



Command sergeants major from across the U.S. Army Reserve perform the Sprint-Drag-Carry event of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) at Fort Eustis, Va., Oct. 25, 2019, during the Army Reserve Senior Enlisted Council. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)

# ACFT: Feasible, Practical, and Safe

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**T**he initial unveiling of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) in 2018 raised many questions and concerns from Soldiers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and officers across the formations (Cox, 2018a; Barno & Bensahel, 2018). As a former first sergeant of three different companies, I also had questions of feasibility, application, time constraints, as well as individual Soldier ability when it came to the new six-event test. So I researched, analyzed, and developed a company-level ACFT train-up that could prepare not only my Soldiers, but perhaps even set a precedent on how Soldiers should train across the Army.

My objective was simple: Develop a program that would be effective, safe, and feasible, no matter the location. My target goal for each event was 70%. Over the next four months, I implemented my first pilot program with a group of 46 Soldiers and staff officers

in 14 different military occupation specialties (MOS). The purpose of this article is to highlight the lessons learned from 10 weeks of training and research on the ACFT and to present a feasible option for all Soldiers to train up to standard.

## Introduction of the ACFT

The ACFT was presented to Soldiers in late 2018 as the new future Army test of record (Vergun, 2018). About the new ACFT, former Secretary of the Army Mark T. Esper said, “If you can’t pass the Army Combat Fitness Test, then there’s probably not a spot for you in the Army” (Vergun, 2018, para 1). Beginning in October 2018, there would be a year-long field test with an active Army unit. However, preliminary score cards flooded the internet and caused some alarm (Myers 2018). Some of the biggest things to stick out to my Soldiers were the





Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Robinson, Military Intelligence Readiness Command, throws a medicine ball over his head during the Standing Power Throw event of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) at Fort Eustis, Va., Oct. 25, 2019, during the Army Reserve Senior Enlisted Council. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)

age and gender neutral standards, the six events (which included a deadlift that some were not prepared for), and the shifting minimum standards based on type of unit or MOS (Myers 2018). In order to better understand the new test, my commander and I took it ourselves.

### Lead by Example

My Commander and I felt that we had a slight advantage going into the ACFT due to our normal workout routines already involving deadlifts and extensive cross-training over the last year. We considered ourselves fit and both scored above 290 on our last APFT. Unfortunately, due to the unavailability of ACFT testing officials at the time, we had no choice but to grade each other. Obviously, this is not an ideal scenario during a fitness test, however, in order to complete the ACFT and learn how to build and implement a training program for our Soldiers, we graded each other as honestly as possible.

The six events of the ACFT in order are: The Three Repetition Maximum Deadlift (140 lbs. for a 60%), the Standing Power Throw (four meters for a 60%), the Hand Release Push-Up (10 repetitions for a 60%), the Sprint-Drag-Carry (an overall 3:35 for a 60%), the Leg Tuck (completing one repetition for a 60%), and the Two-Mile Run (21:00 minutes for a 60%) (Department of the Army, 2019) (\*all scores were based off the original ACFT Field Testing Manual version 1.3).

### The Deadlift

For the deadlift event I immediately put 340 lbs. on the bar to attempt the maximum amount of points. I thought it would not be difficult as I usually deadlift more than that during my regular workouts. This time was different though. The Trap Bar used in the ACFT deadlift is not the same as a deadlift with a barbell. This event requires grip strength, balance, and the most difficult part – controlling the bar from rotating forward, backward, or rolling out of your hands.

I took the weight down to 300 lbs. and was able to complete the three repetitions. My commander followed with similar results.

### The Standing Power Throw

The Standing Power Throw is done with a 10 lbs. medicine ball. The event is a momentum and explosive-based exercise, like a Kettlebell swing. We both managed to throw for 12 meters. This put us over the 90% mark.

### The Hand Release Push-Up

The goal of the Hand Release Push-Up (HRP) is to complete as many repetitions as possible in two minutes. The former Push-Up and Hand Release Push-Up events are similar in that they are both considered to be an upper body endurance test which replicates the sustained pushing used in combat (Cox, 2018b). The difference, however, is during the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) push-up, Soldiers can take some of the endurance out of it by resting in the modified front lean-and-rest position while arching their back. With the HRP there is no rest available. Once the Soldier stops for 3-5 seconds (depending on the grader's interpretation), they are considered to be in the rest position and therefore have completed the event.

