



Students of the new Desert Warrior course ruck through the Chihuahuan desert at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Meghan Portillo/NCO Journal)

NCOs Learn to Survive and Conquer in New Desert Warrior Course

By Meghan Portillo – NCO Journal

Their boots sank into the beach-like sand and sweat dripped down their necks as they rucked under the sweltering sun. With throbbing heads and parched throats, “I’m black on water,” was the phrase nobody wanted to hear.

The 50 NCOs training in the desert heat were not in Iraq or Afghanistan. They were testing their limits during the pilot of the new Desert Warrior course from July 1-23 at Fort Bliss, Texas.

The new three-week course spearheaded by the 1st Armored Division’s Iron Training Detachment is taught by NCO instructors and open to small unit leaders – squad leaders, team leaders and junior enlisted who are in team-leader positions. The course focuses on survival skills and small-unit tactics in a desert environment, and though it takes inspiration from the Jungle Warfare course in Hawaii, the North-

ern Warfare Training Center in Alaska and the Army Reconnaissance course in Georgia, it is the only one of its kind within the Army. Desert combat skills have not been taught in an Army school since 1995, the last year Ranger School included a desert phase. For now, the course at Fort Bliss is only for Soldiers on the installation, but the cadre hope it will be adopted Armywide within the next few years.

The course creators had two months to prepare for the pilot, and the cadre were made aware of their new assignment merely three weeks before the students arrived. Even with the short notice, however, both students and instructors considered the course a success.

“I was excited about coming here,” said Sgt. 1st Class Dionicio Zarrabal, the NCO in charge of the course. “I’ve never done anything like this. I’ve been an instructor in the past, but it was already put to-



Staff Sgt. Cory Ragin, an instructor for the new Desert Warrior course at Fort Bliss, Texas, rucks behind his squad during a field exercise. (Photo by Meghan Portillo/NCO Journal)

gether. So, this was completely different. I was very much out of my comfort zone, because I was creating something from nothing.”

The hiccups encountered during the first course taught the cadre what they need to improve for the next cycle, Zarrabal said.

“Who knows where this course is going to go? We are still adjusting a lot of things, and there are a lot of lessons learned from this cycle, but overall it has the potential to be much bigger. Wherever it goes, at least we can say we were a part of it.”

Three phases bring on the heat

The course was divided into three parts. During the first week, students found themselves in a classroom setting. Lessons covered combat tracking, counter improvised explosive device tactics, advanced land navigation and other survival skills. They evaluated troop-leading procedures, formations and battle drills, in addition to studying the history of desert warfare and how characteristics of desert environments around the world affect Soldier operations, Zarrabal said.

They also studied the desert wildlife they may encounter, including rattlesnakes, cobras, vipers, scorpions, tarantulas, coyotes, camels, big cats and antelope. A civilian from the West Texas Poison Center even brought out a “petting zoo” of the many snakes and other animals native to the Chihuahuan desert to give the students an idea of what was waiting for them in the field.

During week two, the students spent five days in the desert and mountainous terrain spanning West Texas and southern New Mexico. The students were divided into four squads, and each was dropped by helicopter into different landing zones, accompanied by an instructor. They were required to determine their location by analyzing the maps and surrounding terrain, then conduct reconnaissance missions and react to ambushes as they maneuvered to a specified terrain feature.

“A lot of times when you go to do land navigation, you are given a compass, a protractor and a

map. You are given a score card and are told to plot your points – walk from point 1 to point 2 and so on,” Zarrabal said. “It’s not realistic. Not at all. In a deployed environment, you would pinpoint where you are on the map, and from there you would move to a terrain feature if you were on foot.”

At first, the students were asked to maneuver roughly 200 meters at a time. By the end of the week, they were traveling 8 or 9 kilometers per day. They could request a resupply each day and meet at a link-up spot every 12 hours or so to collect water, food and other items.



Students of the new Desert Warrior course observe a tarantula during a brief on Chihuahuan animal and plant life June 4 at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Sgt. Marcus Fichtl/U.S. Army)

While in the field with their cadre, each squad practiced combat tracking and learned how to use the environment to their advantage.

“Without the vegetation, it is much harder to cover and conceal yourself,” Zarrabal said. “Whether it is a slope, a mountain, you have to minimize your movement and get creative with using the terrain to your benefit.”

Rucking long distances with a limited water supply was the biggest challenge of the course for many of the students, as most came from mechanized units.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been in the mountains and dismounted,” said Sgt. Cody Vance of A Troop, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. “So that kind of took me by surprise – the actual up and down that we had to do, and then having to really learn how to conserve my water while we were out there until we could get the resupply.”

