



Drill sergeants observe officer Cadets on their first day of Basic Camp, in Fort Knox, Kentucky. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Loyal Auterson)

Drill Sergeant Misconduct

Analyzing and Tackling a Critical Recruitment Issue Part 1

By Command Sgt. Maj. Robert M. Theus

2nd Battalion, 305th Field Artillery Regiment, 177th Armored Brigade

Letter From the Editor: *From time-to-time sensitive topics worthy of deep discussion come up. Because of their sensitivity, the only way to address them is in a cohesive and productive way, through open dialogue. The NCO Journal endeavors to start that dialogue with Command Sgt. Maj. Robert M. Theus' article "Drill Sergeant Misconduct: Analyzing and Tackling a Critical Recruitment Issue." The article delves deep into the subject. This piece is quite long so we decided to split it into two parts. In Part 1, the author explores drill sergeants, who they are, where they came from, how much responsibility truly lays on their shoulders, training issues, and the senior leadership environment. Part 2 takes a deeper dive into the program, looks at the root causes of drill sergeant misconduct and the author's proposed solutions to remedy the issues.*

Throughout history the one constant of all successful professional militaries was caring for and training their most valuable resource, people. Military history has many instances of small armies defeating larger, better-equipped forces because they were better trained and able to communicate and maneuver better. Overwhelming historical evidence supports that fielding the best-trained army possible is now commonplace because modern militaries and leaders make training their Soldiers their top priority. This is especially true today for the U.S. Army, which by most measurable standards, is considered the best-trained army in recorded history. Army leadership recognizes that the recruiting, training, and Soldier care are priorities through "The Army People Strategy" in 2019 (U.S. Army, 2019, p. 2). This strategy makes a Soldiers' personal and professional development, along with their overall well-being, the Army's number one priority. This crucial development falls to the Soldier's first leader, the drill sergeant.

Drill sergeants are charged with training, educating, and caring for every new Soldier who joins the service. In 2019 alone, 83,000 recruits enlisted in the U.S. Army and conducted their initial training under the direction of drill sergeants (South, 2019, para 16).

To ensure new Soldiers receive the best possible training and have a positive first impression of the Army and its leadership, only the best noncommissioned officers (NCOs) serve as drill sergeants. Unfortunately, despite high selection standards, there are still cases of counterproductive leadership that lead to drill sergeant misconduct during Initial Entry Training (IET).

Drill sergeant misconduct has a negative impact on U.S. Army readiness and contradicts the people-first strategy. Misconduct cases also contribute to first-term Soldier attrition rates higher than the other U.S. military branches (Marrone, 2020, para. 3).

According to U.S. Army Training and Doctrine

Command (TRADOC) (2019), drill sergeant misconduct "Undermines that trust of the American public by violating Army Values, disrupting military order and discipline, and destroying a positive training environment" (p. 159). So critical is the drill sergeant misconduct issue that it requires further analysis to understand the problem more thoroughly.

Part 1 of this article examines drill sergeant selection, training, and certification along with leadership challenges leading to drill sergeant misconduct in the U.S. Army.

Part 2 examines the problem through the lens of leadership, and ethical theories and concepts.

Drill Sergeant Selection

Drill sergeant candidates are selected from the best NCOs across the force. The selection process is critical because the position is identified and listed as of significant trust and authority, a list that also includes sensitive positions like recruiter and Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC) (Department of the Army [DA], 2019a, p. 82).

Drill sergeants are also the first U.S. Army representatives with whom new Soldiers interact during their most critical period in the service (DA, 2019a, p. 81). Therefore, selected candidates must first meet 17 prerequisites, including a background check, a behavioral health evaluation and at least four years of time in service (DA, 2019a, p. 84).

Also, NCOs must be at least a sergeant, with no less than one year time in grade, through sergeant first class (DA, 2020, p.84). The process identifies NCOs who display the Army's preferred leader character attributes of empathy, discipline, humility, the warrior ethos, service ethos, and Army values (DA, 2019b, p. 2-1). Those who meet the requirements must successfully complete the Drill Sergeant Academy at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, prior to IET assignment.