I have maxed out my Push-Ups on the APFT for the last 20 years. However, on the ACFT with the HRPs, I could only complete 43 out of the required 70 to max. The repetitions must be streamlined and efficient; removing your hands noticeably from the ground and locking the arms out at the top with constant movement. What I learned here is two minutes goes by quickly. The 43 executed HRPs earned me 87 points, but if I could take it again, I would use the time more wisely.

### Sprint-Drag-Carry

The Sprint-Drag-Carry (SDC) is a test of strength, endurance, and anaerobic capacity, and, in my opinion,

the most applicable to a combat scenario. With this event we conducted a 50-meter shuttle sprint, a 90 lbs. sled drag for 50 meters, laterals for 50 meters, two 40 lbs. kettlebell carry for 50 meters, and a final 50-meter shuttle sprint.

My first time on this event, I logged a 2:01 which put me at a 78%. I did not give 100% effort to this event because I knew I still had a two-mile run to complete as the final event and was trying to pace my output. If junior Soldiers cannot make a connection to the importance of this event and how it applies to combat missions, NCOs that have deployed should educate them.

### The Leg Tuck

This event was not stressful or overly taxing. It is similar to the pull up event, which I am accustomed to. But what we did learn was that while the event as a standalone is not difficult, the other events (like the Deadlift) sap your grip strength, making it difficult as the second to last event. Ultimately, it was my grip that failed during the leg tucks and not my abdominal muscles. I was able to complete 12 repetitions, earning 84%. My commander was able to complete 16 repetitions and pulled ahead of me on the scorecard. I made a mental note on this event to incorporate more grip strength training for the pilot course for the Soldiers.



A U.S. Army Soldier conducts the “Drag” portion of the Sprint-Drag-Carry event of the Army Combat Fitness Test at Fort Eustis, Va., July 2, 2019. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training)

### The Two-Mile Run

This event was surprisingly more difficult than I had anticipated, especially with five events prior to conducting it. Not many of us do a leg workout and then go for a run, but that’s exactly what’s needed. Learn to run while fatigued. As the last two wars taught us, Soldiers aren’t always going to be refreshed and rested while moving quickly in combat.

From my APFT a few months prior, I was a whole one minute and 30 seconds slower. This was probably the biggest shock and disappointment for me from the entire ACFT. And it wasn’t just me. My commander also saw the same increase in his run time. In preparing your units, this is something you will need to voice to your Soldiers and plan for. Their run times will increase their first time completing an ACFT. They will need to adjust their training so that



A U.S. Army Soldier conducts the Hand-Release Push-Up event of the Army Combat Fitness Test, Oct. 19, 2017. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training)



running after deadlifts and a Sprint-Drag-Carry event becomes commonplace.

### The Baseline and Pilot

Over the next 10 weeks, my Commander and I analyzed the results of our test, created a train-the-trainer program for the NCOs that would be grading, and set up our baseline ACFT, pilot program, and our week eight ACFT. In total, there were 98 Soldiers that participated at some point during the entire process, however, I have narrowed the results down to 46 that took the baseline, participated in the pilot program, and took the second ACFT.

The following figures are the recorded results of both ACFTs; the baseline being their first ACFT and then their eight-week follow-up.

### Deadlift Results

The Deadlift baseline found 14 out of our 46 Soldiers tested could not achieve a minimum of 70%, while five were actually able to earn 100%. The mean average score for the group tested was 74.5 with a median score of 80. Eight weeks later, after the pilot, only five were unable to complete the 70% standard and 11 achieved 100%. The mean average score grew to 85.3 and the median to 84.

### Power Throw Results

The Power Throw baseline found 12 Soldiers could not attain the 70% minimum, and no Soldier could max this event. The mean average score was 75.9 and the median was 78.5. Test two, however, had just nine Soldiers falling under 70%, and still zero maxing this event. The mean average score climbed to 80.6 and the median to 83.

