

Combat-tested drill sergeants revamp training methods

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FORT JACKSON, S.C. — At a new range designed to look like a street in Iraq, a soldier dressed as an insurgent poked the muzzle of her rifle through the window of an abandoned building.

Before she got a chance to investigate further, another soldier leaped up and out of the window as the “insurgent” fell backward, gazing up with her mouth gaping open.

The soldier landed directly in front of her with his M16 pointed right between her eyes. He fired using his Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System simulation equipment, then ran off down an alley.

“That was intense,” said Lt. Col. Fred Johnson, commander of 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, biting the knuckle of his index finger as he watched the action on the Falcon Challenge range. “That was pretty doggone intense. That was a drill sergeant.”

One year ago, most of Fort Jackson’s drill sergeants had been in place for a three-year stint since the beginning of the war in Iraq. But as those trainers have rotated and new people have filtered in, the post is seeing an increase in combat-vet drill sergeants.

As of March, almost 40 percent of



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Sgt. Edgar Soto, with Bravo Company 2nd Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment, leads recruit Kevin Kelley during Falcon Challenge at Fort Jackson, N.C.

drill sergeants had earned a combat patch.

Those drill sergeants have overhauled training at Fort Jackson — training that hadn’t changed for generations.

“It’s just one of those deals that with enough push and enough feedback, we were able to put it together,” said Lt. Col. Mel Hull, commander of 1st Battalion, 13th Infantry Regiment. “It took a war to do it.”

In the past year, drill sergeants have demanded that a live-fire

range move from sandbags and logs to cars and plywood walls, that soldiers learn to clear rooms and evacuate the wounded, that soldiers fire all the weapons they might encounter in combat, and that they learn to shoot quickly and at close range as they move through the streets of a hostile city.

“Almost all the changes have been from drill sergeants and cadre coming back from Iraq,” Hull said. “And we’re getting feedback from soldiers who leave

here and go to Iraq.”

In March, Capt. Dion Mancenido led his soldiers through a new drill at an M16 range. They aimed at a target with a circle, square and triangle in a variety of colors. From the tower, the range operator shouted out colors and shapes. For each shape, the soldier dropped to his knee and quickly picked a match using close combat optics — or a red laser dot that simulates what he would use in combat.

“It checks their reflexes,” Mancenido explained. “It’s a practical application of the lessons learned in theater.”

At Omaha Beach, Sgt. 1st Class James Brannen sends one drill sergeant with each soldier through a live-fire range. Before, soldiers yelled, “Buddy ready? Buddy moving!” through a tangle of barbed wire as they low-crawled around logs in a defined order. Now they pick their own paths through cars as they shoot targets, communicate with their battle buddies and lock and load a new magazine. The range opened in January after drill sergeants began planning it in December.

Rather than wait for supplies to come through the chain, they

made a quick trip to a lumber yard, then built it themselves.

“Before, it wasn’t as genuine as this,” Brannen said. “We’re sharing the training from Iraq to make it as realistic as possible.”



Johnson

Next up? The vehicles need to be painted white and yellow, there shouldn’t be any grass, and there should be more toys and rubble, according to feedback from combat vets.

The new ranges also allow drill sergeants to show off a bit. At Falcon Challenge, they serve as squad leaders. At Omaha Beach, they stand at each private’s side offering guidance. During urban operations training, they offer advice for identifying threats.

“The level of awareness is way up,” said 1st Sgt. Lester Jones of B Company, 3-60 Infantry Regiment. “The war really drives things here.”

Beyond the physical changes, Jones said the privates pay more attention when they know a drill sergeant has seen combat, and nine out of 10 of his drill sergeants have been in Iraq or Afghanistan.

“What really changed was the presentation,” he said. “This is what the book says; here’s how it works in Iraq. You can’t put a price on that kind of knowledge.” □

Basic

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ups, and what really happened was they yelled at us a lot and we did a lot of push-ups.”

Chambers, the brigade commander, said some of that yelling is necessary, as long as the mistake is specific. “Their expectation is to be yelled at, and they will be,” he said. “There will be some high-octane exchanges.”

‘We all made mistakes at 18’

Lt. Col. Frank McClary, commander of 2nd Battalion, 13th Infantry Regiment, pointed to a couple of military police officers standing with a trainee in the company area.

“We had to call them in when one soldier decided he didn’t want to be here,” McClary said. “I call the MPs when things look like they could get rough.”

Between 7 and 10 percent each cycle still won’t make it, he said, even with the new rules.

“We have one or two go AWOL every cycle,” McClary said. “I put them back in training — it’s at the commander’s discretion.”

During the winter holiday break, four soldiers tested positive

for drugs — typically marijuana — in a urinalysis.

“I put them back in training,” he said. “Why? They’re 18. We all made mistakes at 18.”

McClary said the changes can be challenging, but they make sense.

Every drill sergeant interviewed agreed the physical-training program had changed for the better, even if they cringed at the idea of push-ups from the knees.

Early one morning, McClary watched a group of new soldiers doing jumping jacks on their first day of physical training. “Ah, the rhythmless nation,” he said, laughing as the privates flailed about. “They look like popcorn.”

Next to the soldiers lay M16s, sleeping mats and water bottles — the training paraphernalia they carry with them everywhere. “We used to smoke them until they couldn’t see,” McClary said. “But it’s not safe, and there are more effective ways to do it. I don’t see as many in sick call.”

Privates train on rubberized tracks; their new PT pits are made of soft “gravel,” and they wear kneepads and eye protection on the range.

Drill sergeants insist that those with sore knees or ankles go on sick call, they make them stretch longer before runs, and they build

the soldiers up through circuit training rather than pushing them to run three miles on the first day.

During fiscal 2004, 1,952 soldiers processed out for medical problems, including PT injuries, at Fort Jackson. In 2005, that number decreased by almost 300 soldiers, to 1,659.

“We’re building them up for the run because we know Americans don’t exercise as much,” Emery said. “The whole thing is geared toward minimizing injuries.”

Several privates said they had no exercise experience before arriving at Fort Jackson. “I like the PT best,” said Pvt. Sharmayne Smith of Maryland. “I need to get in shape — I’ve never exercised before.”

Thinking for themselves

For all the changes aimed at reducing stress and injuries, the training remains tough.

“When I talk to other drill sergeants, they can’t believe the stuff we’re doing now,” said Sgt. 1st Class Travis Haugen of 1-13. “They are training harder. They know that if they make a catastrophic error, there will be catastrophic results because they know they’re going to war.”

Soldiers learn more tasks than ever before, including infantry

skills that some drill sergeants themselves had never encountered before Fort Jackson — clearing a room, convoy live fire and advanced rifle training. Soldiers learn how to scout for intel, they carry their weapons at all times, and they shoot from a kneeling position wearing full combat gear. Rather than concentrate on one task, drill sergeants harp on the importance of paying attention to several things at once.

“It’s not easier, but it’s more of a thinking basic training than it used to be,” said Pfc. Bryan Hunter, who went through basic training under the old rules at Fort Knox three years ago as a Reserve Officers’ Training Corps cadet. “They just train soldiers now, rather than beat them into submission.”

Pvt. John Barnes of Wyoming had also gone through basic before — with the Marine Corps.

“The yelling is still there, but when we’re doing it right, they don’t get on us at all,” Barnes said. “It’s better. It lets us know we’re doing good. And the minute we mess up, they jump right on top of us.”

He said he needs the opportunity to concentrate in the classroom, and it’s easier when it’s not as stressful.