



U.S. Army Soldiers tackle part of an obstacle course at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, 1942. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

# Understanding the Physical Dimension

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**T**eaching U.S. Army noncommissioned officers (NCOs) the historical importance of physical fitness remains an important aspect of the profession of arms. Soldiers should not rely strictly on technology to complete their missions. They must be ready to operate in degraded environments in order to win tomorrow's battles (Waxler, 2019). This article will focus on historical examples regarding the importance of physical fitness and its correlation to the future fight.

## Alexander's Great Army

Alexander III of Macedon, also known as "Alexander the Great," was known as one of history's most brilliant and successful military commanders. He established the largest empire of the ancient world, extending from Greece all the way to northwest India (Walbank, 2020). He did this with an army that excelled in traversing

rugged terrain quickly. To prepare for this, Alexander created one of the first documented physically rigorous training programs. A fellow Macedonian named Diodorus said "he held unremitting exercises in full kit as well as competitive exercises" (English, 2009, p. 7).

Once Alexander became the king of Macedon, he decided to conquer all lands from Babylon to Bactria (modern-day Iraq to Afghanistan). These confrontations, which included mountain and guerrilla warfare and prolonged sieges, were typically preceded by extensive marches that sometimes lasted several months. All of these scenarios required high levels of resilience and physical fitness in order to compete and triumph (English, 2009).

## The Korean War

On June 25, 1950, the Korean People's Army (North Korea), supported by the Soviet Union and China,

crossed into South Korea to try and unify the Korean Peninsula by force. It was a war between philosophies: democracy vs. communism (Sicard, 2020).

The Chinese led vicious attacks without heavy armor and effectively hid from American airpower in the mountains. A U.S. Marine in the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines stated, "If the Chinese can run the goddam ridges, so can we" (Fehrenbach, 2001, p. 246). The men of 7th Marines climbed mountains, traversed rugged terrain, and eventually flanked the Chinese, allowing them to mount an effective offensive (Fehrenbach, 2001). It was because of their endurance and strict training that U.S. military personnel were able to adapt to their location and combat the Chinese and North Korean forces, ending the Korean War in 1953.

## Afghanistan

Operation Anaconda, in Afghanistan's Shahikot Valley, is a recent reminder of the need to physically prepare U.S. forces for ground combat. According to Drs. Kugler, Baranick, and Binnendijk:

“Operation Anaconda, conducted in the Shahikot Valley of Afghanistan during early March 2002, was a complex battle fought in rugged mountainous terrain under difficult conditions. The battle ended as an American victory at the cost of eight U.S. military personnel killed and more than 50 wounded. But the difficult early stages of the battle provide insights for thinking about how to organize, train, and equip U.S. forces for future joint expeditionary operations and how to pursue transformation. (2009, p. v)”

In 2002, the 10th Mountain Division deployed to secure the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan from Taliban fighters who fled after being repulsed by U.S. Special Forces and the Northern Alliance. The main region of 10th Mountain's operations sat at 8,500 feet above sea level in the Shahikot Valley with mountain peaks at 11,000

to 12,000 feet (Geibel, 2002). Moving vehicles through this type of terrain was not possible.

Soldiers conducted foot patrols through areas littered with caves formerly used to repel the Soviet Union only two and a half decades earlier. These caves provided Taliban fighters protection from U.S. air strikes and slowed American advances (Geibel, 2002).

Instead of fighting from armored vehicles like they had previously, Soldiers had to once again conduct long foot patrols, relying on their physical fitness and resilience to overcome the environment.

## Conclusion

Physical fitness remains an important part of maintaining a professional military. Mission success relies on an NCO's dedication to supervise the nutrition, hydration, and fitness of their Soldiers. The possibility of future conflicts with near-peer adversaries in degraded environments reinforces the need to prioritize fitness in our ranks. Senior Army leaders must ensure their units possess the physical ability and capability to traverse the terrain in unforgiving environments. An over-reliance on MSRs, vehicles, and air superiority stifles the ability to train to meet all worldwide threats. Preparing Soldiers to compete at every level of combat prepares them to succeed in future conflicts. ■



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Matthew Foster taken March 7, 2020) U.S. Army Sgt. Haleigh A. Romero with the 777th Aviation Support Battalion, completes a rope climb as part of an obstacle course at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, March 7, 2020.

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