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NewsLines

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Wartime. exercise

Fitness rules eased in light of combat demands

By Kelly Kennedy

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Staff Sgt. Jose Vasquez Jr. figured PT in Iraq would be doable.

Then an incoming mortar round struck a formation at Forward Operating Base Anaconda in November 2004 and hurt a couple of soldiers. A month later, another attack hit the motor pool during a Christmas party.

Formations were forbidden during his 15-month tour.

"We did one formation on the airport tarmac prior to leaving, but that was it," said Vasquez, training noncommissioned officer for the 316th Chemical Company at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico. "I don't know how we would have done a PT test."

The continuing difficulties in conducting physical training in the combat zone recently led Army officials to issue a message reminding unit commanders they need not administer the physical fitness test in combat zones. That policy first was issued in December 2003.

More recent policy changes are also aimed at easing related requirements and standards.

In October, the Army increased the maximum weight allowances for female soldiers from five to 19 pounds above the standards and

changed how their body fat is measured, making clear the different measuring methods for men and women.

Two months earlier, the Army removed until March 31 the "flags" that prevented soldiers in the Weight Control Program from attending professional development courses.

The recent changes largely are aimed at adjusting not only to the realities troops face in the combat zone, but to the pressing need to keep soldiers on duty in a time of war. With a crushing operations tempo and stiff challenges in recruiting, the Army cannot afford the peacetime luxury of weeding out troops whose waistlines strain standards.

To ensure that deployed troops stay professionally competitive even though their PT tests have been canceled, the Army ignores the absence of an Army Physical Fitness Test score on promotion point worksheets when considering those troops for advancement while they are deployed.

Beyond errant mortars, Vasquez said, war-zone workloads and

weather make it difficult to do PT while deployed. It can be 120 degrees in Iraq during the day, and soldiers often work odd shifts, don't always have access to a gym or other training facility and often are weary from patrols and combat stress.

'Theoretically, it shouldn't be too hard to pass a PT test,' but available time and conditions for exercising vary.

STAFF SGT. ERIK HOLTAN

Former Spc. John Meehan, who served as a mental health specialist at FOB Falcon with the 704th Support Battalion, said he encouraged exercise as an antidote to fatigue, sleep problems and depression, but said there are good reasons to avoid PT tests in combat zones.

"Take the infantryman pulling 24-hour guard shifts, three to four days a week, or guys that go on daily patrols and risk their lives protecting the citizens of Iraq," he said. "Who cares if they can't make it to the gym?"

Staying in shape

Most soldiers, however, said that while commanders may cancel PT for some units, there are few good excuses for not staying in shape in the war zone.

"I don't think [not taking a test]



LIU JIN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sgt. 1st Class Ronald Sloan helps Sgt. Kevin Wright do sit-ups during physical training at Camp Prosperity in Baghdad's Green Zone in August 2005. The Army recently reminded commanders that given current operations tempo, soldiers are not required to take the Army Physical Fitness Test in the war zone.

would hurt readiness because if you are not going to have personal responsibility to keep yourself fit in a combat zone when your life is on the line, you probably won't when you get back," said Staff Sgt. Erik Holtan. He took a PT test while he worked as a medic in Iraq with the XVIII Airborne Corps on the MNC-I surgeon cell at Camp Victory, but he had plenty of time to practice for it.

"Theoretically, it shouldn't be too hard to pass a PT test," he said, but available time and conditions for exercising vary, "from the main bases, where you have all the amenities, to the small FOBs, where you mainly only use treadmills."

Vasquez said Anaconda was one of the more active FOBs he saw during his duties as a mail handler. "We went to some places, like Taji, where it seemed like if people weren't gainfully employed, they

were in the barracks — not exercising," he said. "And the Air Force people I saw were heavier. Some soldiers did gain weight, but at Anaconda, there were so many attacks that sometimes we wore our flak vests 24 hours a day for a week — that burns off some calories."

Lt. Col. Colleen Kesselring, deputy chief of nutrition care at Darnell Hospital at Fort Hood, Texas, said some soldiers are sabotaging themselves when it comes to eating well in the war zone.

"It's the junk food," she said. "It's those 1½ liter water bottles filled with Kool-Aid. They drink two or three of those a day, and it's 700 to 900 calories a day — liquid candy. It's a huge issue over there."

Add to that care packages filled with yet more junk food, Kesselring said, and weight control in the war zone can be tough.

"They gain weight in Iraq if