

# Jungle Training NCOs Teach Skills Ignored During Desert Combat

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With our country's most recent wars taking place in the Middle East, U.S. Army Soldiers have become proficient at fighting in a desert environment. There is only one problem with that: Much of the world isn't desert.

As the Army refocuses its attention on the Pacific region, NCOs of the 25th Infantry Division are working to teach Soldiers about jungle fighting. After disappearing for several decades, a course about jungle warfare was reborn in 2013 at the Jungle Operations Training Center at Oahu, Hawaii.

The need for the training center became clear soon after President Barack Obama announced in 2011 the Asia-Pacific region would be a top priority, telling our allies in the region, "The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay."

But if you are going to be a Pacific power, you will need to learn how to work in the jungle environment, NCO instructors at the training center said.

In addition to reacquainting Soldiers with the jungle, the course offers many basic skills Soldiers should learn, said Staff Sgt. Daniel P. McCollum, instructor and coursework writer at the Jungle Operations Training Center.

“The course is extremely relevant in that in our current strategic shift to the Pacific, most of the countries in the PACOM (United States Pacific Command) region have jungle terrain in them,” McCollum said. “These are also individual Soldier skills that we’ve gotten away from ... we need to get a massive refresher out to the rest of the force.”

Sgt. 1st Class Michael Lee Hollis Jr., senior jungle instructor at the Jungle Operations Training Center, agreed that much of the course is about getting back to basic Soldier skills.

(Photos by Sachel Harris)

“Most of the world is jungle or woodland, not desert, where we’ve been fighting,” Hollis said. “It’s just going back to the basics. We all know how to fight in the desert, but once you get into the jungle and do river crossing and all the stuff we teach, peoples’ minds are blown. It’s like they are starting all over again from scratch.”

## History

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Army jungle warfare training began in Hawaii during World War II, with the establishment of the Jungle Warfare Training Center in 1942. By 1945, the center had trained more than 300,000 Soldiers for jungle fighting, said 1st Sgt. Glen DeMarcus, first sergeant at the training center, during a brief on the training center for Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey.

“During the next several decades, Hawaii had jungle courses under several different names,” DeMarcus said. “In about 1979, Fort Sherman opened in Panama, so for the next 20 years we were doing jungle training in Panama. As we gave the canal back to the Panamanians in 1999 and then focused on the Middle East, jungle training fell off the Army’s radar.

“As we pivoted back toward the Pacific, we needed to set up some kind of jungle training again,” DeMarcus said. “So in 2012 we started talking about it, and in 2013 we started training. We have the climate, geography and capacity to re-establish jungle training. It’s actually perfect for equipment and jungle uniform testing. I see it as part of our charge to help the Army find a uniform that we can fight with in the jungle.”

Soldiers spend 12 days in the jungle as part of the current course. The first nine days are spent training in areas such as tropical medicine, waterproofing and waterborne tactics, mobility in the jungle, tracking, survival, squad lanes and how to spot improvised explosive devices. The Soldiers spend the final three days taking part in a culminating exercise in two platoons. Each platoon has its own mission as they move through the thick Hawaiian vegetation.

After those 12 days of Phase I training, the Soldiers return to their units for Phase II field training exercises to practice what they learned.

## Jungle lessons

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One of the favorite moments for students going through the jungle course is when the instructors teach how to track people through the jungle, Hollis said.

“We have a lot of skilled trackers in our platoon, so we teach a whole day of tracking,” Hollis said. “Tracking could easily go into a week of training. But we do a whole day, and most people love that. You start looking at things differently after you go to that class. You start seeing stuff you never saw before.”

(Photos by Sachel Harris)

Tracking is a skill that is not only different in the jungle than in the desert, it’s also one that is needed to simply survive in the jungle, McCollum said.

“When you get into the jungle environment, it’s a significant deviation from just simply following someone through some easily visible footsteps or through an urban area,” McCollum said. “This is wild country. It’s a tropical forest. Brushing up on those skills is something that we try to convey to the students as both highly important, not only for tactical reasons but also for just general survival purposes in the jungle.”

Staff Sgt. Cory Winesburg, an instructor and writer at the Jungle Operations Training Center, said you can learn a variety of things about enemy movement through the jungle with tracking.

“(Jungle tracking has) definitely been a lost art throughout our military,” Winesburg said. “It was last used in Vietnam, and we’ve just recently started trying to pick it back up. We go through and teach our Soldiers how to decipher what direction their quarry, or whoever they are following, is moving. How many there are. How long ago they traveled through and what different activities they did when they stopped for any period of time. It really helps develop the situation for that Soldier on the ground. They can figure out what’s going on, what they’re facing and whether they have the right ratio. If we have a six-man element, we should really only want to engage two people. Whereas if we are following a platoon, then we need to start notifying people and let them know, ‘We have a lot of guys here. We need help.’”

Communicating with your unit is another part of jungle training. The tools Soldiers have used in the past to figure out where they are and communicate with others often don’t work in the thick jungle canopy, Hollis said.

“GPS isn’t going to work,” Hollis said. “Everybody buys all these high-speed communications devices, but then when you get into thick vegetation and triple canopy, it won’t penetrate. You have to find another way. So we use an RC-292 omni-directional antenna, which is made out of sticks and [meals ready-to-eat] spoons, and it will reach. We’ll hook it up out here and it will reach all the way to Schofield Barracks. It’s just sticks and MRE spoons, but it’s omni-directional so it shoots out.”

The challenges of dealing with the jungle terrain often aren’t apparent to Soldiers until they are in the field and asked to complete a mission, Winesburg said.