New Soldiers arrive for their first day of Basic Combat Training while drill sergeants encourage them to pick up their gear. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. 1st Class Brian Hamilton)

Training and Certification

The Drill Sergeant Academy trains and educates future drill sergeants. The nine-week-long course consists of three phases designed to mirror the three Basic Combat Training (BCT) phases (TRADOC, 2020, p. 12). To graduate, candidates must complete IET Soldier requirements. In addition, they must pass oral and written assessments designed to measure their knowledge of regulations governing the drill sergeant program, IET and drill sergeant duties and responsibilities. Finally, they are certified when they arrive at their IET unit and again one year later (TRADOC, 2020, p. 21).

Every IET unit is required to administer the certification to validate drill sergeants' un-



Drill sergeants “welcome” new Soldiers arriving for their first day of Basic Combat Training. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Sgt. 1st Class Brian Hamilton)

derstanding of the BCT program of instruction, and the duties and responsibilities unique to that organization and location (TRADOC, 2020, p. 21).

Duties and Responsibilities

The Drill Sergeant Creed lays out principal duties and responsibilities and provides a logical flow to explain them, serves as a moral compass for drill sergeants to follow when facing challenges, and states drill sergeants’ duty to ensure every recruit is mentally and physically capable of engaging and defeating U.S. adversaries in multi-domain and large-scale combat operations (Drill Sergeant Creed, n.d., para. 1).

Next, drill sergeants are responsible for giving recruits a sense of pride and purpose, along with teaching them Army traditions, customs, and standards (Drill Sergeant Creed, n.d., para. 2-3). They are charged with leading by example, never asking recruits to do anything unethical or immoral, and demonstrating that their greatest loyalty is to the U.S. constitution (Drill Sergeant Creed, n.d., para. 4-5). Simply put, drill sergeants are responsible for upholding Army values, along with their recruits’ training, morale, and safety.

Initial Entry Training Environment

The IET environment is characterized by its fast-paced operational tempo, long hours, and stressful tasks. Drill

sergeants serve in an IET unit at least 24 and no more than 42 months (TRADOC, 2020, p.20). The typical IET organizational structure consists of 12 drill sergeants serving across four platoons in a training company. Each platoon has one senior drill sergeant who is personally responsible for two other drill sergeants, their daily activities and professional development. Additionally, a company commander and first sergeant hold overall responsibility for everyone and everything in the company. They serve as the senior leaders in the company and play an essential role in fostering an ethical climate.

The Army’s 10-week basic training cycle is when IET companies are busiest and when senior leadership, drill sergeant and trainee stress levels are at their highest. The typical training day starts early in the morning and does not end until late evening when trainees go to bed.

A study of drill sergeant sleep deprivation and its hazards in BCT concluded that drill sergeants are among the most sleep-deprived populations in the Army (Elliman et al. 2020, para. 1). The study also found average drill sergeants were at work for 14.72 hours a day, 6.72 days per week and got less than five hours of sleep a night (Elliman et al., 2020, para. 1).

Drill sergeants control every aspect of the trainees’ day. From when to wake up and go to bed, how to make their bed, when they can eat and whether they can speak or not. It is typical for training days to have

multiple events co-occurring, requiring drill sergeant participation, creating situations where the drill sergeant to trainee ratio is higher than the desired ratio of 1-to-20 (TRADOC, 2019, p. 124).

So, a platoon with three drill sergeants assigned may only have one or two available to train 60 or more trainees for long periods of the programmed day and during critical blocks of instruction. In turn, this creates an environment with minimal oversight of drill sergeants' interaction with trainees which, in combination with the other stressors, can lead to drill sergeant misconduct.

Reports of Drill Sergeant Misconduct

Drill sergeant misconduct takes on different forms across the Army's training enterprise. According to TRADOC (2019), "Trainee abuse is any improper or unlawful physical, verbal, or sexual act an Army trainer commits against a trainee" (p. 23). The Department of the Army elaborates that trainee abuse includes extreme exercise in the form of corrective action, extreme profanity, sexual misconduct, prohibited relationships, extortion and soliciting donations (TRADOC, 2019, p. 23-24).