The third week was dedicated to live-fire training. Students began with a “familiarization fire,” Zarrabal explained. Each student fired all available weapon systems.

“Unfortunately, some of these students haven’t fired some of the different weapon systems in months or years,” Zarrabal said. “So prior to going into live fire, we want to make sure that they get familiar with the weapon systems again before we move on.”

In the next step, students moved through Situational Training Exer-

cise lanes, reacting to targets they encountered. Because of safety requirements, targets could not be moved once they were set. This took away the element of surprise, but Zarrabal and the other cadre still considered the live-fire training a vital part of the course.

“Unfortunately, once the students run through a lane the first time, they know where all of the targets are going to be. But we included this portion of the course because it is important to know how to maneuver when you actually have live bullets going downrange.”

In each phase, the cadre helped the students hone their basic skills as well as their leadership skills, said Staff Sgt. Michael Oshiro, an

instructor for the course. Both cadre and students said the course is especially valuable for young NCOs and those new to team leading positions.

“I think this course is important, because it refreshes the basics and gives them something to take back to their units and instruct their Soldiers, making us more proficient in our basic tasks,” Oshiro said.

Plans for desert survival

When students were asked how the course could be improved, everyone said they had hoped for more lessons on desert survival.

With such a short time for preparation and instructor training, many lessons such as how to find water and how to trap and safely cook food were left out of the



After successfully taking control of an enemy bunker, a squad of students in the Desert Warrior course defend their position during a live-fire exercise June 22 at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Marshall Mason/U.S. Army)

curriculum. But there are plans to include those survival skills in future cycles of the course, Zarrabal said.

Oshiro will be the primary instructor for the desert survival portion. During the second week of the pilot, he taught his squad how to eat the nopal and prickly-pear parts of the cactus, as well as to cut the plant open at the stalk to find water. Oshiro's skills are limited, though, and he said he hopes to attend a level C Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) course – an Air Force program extended during the Vietnam War to the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. The skills he would acquire there would help him add to the curriculum and train the cadre.

“In the September course, I’m hoping to include more on snare traps, plant life, making fire and shelter, as well as a medical portion,” Oshiro said. “Those lessons will be incorporated into the curriculum to benefit all of the students – not just my squad.”

Because of disease concerns, students in the next cycle of the course will not be expected to eat any wild animals, Oshiro said, but there are plenty out there to practice trapping. Cadre reported seeing rattlesnakes, rabbits, scorpions and even an Oryx.

Staff Sgt. Cory Ragin, an instructor for the course, said he was completely surprised by how many wild animals he and his squad encountered.

“I came about three steps from a rattlesnake,” Ragin said. “He gave me one quick rattle and pulled his head back in strike position. I turned around and ran the other direction until I remembered the students were watching me and I regained my composure. And the rabbits... I told my wife one of these rabbits may drag you away and eat you. They are so huge. A lot of people think of the desert as being empty and lifeless, but there is a lot of life out there.”

Making improvements

The addition of desert survival content is just one of the many improvements planned for the course. The instructors are undergoing extensive training, so that all are experts on the material being taught. The schedule will be more streamlined, and Zarrabal said they are considering adding reconnaissance, ambush, combat-tracking and desert-survival lanes to the tasks required of the students during week two.

“As instructors, we are constantly thinking of what we can do to improve for the next cycle,” Ragin said. “What do we need to do so that somebody from Fort Bragg, N.C., will want to come to Fort Bliss for four weeks to get that training? What do we have to do for that to happen? We are constantly thinking about that.”



Spc. Riley Ladd of 4th Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team (Stryker), 1st Armored Division takes a break to drink water while on a field exercise during the new Desert Warrior course at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Meghan Portillo/NCO Journal)



Sgt. Brendan Pinkham, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, finishes his last land navigation point June 5 during the new Desert Warrior course at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photo by Sgt. Marcus Fichtl/U.S. Army)

One cycle of the course will be offered each quarter, with the next set to begin Sept. 7. That gives the cadre about two and a half months to prepare. Zarrabal said he is confident it is more than enough time to make significant improvements before the new students arrive, as it is more time than they had to create the course.

“Having a limited time for preparation is not necessarily a bad thing,” Zarrabal said. “Even if the course doesn’t go as planned, at least we have all of those lessons learned, and we can apply them almost immediately. Had they given us six or seven months to prepare and it still wasn’t what they wanted, that time was wasted.

“I have no doubt that this course is going to get better. Once we get more feedback and get more efficient with how we present the material, I actually think this course is going to be really, really good.”

The logo for NCO JOURNAL. The text "NCO JOURNAL" is in a bold, serif font. The "N" and "O" are larger and more prominent. Below the text is a stylized arrow pointing to the right, with a small flame-like shape at its tip.

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

