers, at least one town hall commenter was ready to get to work, asking what he should do to prepare himself.

“For an individual to start training for the EAB right now, I would encourage him to start focusing on his Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills,” Gragg said. “Becoming extremely proficient on those, because that's going to be the basis of the test. There are going to be some physical challenges to the test. There is going to be an APFT requirement. There is going to be a forced foot march. Those things you can continue to improve. Work on your physical fitness. Even with the Expert Infantryman Badge and Expert Field Medical Badge, the tasks themselves usually aren't what break people down. It's the physical demands over the testing period that makes people lose their mental acuity and so they make a mistake.”

References

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- 3) Command Sgt. Maj. Scott Schroeder in discussion with the author, March 2017.
- 4) Gragg, Michael, “Town Hall 4.” April 10, 2017.
- 5) Davenport, David, “Town Hall 4.” April 10, 2017.
- 6) Ibid.