Sexual Misconduct

Sexual misconduct is one of the most severe and detrimental forms of drill sergeant misconduct. It is also one of the most reported forms of trainee abuse in the Army. Department of Defense (DoD) reports from Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 through FY 2020 detail sexual misconduct in the military and provide the exact number of cases reported involving drill sergeants. In FY 2017, seven cases of sexual misconduct involving drill sergeants were reported (DoD Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office [DoD SAPR], 2017). Then in FY 2018, 12 cases were reported, three of which were severe (DoD SAPR, 2018). FY 2019 saw 10 cases, six of which were penetrating offenses, including one rape (DoD SAPR, 2019). In FY 2020, the number of sexual misconduct cases jumped back up to 12, with five classified as sexual assaults (DoD SAPR, 2020).

Additionally, the seriousness of these internal reports detailing serious allegations and confirmed sexual misconduct cases in the IET environment was covered intensively by the national news media. This significantly affected public perception by putting human faces on the cases. For example, The Washington Post covered allegations against a drill sergeant accused of sexually assaulting female trainees (Lamothe, 2014, para. 1).

Physical Assault

Physical assault is another severe violation that harms trainees, the Army's professional reputation, and drill sergeant program credibility. One such incident occurred at Fort Benning, Georgia, in February 2020, where a drill sergeant was suspended after getting into a shouting match with a trainee and using extreme profanity. The shouting match escalated to a physical altercation in which the drill sergeant shoved the trainee (Choi, 2020, para. 1-6).

The drill sergeant's decisions and actions were unethical and violated TRADOC regulation, which clearly states trainers are prohibited from touching trainees except when safety is a concern (TRADOC, 2019, p. 25). Fort Benning leadership stated the drill sergeant's actions were "not consistent with U.S. Army Values of treating all with dignity and respect" (Choi, 2020, para. 8). Making matters worse, the incident was captured on video and posted on social media.

Dereliction of Duty

Drill sergeants endure the job's pressures and requirements every day, which can lead to dereliction of duty and poor ethical judgment. In extreme cases, that dereliction can lead to severe injury or even death.

Once case occurred at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in 2017. A drill sergeant fell asleep at the wheel of a pickup truck while towing a trailer and ran over trainees conducting a night foot march (Elliman et al., 2020, para. 4). Two trainees died and half a dozen others suffered injuries (Elliman et al., 2020, para. 4).

The accident demonstrates the severe consequences of ill-prepared drill sergeants and leadership. At his sentencing hearing, the drill sergeant said he had only four hours of sleep in the 24 hours leading up to the accident.



A U.S. Army drill sergeant watches over trainees as they recover their gear on the first day of Basic Combat Training, on June 2017 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Madelyn Hancock)

Another drill sergeant testified the drill sergeant responsible for the accident had no choice but to drive the truck (Kulmala, 2019, para. 13-15).

The Problem's Root Causes

The leadership and ethical failures leading to misconduct are not limited to drill sergeants alone. Pseudo-transformational leadership, destructive leadership, and ethical fading result from ineffective ethical leadership. These leadership types will be discussed in part two of this article.

Weak and ineffective senior leadership can play a significant role in fostering a climate which enables drill sergeants' unethical decision-making. Fundamental flaws in the selection and training process intensify the problem.

Drill Sergeant Selection and Training Issues

The current drill sergeant selection process relies on a personnel file review of NCOs to judge their fitness for the role and does not include face-to-face interviews, which can lead to improper person-environment (PE) fit. The PE fit theory, which will be discussed in part two of this article, refers to the compatibility or incompatibility that exists between people and their environment. If the right conditions exist, they create a high-performance environment and improved organizational loyalty. Research showed that when there is a good PE fit, individuals perform better, have a higher commitment level, and higher job satisfaction than those who do not (Scandura, 2019, p. 108).

Checkpoints during the selection process should require more than just a simple mental health evaluation designed only to determine an NCO's mental fitness, a point highlighted by senior leadership. For example, a first sergeant who served in a BCT unit as a senior drill sergeant and first sergeant, said there is a critical flaw in the current selection process. He said the fact there is no face-to-face interview designed to identify a candidate's suitability for a challenging position is a problem. On occasion, he received new drill sergeants that clearly did not display the required character attributes (P. Veracruz, personal communication, April 13, 2021).

Without an interview process designed to bring possible counterproductive leadership attributes consistent with pseudo-transformational and destructive leadership to the surface, PE fit will continue to be a problem in the drill sergeant selection process.