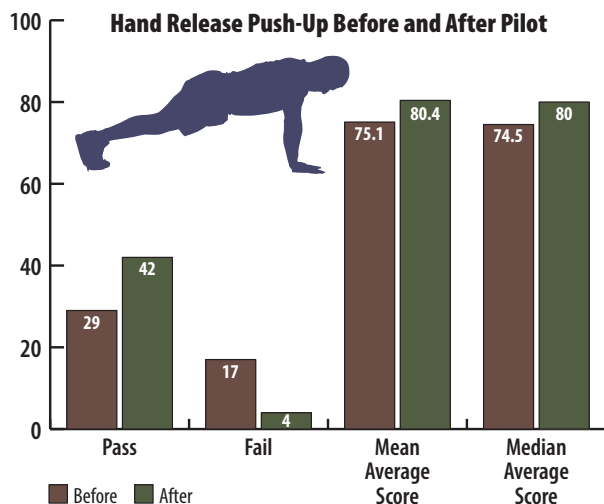
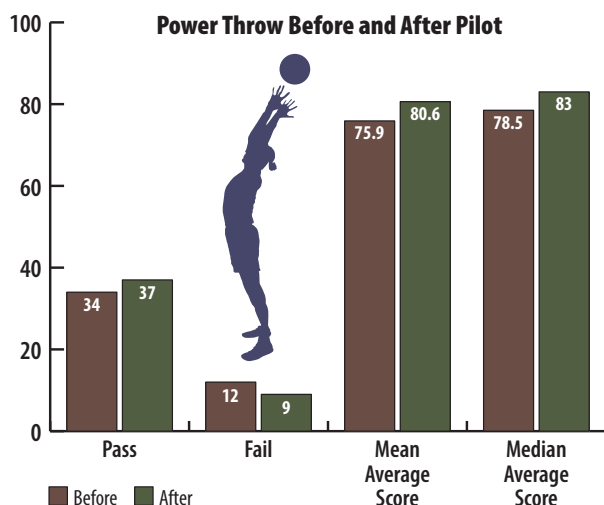
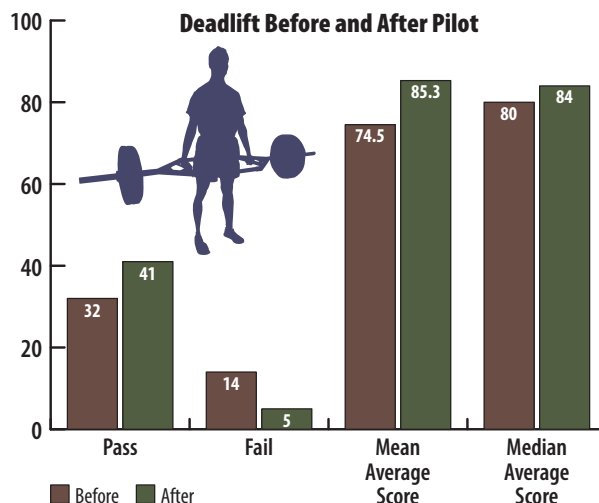
### Hand Release Push-Ups Results

In the Hand Release Push-Up event, 17 Soldiers failed to achieve 70%, and no Soldier maxed it. The mean average was 75.1 and the median was 74.5. The lowest achieved score was 61. In test two, the failure number fell to only four Soldiers, and two actually earned a 100% score. The median grew to 80, the mean to 80.4, however, the lowest achieved score stayed at 61%.

