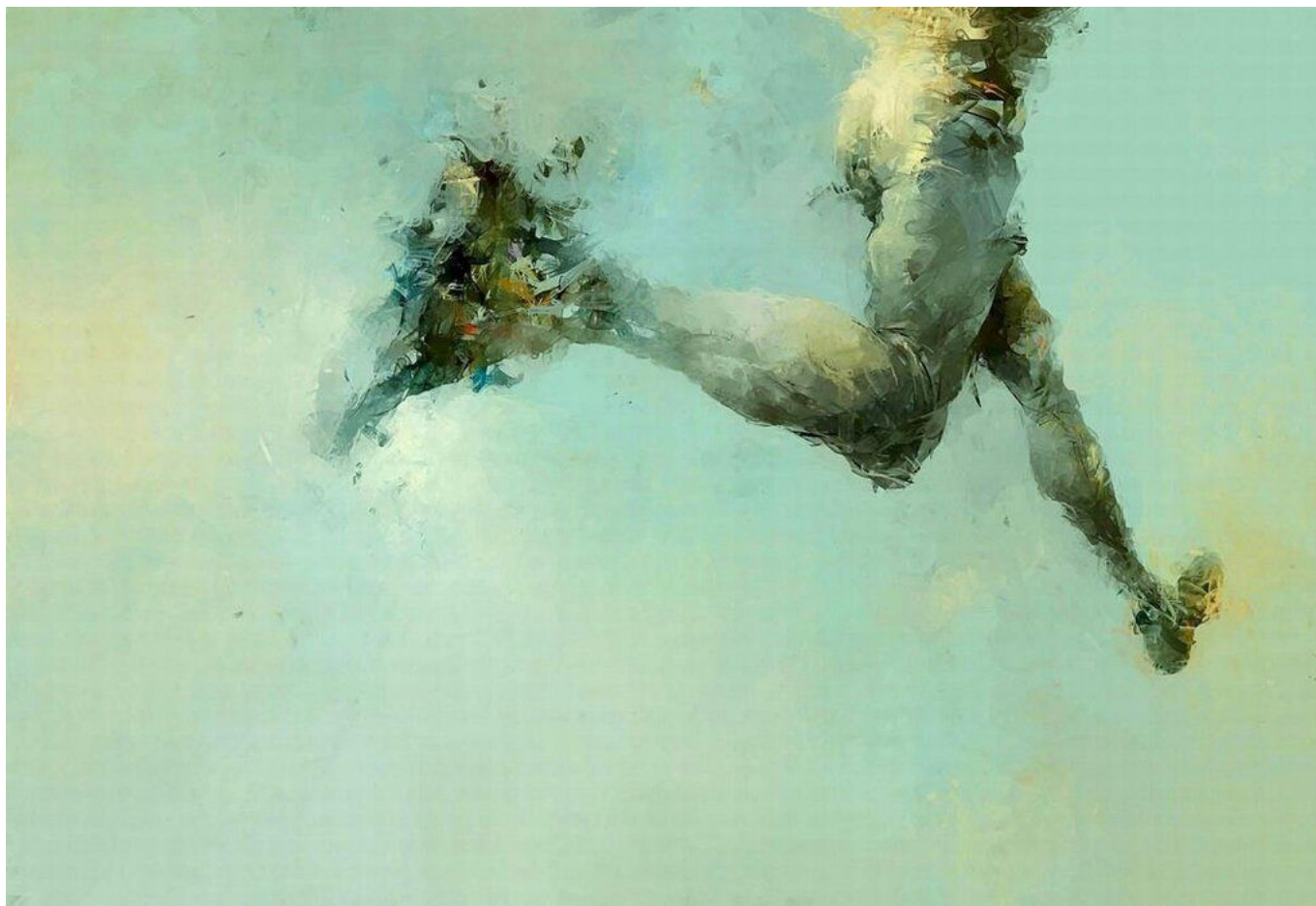


## Sprinting the Marathon: Lessons Learned from an Advanced Individual Training Commander



by David G. Moehling

Commanding an Advanced Individual Training (AIT) Company presents unique challenges vastly different from those in conventional units. The training calendar is cyclic and repetitive, the property book is minimal, and deployments/lengthy CTC rotations are nonexistent. The challenge lies in the constant churn of Soldiers, all brand new to the Army, moving in and out of the unit at a rate of upwards of 200 every two months.

