



A senior NCO talks with Soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, on Sept. 26, 2022. Leaders who are physically, mentally, and spiritually strong build better teams and a stronger Army. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Jonathon Daniell)

Project Maximo: Empowering NCOs through Health, Family and Selfcare

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The demands of being an NCO are extensive, the commitment serious and the days often endless. Finding a consistent rhythm between leadership requirements, operational readiness requirements and managing oneself and family can be challenging.

All leaders can lead from the front with the tools and knowledge to disarm the stigma associated with receiving help through authenticity, strength and vulnerability. This is why we created Project Maximo in our brigade combat team—a four-week program assisting senior

NCOs in prioritizing their health to maintain high levels of warfighting readiness the U.S. Army demands.

What is Project Maximo?

Project Maximo is a physical, mental and spiritual ‘tune-up’ for our senior NCOs. The goal is to grant leaders time to recover and prioritize performance, ultimately building stronger leaders and a stronger force.

In an environment where sergeants first class often fulfill the responsibilities of first sergeants, senior enlisted leaders may see collisions of family pressure, health and priorities. Project Maximo affords our leaders an opportunity to briefly step out of the rigorous demands of duty, reflect on their personal and professional performance and intentionally focus on health and family while learning, building and maintaining healthy habits.

The Project Maximo concept resulted from a personal inflection point. I had been wounded on multiple occasions—emotionally, mentally and physically—while fighting overseas. When I finally sought treatment, I thought it was the end of my career. Instead, seeking care for my mental and physical health gave me a new lease on life and the opportunity to continue serving in uniform. As I prioritized myself, I started to envision a program supporting our senior enlisted leaders’ wellbeing. This ultimately evolved into Project Maximo.

Aligned with Army Regulations

Project Maximo is designed around the Army’s Holistic Health and Fitness System (H2F) which “seeks to optimize physical and non-physical performance, reduce injury rates, and improve rehabilitation after injury ultimately increasing the overall readiness of the total Army” (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2023).

Project Maximo draws upon the five pillars of mental, sleep, nutritional, spiritual and physical readiness prioritized in H2F (Department of the Army, 2020).

Selected senior NCOs receive brigade-level care that includes cancer screenings, physical therapy, embedded behavioral health sessions and spiritual support. They are encouraged to attend classes and sessions by the Armed Forces Wellness Center, including “a variety of assessments, health coaching and educational classes” to promote “behavior change in the areas of physical activity, nutrition, sleep and stress management” (Desmond Doss Health Clinic, n.d.).

A PMCS for the Mind, Body, and Soul

Project Maximo affords leaders the time,

mentorship and tools to undergo a PMCS for the mind, body and soul. In turn, this better serves senior NCOs their Soldiers and the Army.

During the program’s first week, leaders report to me to guide them through the withdrawal they often face when asked to prioritize themselves instead of those around them. They conduct physical training on their own, are present for their morning routine with their family, prioritize maintaining and learning about their health during the day and are home in time to make dinner and spend quality time with those they care about.

For the next three weeks these leaders attend appointments and learn healthy habits.

To fully encourage participation, there are no direct work ties. The level of care received comes from the brigade level. This was intentional. By removing work barriers, leaders would feel more inclined to honestly address issues they feel are most pressing to them.

1st Sgt. Langkilde Paleaee, who participated in Project Maximo after 24 months in a first sergeant position, is a senior NCO who has felt the systemic uneasiness associated with acknowledging, asking for and receiving mental healthcare.

“As senior leaders, you don’t have that time to actually go—the check engine light is on, but you just ignore it,” he said. “I think I am way better because of the program. Before Project Maximo, I used to ignore physical and psychological issues. It’s not that it is forced upon you, but you have the opportunity to go and look at these programs and services. Doing that and learning that changed my mentality of coming from a combat MOS to slowing down and taking some time for my own maintenance.”



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Shaun Curry, Command Sergeant Major of 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, fires blanks from an M4 carbine during a field training exercise at Batura Training Area, on August 7, 2021. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Rachel Christensen)



U.S. Army Medal of Honor recipient, 1st Sgt. Maximo Yabes. (U.S. Army Photo by Unknown)

Another senior NCO who participated in Project Maximo said that the ability to reset during this time allowed him to prioritize himself in multiple ways, including through education.

"This allotted me the time to take care of all the things I neglected to take care of while I was in the position, and a few things that I had been wanting to take care of," said 1st Sgt. Michael Camacho. "I had been wanting to take care of some of my college classes, but I had put that off to the side. Project Maximo gave me the opportunity to realign, and I got the opportunity to do that."

Both Paleaee and Camacho came away with new habits they have continued to incorporate into their daily lives. These personal changes have impacted their leadership styles, the Soldiers within their ranks and their family relationships.

"One of the biggest takeaways from me was therapy—I have a therapist now. I learned that it is important to work on yourself and get some family time because once this uniform goes away, your family is still there," Paleaee said. "Now that I know that I got the help that I needed, and it's continuous, it has really changed my mentality. Project Maximo is great and the magnitude of it needs to be addressed and implemented all the way down to the most junior level."

Camacho said he has already seen the lessons he learned during Project Maximo spread throughout his company.

"It has a lasting effect, and it trickles down from me to my Soldiers. Project Maximo is ready to catch fire and blaze through the Army. I hope it's adopted and implemented."

The Hero Behind the Name

Project Maximo is named in honor of U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Maximo Yabes, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, who selflessly sacrificed himself when his company came under intense automatic weapons fire, mortar fire and a battalion-sized assault in the Republic of Vietnam on Feb. 26, 1967. Yabes' selfless actions undeniably saved the lives of his comrades, and he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor (Congressional Medal of Honor Society, n.d.).

If Yabes gave every measure for his company, the very least we could do for our first sergeants is to give them back a month. They carry a heavy rucksack every day. We're seeing that they are taking care of their people and doing less taking care of themselves in the name of duty to their country and their people—just like Yabes.

Projection of Project Maximo

Project Maximo is helping to break the cycle of unhealthy habits and instead fill the ranks with Soldiers equipped with a new weapon of choice: preventative health knowledge and readily available resources. It is an example of how military leadership can adapt to holistically prioritize the health of leaders while simultaneously ensuring our force remains the world's most elite Army.

Best practices established by the project are well supported within Army regulations and require no additional cost to units, making it easily scalable across the Army. By leaders encouraging, modeling and discussing mental, physical and spiritual health, the NCO Corps will continue to 'grease the wheel' of the warfighting functions we pride ourselves on.

As Project Maximo unfolds inside the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team's footprint, it could potentially leave Schofield Barracks' gates and Hawaii. It's a small investment in giving back to our most experienced leaders who give their all to their profession every single day.

I would feel comfortable retiring today if there was a program like this on every installation in the Army. There is no better way to give back to the people of our Army than to allow them the opportunity to lead by example on what can be accomplished with H2F. ■

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