



By Jake Conrad

We are all familiar with zombies. We see them plastered across [pop culture](#) in movies, video games, and television shows. You may have even read a [full length novel](#) about them! Today, zombies are everywhere. But what if I told you that they had infiltrated the Army, and that

most of us interact with them every day?

These pesky intruders are known as 'Staff Zombies' and they come in many shapes and sizes. They may be difficult to spot at first, but once recognized, they are nearly impossible to ignore. Throughout our careers, we have all seen and dealt with them. Staff Zombies can be unnecessary personally owned vehicle inspections before a long weekend, or they can be weekly storyboard requirements that go nowhere. Every unit has its own invaders, and often, the same ones permeate across the entire force. Please keep in mind, my use of 'staff' as the prefix to zombies isn't a [Myrerian reaction](#) to any form of staff officership, but that will become evident later on.

Typically, zombies share three basic characteristics.

- 1: They are not living, but not quite dead.
- 2: They vaguely resemble their former self (aside from the rotting flesh!).
- 3: They crave brains.

Staff Zombies are not too different. At one time, they may have served a purpose, but that purpose has since been long forgotten. They may appear useful, but after a closer look, you realize that they have been rotting away for some time. And instead of eating brains, they consume readiness.

You might find yourself asking, "What's the big deal? Staff Zombies might be annoying, but they're not really hurting anyone." And that is where you are wrong. A few Staff Zombies are to be expected in any organization. But if not dealt with, they can quickly spread, infecting other processes or formations. Staff Zombies drain soldiers' time and energy, and a mass of them can grind operations to a screeching halt.

So, what do you do when zombies surround you? You kill them.

Good leaders kill zombies, and Staff Zombies are no different. As the Secretary of the Army, Mark Esper was the [Ash Williams \(*The Evil Dead*\)](#) of zombie killing. In 2018, with a single stroke of his pen, he [killed dozens of Army-wide Staff Zombies](#). Gone were the super powered zombies of virtual Survive-Evade-Resist-Escape (SERE-A) training, the Multi-source Assessment and Feedback Survey (MSAF), and the Accident Avoidance Course. In the aftermath, all of us collectively breathed a sigh of relief as we gained back valuable time these monsters had previously consumed.

Unfortunately, unlike traditional zombies, Staff Zombies cannot be dispatched with a quick blow to the head. Getting rid of these invaders takes vigilance, dedication, and trust. Leaders must be watchful, sussing them out wherever they appear. To assist in these efforts, we have a powerful but dangerous weapon: "Why?"

"Why do I need to fill out another cover sheet before legal will look at this separation packet?"

"Why is the supply room only open on Tuesday mornings?"

"Why do I have to complete Thumb Drive Awareness Training before I can submit a leave packet?"

"Why" is a critical tool that we can use to identify and stop Staff Zombies in their tracks, but we must employ it with caution. First, operations or processes can appear to be Staff Zombies, but after a closer look, or at a higher level, there might be an important reason they exist. Second, "why" will not win you any friends. Soldiers may cling to the familiar, even if it is nonsensical. The Army has embraced the phrase "shut up and color" for a reason. Often, we get so wrapped up in our routine that we fail to ask, and we do not like being asked, "why." Lastly, used in excess, "why" wastes time and energy. I'm sure many of us have witnessed a crafty soldier trying to use the Socratic method to get out of sweeping the motorpool. Explaining, in detail, the purpose behind every daily tasking, request, or training event can grind operations to a screeching halt just as quickly as Staff Zombies can. "Why" is a weapon we must wield carefully and with good judgment.

Despite my familiarity with Staff Zombies, I often failed to recognize them loitering within my own ranks as a leader. During my time in company command, one particularly crafty zombie eluded me for weeks. It drained the readiness of soldiers by limiting the rigor and creativity of morning physical training. To do so, it targeted our brand new container filled with Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) equipment. For those that don't know, these containers are basically a gym in a box. They have over two hundred pieces of individual workout equipment, which is great for physical training, but a property accountability nightmare. It would routinely take ten of us an hour, and plenty of sweat and frustration, to inventory all of these items. After my first few weeks in command, I noticed that none of my platoons were using the ACFT equipment. Perplexed, I remained quiet for far too long. Eventually, my frustration boiled over and I brought it up during our weekly training meeting. The platoon leadership casually explained that they didn't have the time to inventory the container, in its entirety, before and after each day's physical training event. Lo' and behold, the headquarters representative, responsible for the ACFT equipment,

required a complete layout of all two hundred items every time any property changed hands. This endeavor would waste about two hours of the Platoon's time, so the default response was to stop use. At that moment, I finally recognized the beast - our very own ACFT Staff Zombie! To kill this wasteful monster, I employed the best weapon I had. I asked, "why are we signing out the equipment this way?" My "why" was the equivalent of a shotgun blast to the ACFT zombie's head. That day, we changed the sign out procedures. The headquarters section issued and received only the items that were used for the workout. This cut the inventory process from two hours to fifteen minutes. With a simple "why," one less Staff Zombie existed to drain our soldiers' time and energy. But this victory came at great cost, as we had lost weeks of valuable physical readiness training. If I had asked "why" sooner, I may have been able to identify this Staff Zombie earlier, preserve soldier readiness, and save us all a headache.

As leaders, we all should take a page out of the legendary zombie killer, Mark Esper's, playbook. Whether we like it or not, the Army is a bureaucracy. And in bureaucracies, Staff Zombies breed like rabbits. Going about our day, we must remain vigilant towards the zombie threat. The Army is not designed to be efficient. Still, it will operate a little smoother if we eliminate the invaders mucking up the works.

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