### Sprint-Drag-Carry Results

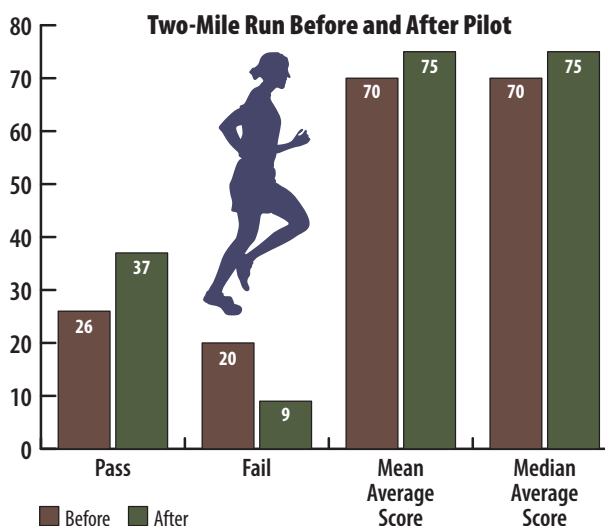
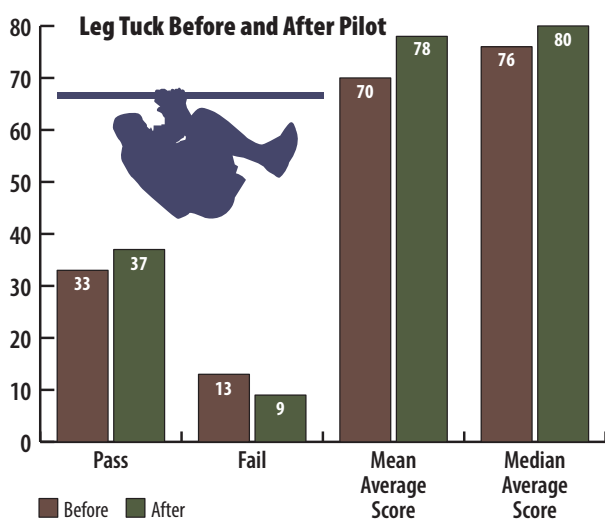
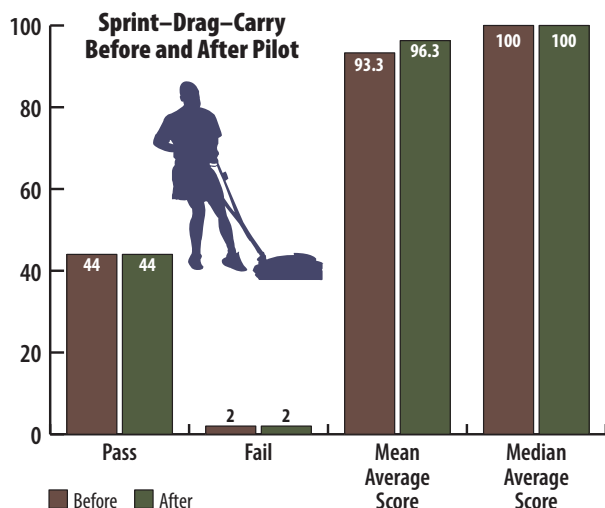
Surprisingly, the Sprint-Drag-Carry went extremely well and only two Soldiers from the initial test failed to achieve the 70% minimum. There were 25 Soldiers that scored 100% which was 54% of the group; all without previous training on this event. The mean was 93.3, the median 100, and the minimum score achieved was 67%.

Test two still had two Soldiers that failed to achieve 70%, however, the number that earned 100% grew to 35 Soldiers. The mean increased to 96.3, the median stayed at 100, and the minimum score increased to 69%.



### Leg-Tuck Results

In the Leg-Tuck event, 13 Soldiers could not attain 70%, however, we also had four that could not even com-



plete one correct repetition. The mean was just over 70, the median 76, and none earned 100%. This proved to be the toughest event for many in the test group.

Eight weeks later, nine Soldiers did not achieve 70%,

but this time three achieved 100%. The mean grew substantially to 78, the median to 80, and we were down to only one Soldier that could not complete one Leg-Tuck.

## Two-Mile Run Results

As we predicted from our own ACFT, my Commander and I saw a decline in scores for the Two-Mile Run between the APFT and the ACFT. We had 20 Soldiers that came in under the 70% minimum, and zero achieving 100%. Much of them complained of “wobbly” legs and tight hamstrings from the Deadlift event; and a couple even vomited. Both the mean and median was 70%, and the lowest score of the group was 53%.

After the pilot, only nine Soldiers fell under 70%. The mean and median both increased to 75 and the lowest score was 59%. For comparison purposes, the Soldier with the 59% passed his APFT with a 71%.

Since I displayed my personal scores in the beginning, I felt it was only fair to include my specific scores on test two to demonstrate the effectiveness and belief I have in the program. For the Deadlift, I went from a 94 to a 100. In the Power Throw I went from 87 to 96. My HRP increased from an 83 to a 91. The Sprint-Drag-Carry was my largest improvement, from a 78 to a 100. My Leg Tuck score increased from an 84 to a 90. And my Two-Mile Run increased from an 87 to an 88. In total, my initial 513 overall score increased to a 565 out of a possible 600.