“We get a lot of the combat vets who look at this as just another field problem,” Winesburg said. “Then we get them out and put them into terrain that we have experienced, and they understand finally. They realize, ‘Hey, I can’t see the people around me. I don’t know how to control this.’ Then we go through and prompt them and that helps get them to where they get comfortable and are able to regain that initiative.”

## Surprises

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There are usually many surprises for NCOs getting their first taste of jungle training. The number of ways a Soldier can get injured in the jungle surprised Sgt. Tuan Tran, B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 11th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division.

“I’m seeing that there are a lot of natural things like trees and branches that can be used as weapons,” Tran said. “Anything can kill you. I’ve learned about a lot of things that you wouldn’t expect can kill you. For me, as a Soldier, I’m learning the most basic skills that you need to know to avoid things like getting into an enemy’s ambush or trap. So it’s important general knowledge.”

(Photos by Sachel Harris)

Staff Sgt. Steven Kamakeeaina, Jungle Operations Training Course instructor, said that training in this environment requires a mindset that recognizes, in the jungle, the enemy is just one of many dangers.

“The biggest things I tell leaders to be concerned about in the jungle is not only the enemy, but also the flora and fauna,” Kamakeeaina said. “In the desert, you have your own faunas and floras. There could be sand fleas that deter a successful patrol from happening. Here in the jungle, you’re going to have large faunas, such as, in a worst-case scenario, you could run into a tiger. Or less hazardous but still problematic is running into killer ants or bees or termites. The next one is flora. The jungle, through time and evolution, has defensive mechanisms, so you run into people getting poisoned by certain trees. You have things like barbed vines or vines with hooks.”

Some of those basic jungle survival skills were what Staff Sgt. Michael Johnson, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 11th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, was surprised to learn about when he went through the course.

“I was surprised to learn how to live off what you have within your immediate team and not relying on ready-made support that could come out to you quickly,” Johnson said. “Here you learn to pack in what you are going to need for a long period of time in small unit operations.”

(Photos by Sachel Harris)

Staff Sgt. Vincent Matheny, now a training center instructor, learned much about waterborne tactics necessary to get a platoon past a river or other body of water.

“The main thing that surprised me was the waterborne training, where you take your rucksack with all of your gear and use that as a flotation device,” Matheny said. “I’m well over 200 pounds, and for me to think something that weighs 60 pounds is going to hold my 200-pound frame up along with all my gear, I’d say you are lying to me. But to actually put all of your personal gear inside of your rucksack and to have it on your back and then jump into a body of water that’s over your head, and you still stay afloat — I found that to be extremely interesting. It’s something I will definitely keep with me for the rest of my life.”

Sometimes even the simple tactics and techniques needed to get through jungle terrain are what surprise Soldiers, Hollis said.

“Simple stuff like knots can be a surprise,” Hollis said. “We teach 13 different knots here. Everybody thinks there are only one or two, so when we start teaching them knots it blows their minds.

“We teach simple survival skills like fire,” Hollis said. “Who doesn’t like to learn how to start a fire with two sticks? We teach water procurement, teaching how to get safe water that doesn’t have animal waste in it or hasn’t dripped off a poisonous vine.”

## Joint training

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Because the Jungle Operations Training Center is one of the few places to pick up the much-needed jungle warfare skills, there is a lot of joint training. In addition to Army Soldiers from the 25th Infantry Division, students from the Navy, Air Force and Marines visit the course, Hollis said.

The joint training has shown Hollis that though much of the way the branches prepare for the jungle is the same, there are some slight differences.

“We do a lot of cross training with the Marines,” Hollis said. “We’ve had a Marine instructor from the Okinawa course come out here and instruct with us, just to see how different we are. We’re not too far off each other when it comes to the jungle training. They just get you a lot more muddy. We get you wet and muddy out here, but the Marines keep you wet and muddy the whole time. But it’s not too far off. The same knots they teach, we teach in our class. Soldiers here will fail our knot test because knots are just hard, period. But in the Marine Corps course, they make you do those same knots blindfolded. So, they just step it up a little bit.

“I think joint training is good because when we’re deployed, we all fight together,” Hollis said. “I serve with Marines and Air Force all the time, so knowing how they operate makes it easier. Plus, we learn from them and they learn from us.”

(Photos by Sachel Harris)

Joint training is especially important in the Asia-Pacific area, McCollum said, because operations in the area almost always involve other service branches.

“In the PACOM area of operations, no matter what you end up doing, it’s going to be a joint force operation,” McCollum said. “And having everybody in on a class at one time, you get all

the different viewpoints. We had some (Air Force joint terminal attack controllers) in our cycle right now, and they were pointing out how their job changes while in the jungle. And getting that, having those subject matter experts receive our training and receiving feedback from them, stipulates how we can be adaptable and adjust our training in the future.”

One thing every instructor at the Jungle Operations Training Center agrees on is that learning jungle skills ends up being useful to every Soldier, even if that Soldier is sent to Afghanistan instead of staying in the Pacific. The skills taught can help Soldiers throughout their careers.

“The Jungle Course is extremely important because if you can fight in close country or the thick vegetation without line of sight of your friendly forces and being able to maneuver onto the enemy, it will translate anywhere,” Winesburg said. “It makes it a lot easier when you get into the open country, desert, woodlands. When you’re in that close country and you’re dealing with bad communications, you’re dealing with not being able to see, calling for fire and adjusting rounds by sound versus being able to see the impact. That just will multiply your capabilities when you can see. If you can fight in close country, you can fight anywhere.”

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