There are no specifically designed training scenarios to identify drill sergeant candidates who display destructive leadership attributes. Cognitive testing alone cannot detect all the character flaws that may result in unethical behavior. One study showed cognitive testing did not accurately predict an individual's ability to perform



The Senior Drill Sergeant Leader for Drill Sergeant Academy Cycle 5-20 speaks to drill sergeant candidates during a tour of the barracks before they go to assist a company about to receive new trainees. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by Maj. Michelle Lunato)

duties of a given occupation (Trent et al., 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, an individual taking a cognitive test could manipulate the test by providing answers they think will result in a positive outcome (Trent et al., 2020, p. 2).

The study's findings make a strong case for real-world training scenarios as part of the evaluation process which would eliminate unfit individuals from high-stress positions of significant trust in the U.S. Army, like drill sergeants.

A command sergeant major (CSM) with relevant experience with new drill sergeants who served in the 1st Battalion, 19th Field Artillery Regiment, a BCT unit located at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, said new drill sergeants are often unprepared to interact with trainees and find themselves unequipped in challenging ethical situations, resulting in an abuse of authority and misconduct (R. Rodriguez, personal communication, April 13, 2021).

The CSM's observations and interactions with drill sergeants demonstrate the need to incorporate more real-world training. Without such training, it is difficult to accurately determine if drill sergeants possess positive or negative leadership character attributes until it is too late. Another challenge related to drill sergeant misconduct is ineffective senior leadership at the IET company level.

Senior Leadership and the IET Environment

Strong ethical leadership is required in the IET environment to ensure the perils of ethical fading do not take hold. Ethical fading, further explored in part two of this article, occurs when individuals unconsciously avoid or disguise a decision's moral implications, allowing them to behave in immoral ways while maintaining the conviction they are good and moral.

As stated earlier, leaders foster their organization's ethical climate, and subordinates look to them for direction when making difficult decisions. In an environment described as one where the "long hours,

complex duties, and time away from family members can cause frustration, anger, and other problems that may lead to trainee abuse," it is paramount for senior leadership to be the ethical compass for the organization (TRADOC, 2019, p. 160).

This is critically important because of drill sergeants' relatively young average age, likely meaning some may not have accumulated the leadership and ethical experience to prepare them for the challenges of the IET environment.

A CSM who served with the 1st Battalion, 79th Field Artillery Regiment, a BCT unit located at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, with recent and relevant experience dealing with drill sergeant misconduct in the IET environment, said most of the drill sergeant misconduct cases he dealt with involved one common denominator ... weak senior company leadership, either the commander or first sergeant or both.

The CSM also stated that companies with the highest number of issues related to unethical behavior all had a culture of operating within what he called an ethical gray area (J. Stewart, personal communication, November 25, 2020).

The misconduct case of the drill sergeant who killed two trainees with a truck, is a powerful example of weak senior leaders allowing ethical fading to control their organization. The drill sergeant believed he had no choice but to drive the truck with minimal sleep resulted from an organization that prioritizes

mission accomplishment over everything else.

In that situation the desired end state (completing the road march) "justified" the means (putting a tired drill sergeant in a vehicle). A classic sign of ethical fading.

Ethical fading also plays a role in setting the conditions within an organization for sexual misconduct to occur. An independent 2020 review conducted at Fort Hood, Texas, found a high number of sexual misconduct cases, providing another example of ethical fading in action. One of the report's findings was that senior leaders were more concerned with combat readiness than sexual assault prevention training (DA, 2020, p. 18).

The result was a sexual assault program that barely functioned and was unable to adequately prevent or handle sexual misconduct cases (DA, 2020, p. 18). Moreover, the priority on combat readiness fostered an environment where other critical training faded into the background.

Conclusion

This article explores drill sergeant misconduct. In this first part, the author explores who drill sergeants are, where they came from, how much responsibility lays on their shoulders, training issues, and the senior leadership environment. Drill sergeant misconduct, while not the standard or the norm, severely impacts mission readiness and success, and contradicts the Army's people-first strategy.