## Final Thoughts

Forty-six highly motivated Soldiers, with no training on the ACFT and a 270 company APFT average, embarked on a journey with their command team. On their initial ACFT, only 9 were able to achieve a 70% minimum in all six events. Eight weeks later and 26 of those Soldiers achieved a 70% in all six events. This increased the original 19% success rate to 56%; a 37% increase in combat capability in just eight weeks with zero injuries. Injuries do not have to be a byproduct of combat training. They are often a consequence of a failure to plan.

The lesson learned in our experiment was that the AFCT is an outstanding physical event. I also believe it is feasible to complete Army-wide with Soldiers training and testing on major installations with the proper turf, equipment, and trainers, however, I am unsure of the feasibility when looking at Reserve, National Guard, and Recruiting elements not co-located near major installations.

The three-event APFT is simplistic and can be conducted in any environment with no equipment. But what must be realized about the APFT is that it’s simply a basic requirement for Soldiers to get their foot in the door, not a test of actual combat capability.

Final thought: My Soldiers and I enjoyed the difficulty of the ACFT. It’s an accurate test of combat capabilities and we look forward to our continued train-up for it. ■

Weeks 1, 3, 5, 7						
Monday (Company)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	0600	Company Formation at Barracks
Training	Hand Release Push-ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Company Run	1	4 Miles	N/A		
Tuesday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	Air Squats	5	5	BW	0600	Hangar 5
	Box Jumps 24"		5	BW		
	Power Throw		2	15 LBS		
	25M Shuttle Sprint		1	BW		
Training	Standing Power Throw Partner Up / Throw to Each Other	8	1	15 LBS		
	Standing Power Throw Partner Up / Throw to Each Other	8	1	20 LBS		
	100M Sled Drag	3	1	180 LBS		
	100M Lateral Shuffle	3	1	BW		
	100M KB Carry	3	1	50 LBS		
	100M Shuttle Sprint	3	1	BW		
	Run 1 Mile	1	1	BW		
	Rest 8 Minutes					
	Run 1 Mile	1	1	BW		
Wednesday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	Dead lifts (Hex Bar)	5	10	40% ACFT	0600	Buckner
	HR Push-Ups		10	BW		
	25M Shuttle Sprint		1	BW		
	Sit-Ups		10	BW		
Training	Dead lifts (8 Total Sets)	1	3	65% ACFT		
		1	3	75% ACFT		
		1	3	85% ACFT		
		4	3	93% ACFT		
	Hand Release Push-Ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW			
Thursday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
SGT's Time	Battle Drills (AB6)				0545	Company
Friday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	0600	Company Formation at Barracks
Training	Hand Release Push-ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Section Choice / Team Building					

Weeks 2, 4, 6, 8						
Monday (Company)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	0600	Company Formation at Barracks
Training	Hand Release Push-ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
Platoon Choice / Mobility Training						
Tuesday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	Dead lifts (Hex Bar)	5	10	40% ACFT	0600	Buckner
	HR Push-Ups		10	BW		
	25M Shuttle Sprint		1	BW		
	Sit-Ups		10	BW		
Training	Dead lifts (8 Total Sets)	1	3	65% ACFT		
		1	3	75% ACFT		
		1	3	85% ACFT		
		4	3	93% ACFT		
	Hand Release Push-Ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
Wednesday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	Air Squats	5	5	BW	0600	Hangar 5
	Box Jumps 24"		5	BW		
	Power Throw		2	15 LBS		
	25M Shuttle Sprint		1	BW		
Training	Standing Power Throw Partner Up / Throw to Each Other	8	1	15 LBS		
	Standing Power Throw Partner Up / Throw to Each Other	8	1	20 LBS		
	150M Shuttle Sprint Every 60 Seconds	6	1	BW		
	800M Run at Interval Pace Rest 4 Minutes Between Rounds	4	1	BW		
Thursday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	MMD 2	1	1	N/A	0600	TBD
Training	Non-Tactical Ruck	N/A	N/A	35 LBS		
Friday (Section)						
	Exercise	Rounds	Reps	Weight	Time	Location
Warm-Up	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	0600	Company Formation at Barracks
Training	Hand Release Push-ups Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	Leg Tucks Every 60 Seconds	6	30% ACFT	BW		
	AGR RUN A = 14:00 or less B = 14:01 - 15:59 C = 16:00 - 17:30 D = 17:31+	1	3-5 Miles	N/A		

\*For more information on the Army Combat Fitness Test, go to: <https://www.army.mil/acft/>

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