

Fort Sill's Move to Certify Drill Sergeants at Brigade Level Paves Way for Armywide POI

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U.S. Army Reserve drill sergeants with the 108th Training Command stand at attention during a change of command ceremony at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, June 13, 2015. (Photo by Sgt. Ken Scar / U.S. Army)

Drill sergeants are entrusted with transforming civilian volunteers into new Soldiers. They must be symbols of excellence for new recruits, as they are everything their Soldiers know of the Army. The Army's future rests on them and their ability to mold motivated, disciplined, fit and capable Soldiers.

"The ultimate goal is to produce and maintain the highest quality trainer so they can produce the highest quality Soldier," said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Gragg, command sergeant major for the Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Virginia. "The better drill sergeant we can produce, the better Soldier we can produce for the force."

So how does the Army ensure only the best of the best continue to train America's Soldiers?

Training and Doctrine Command Regulation 350-16 stipulates that drill sergeants must certify each year to prove they are still subject matter experts in all the warrior tasks and battle drills. But the process by which the drill sergeants certify varies across the Army's training centers, and even from one battalion to another.

To remedy the problem, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, now conducts the certification at brigade level. The change ensures a more consistent training experience for each Soldier, and has paved the way for standardization of drill sergeant certification Armywide.

"Fort Sill has an outstanding [certification] program that it has in place right now, almost to the point where it is a model that we can look at as a best practice to incorporate into other facilities, into the Program of Instruction," Gragg said.

Gragg said he hopes to standardize the requirements for drill sergeant certification across all four Basic Combat Training locations. The POI that would accomplish that should be in place by the end of 2016, he said.

"We will definitely use some tenets from the program in place at Fort Sill," Gragg said. "What Fort Sill has done – is doing, and continues to do – is awesome, and I can honestly say they are producing day in and day out some of our best Soldiers coming out of basic training."

Fort Sill drill sergeant certification

When Fort Sill's drill sergeant certification was being implemented at the battalion level, drill sergeants were grading other drill sergeants, which created staffing issues.

"Anytime certification needed to be done, the units had to cut this position out – that is a drill sergeant that could be utilized to train Soldiers that they can't use to train Soldiers because they have to train or maintain consistency in the drill-sergeant population," Gragg said. "That's why Fort Sill doing it at the brigade level eases some of the manning requirements; it is one level teaching it as opposed to duplication of efforts at a battalion level."

Staff Sgt. Franco Peralta, Fort Sill's Drill Sergeant of the Year for 2015, noticed that, in addition to staffing challenges, the grading and the tasks being graded differed greatly from one battalion to another, and that the certification was not much of a challenge for the drill sergeants to obtain. He worked with his command to standardize the certification process and raise the bar for drill sergeants across the 434th Field Artillery Brigade. The new process was implemented in February 2016.

"Now, at brigade level, it is more rigorous and more challenging," Peralta said. "And, drill sergeants are graded by cadre from Headquarters and Headquarters Support who are subject-matter experts. For example, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear tasks are graded by CBRN experts in that field. If it is a medical task, it is graded by medics."

The certification is offered once a month, after a four-day refresher course in which drill sergeants train on the 30 tasks outlined in the Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks (SMCT 21-1.) On certification day, the drill sergeants are tested on 15 of the 30 tasks, but do not know beforehand which those will be.

"A drill sergeant is an expert in the warrior tasks and battle drills," said Staff Sgt. Dustin Randall, Fort Sill's Drill Sergeant of the Year. "That's what we are. We should be experts in everything in SMCT 21-1. We train Soldiers right out of that book, and if we don't know how to do it ourselves, how are we going to teach them? The whole idea of this certification is to get everybody on post on the same page, so that every Soldier is getting trained to standard, across the board."

If drill sergeants fail the certification test – which has happened quite a bit across the brigade, Randall said – they receive counseling and are required to recertify the next month. If they fail twice, they will receive counseling and be removed from the drill sergeant program for a month. They will remain with their unit, but will not be allowed to train Soldiers for 30 days.

"The idea behind that is to get them 30 days of solid training so they can meet the standard," Randall said. "If they fail a third time, they will be recommended for removal from the drill sergeant program all together."

Both Randall and Peralta said they have noticed a marked difference in the confidence of the brigade's drill sergeants and in the quality of the training they provide.

"I think it's good because when the drill sergeants know they can do everything by the book, they get in front of the Soldiers and teach them with confidence," Peralta said. "That extra pressure – it's hard when someone is looking at you and testing you. 'OK, let me see how you clear an M4, how you load an M4.' It makes them nervous. But after they prepare, study, read through the book, they have more confidence to teach their Soldiers and know they are teaching a task the right way, just how TRADOC wants it to be taught."

"I think everybody is kind of walking with their chest puffed out, walking a little taller than they used to," Randall said. "They feel more proud to be drill sergeants, and if they haven't certified yet, they look at it as a competitive game. It's good stuff."

Moving toward an Armywide standard

Though Gragg praised the measures Fort Sill has taken to standardize certification across the brigade, he pointed out that the process still varies from one brigade to another. The fact that the 434th Field Artillery Brigade will soon be breaking down basic training under two Advanced Individual Training brigades, he said, further highlights the need for an even higher-level standard to maintain consistency.

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“Right now, the advantage of brigade-level certification is that it provides a consistent standard from that brigade on down. The only concern with that is that if the standard they are teaching at brigade A is different than what they are teaching at brigade B, then you have an inconsistent product that is being produced,” Gragg said. “My goal is to have a Program of Instruction in place across TRADOC so that, whether it is being utilized at the brigade level or the battalion level, the product is the same.

“Whether the Army Training Centers choose to utilize the POI at the brigade level or the battalion level is going to be up to them. The Center for Initial Military Training isn’t going to tell units how to conduct their certification. We just want to ensure that the certification is conducted to a standard that we feel all drill sergeants need to meet.”

Gragg said he hopes to have the POI completed by the fourth quarter of this year. Meanwhile, he is gathering feedback from the force as to what should be included. What are the most important perishable skills that drill sergeants need to brush up on every year? He is working to identify those areas and get drill sergeants the tools they need to keep those skills sharp and deliver the best training possible to U.S. Soldiers.

“We in IMT are in the business of process improvement,” Gragg said. “We have been making Soldiers for 241 years, but we still aren’t perfect at it. We are always looking at ways to improve our ability to produce the best Soldiers we possibly can.”