Part 2 will be published on April 7, 2023. ■

References

- Choi, D. (2020). A US Army Drill Sergeant is suspended after a profanity-laced shoving match with a recruit in Georgia. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-army-drill-sergeant-suspended-hitting-recruit-ft-benning-allegation-2020-2>
- Department of the Army. (2021). Sergeant Major Assessment Program. Army.mil. <https://www.army.mil/standto/archive/2021/01/15/>
- Department of the Army. (2019a). Enlisted assignments and utilization management (AR 614-200). Army Publishing Directorate. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN14314_AR614-200_FINAL.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2019b). Army leadership and the profession (ADP 6-22). Army Publishing Directorate. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20039-ADP_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf
- Department of the Army. (2020). Report of the Fort Hood independent review committee. https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/forthoodreview/2020-12-03_FHIRC_report_redacted.pdf
- Department of Defense. (2017). 2017 demographics: profile of the military community. <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2017-demographics-report.pdf>
- Department of the Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. (2021). DOD SAPR annual reports. <https://sapr.mil/reports>
- Drill Sergeant Creed. (n.d.). <https://www.ausa.org/drill-sergeant-creed>
- Elliman, T., Schwalb, M., & Adler, A. (2020, June). Sleep deprivation and hazardous unintended sleep in U.S. Army Drill Sergeants. *Sleep Health*, 6(3), 350–357. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2020.04.007>
- Janis, I. L. (1991). Groupthink. Owen Stewart Performance Resources, Inc.
- Johnson, C. E. (2018). Meeting the ethical challenges of leadership: casting light or shadow (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Kulmala, T. (2019, February 12). Drill Sergeant gets 18 months for crash that killed recruits. AP NEWS. <https://apnews.com/article/d0ab700fba09428b9ab12ebb25cf4fa8>
- Lamothe, Dan. (2014). Alleged sex assaults by Drill Sergeant the latest in a long line during military training: the incidents raise questions whether enough has been done to vet troops put in a position of power.

The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/alleged-sex-assaults-by-drill-sergeant-the-latest-in-a-long-line-during-military-training/2014/05/30/32a142ec-e767-11e3-afc6-a1dd-9407abcf_story.html

Marrone, J. V. (2020). Predicting 36-month attrition in the U.S. Military: a comparison across service branches. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4258.html

Narayan, A. K. (2016). An ethical perspective on performance measurement in the public sector. *Pacific Accounting Review*, 28(4), 364–372. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PAR-02-2016-0024>

Northouse, P. G. (2018). *Leadership: theory and practice* (8th ed.). SAGE Publications

Scandura, T. A. (2019). *Essentials of organizational behavior: an evidence-based approach*. SAGE Publications.

South, T. (2019). Rising costs, dwindling recruit numbers, increasing demands may bring back military draft. *MilitaryTimes*. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/11/19/rising-costs-dwindling-recruit-numbers-increasing-demands-may-bring-back-the-draft/>

Tenbrunsel, A. E., & Messick, D. M. (2004). Ethical fading: The role of self-deception in unethical behavior. *Social Justice Research*, 17(2), 223–236. <https://doi.org/10.1023/>

[b:sore.0000027411.35832.53](https://doi.org/10.1023/101080/08995605.2019.1652481)

Trent, Barron, L. G., Rose, M. R., & Carretta, T. R. (2020). Tailored Adaptive Personality Assessment System (TAPAS) as an indicator for counterproductive work behavior: comparing validity in applicant, honest, and directed faking conditions. *Military Psychology*, 32(1), 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2019.1652481>

United States Army. (2019). The Army people strategy. <https://www.army.mil/peoplefirst/?from=features>

United States Army Training and Doctrine Command. (2020). Drill Sergeant program (TR 350-16). TRADOC Administrative Publications. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/regulations/TR350-16.pdf>

United States Army Training and Doctrine Command. (2019). Enlisted entry training policies and administration (TR 350-6). TRADOC Administrative Publications. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/regulations/TR350-6.pdf>

United States Drill Sergeant Academy. (2019). *Drill Sergeant Candidate Handbook*.

Winkie, D. (2021). Army hits end-strength goals through high retention, lower basic training attrition. *ArmyTimes*. <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2021/10/20/army-hits-end-strength-goals-through-high-retention-lower-basic-training-attrition/>

Command Sgt. Maj. Robert M. Theus is the senior enlisted advisor for 2nd Battalion, 305th Field Artillery Regiment, 177th Armored Brigade, at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He served in the Basic Combat Training environment as a senior drill sergeant and first sergeant. Theus is a Class 71 Sergeants Major Course graduate, and holds an associate degree in Military History, a bachelor's degree in Leadership and Workforce Development, and a master's degree in Leadership Studies.



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.