This command truly is about people; both in the soldierization process and, more importantly, the genuine concern for their wellbeing. The following are lessons I discovered while learning how to be a successful commander of an AIT Company.

**Create a positive command climate.** Implementing the Army's [People First Strategy](#) in AIT was a priority. Balancing what is best for the individual Soldiers with what is best for the mission and best for the Army was a struggle. However, most of the time an effective solution could be reached. Things like accommodating National Guard and Reserves

Soldiers with finding follow on employment, supporting challenging administrative requests (OCONUS leave packets, religious accommodations, etc.), being open and honest with Soldiers who want to voluntarily transfer to a new MOS or separate from the Army, and fighting to keep Soldiers from being recycled/dismissed from the course whenever possible are examples of, in my opinion, meeting its intent.

It's easy to just say "no" and not support those choices, but fighting for what's best for your Soldiers and putting effort into solving their problems is visible to the entire formation and establishes a very positive climate. To leverage data in support of tracking that climate, I kept tabs on the number of open-door engagements, suicidal ideation trends, and EO/SHARP situation.

I tracked open-door engagement because it was important to me that Soldiers felt comfortable bringing issues to 1SG and I. The late [Colin Powell](#) perfectly captured this sentiment, stating "the day the Soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership."

Next, I tracked suicidal ideation trends to compare the frequent emphasis on suicide prevention with the climate and overall morale in the unit. We regularly held candid and open conversations about suicide prevention, often relying on Soldiers' and cadre members' personal experiences. We supplemented this with weekly Military Resiliency Training (MRT) sessions and implementation of a grassroots bystander intervention program titled RAPID (Resiliency, Awareness, Prevention, Inclusion, and Diversity), to address mental health.

*Bottom Line: from a command perspective, consistency, fairness, and transparency go a long way to building a positive climate.*

**Prioritize character development.** In every situation, promote and reinforce character development. Soldiers must learn to become accountable for every action they take. Consistently messaging the fact that ACFT scores, marksmanship scores, and technical analytical competency only matter if leaders first know that they can trust you. Period. Do the right thing and demand those around you do the same.

*Bottom Line: character always comes first.*

**Promote fitness.** The physical demands of daily military service does not disappear because we do not currently have an approved fitness test of record. Unloading a CONEX, moving ammo cans on the range, or sitting in a parachute harness for eight hours are all

tasks which require physical stamina and strength. As a command, we consistently reinforced the mentality of “training for the job, not for the test” to produce physically fit and resilient trainees.

It was evident early on in command that implementing positive incentives for positive performance proved incredibly useful. We implemented a PT incentive program focused on encouraging Soldiers to perform well during PT and on their diagnostic ACFT. Any Soldier who achieved a 420 or above (70% average per event) received an exemption from organized unit PT on Fridays. Over the ensuing several months, the unit’s ACFT pass rate increased by 10% and the average overall score improved 6%.

*Bottom line: Soldiers value sleep, and giving them back 90 extra minutes of it on Fridays is an effective motivator.*

Additionally, our height/weight improvement program provided education for Soldiers trending towards enrollment in ABCP upon hitting their 180-days time-in-service, the point at which they begin to fall under [AR 600-9](#). Every cycle we tested the Soldiers about four weeks into the course. If they failed height/weight we scheduled them for a 90-minute block of instruction with our Brigade [Holistic Health and Fitness](#) (H2F) team where they completed a body composition analysis test (using an InBody system) and learned nutrition and training methods specific to their body type. At each iteration, roughly 7-10% of Soldiers failed this initial test. However, over 13 months in command we did not have a single Soldier fail their final test, resulting in zero Soldiers enrolled in ABCP at their 180-day mark.

*Bottom Line: get creative and employ all available resources to identify trends, intervene early, and help your Soldiers succeed.*

**Treat everything as a training event.** For an AIT Soldier at Fort Huachuca, developing necessary analytical skills is just one part of their training. During my time in command, I had a mindset to approach everything as a training event. These Soldiers have less than three months in the Army when they arrive at AIT. Learning to professionally interact with other Soldiers, handle stressful situations, and respect their leadership are all skills which require training. Living with other Soldiers who they just met requires training. Speaking respectfully to their peers and superiors requires training. Learning to advocate for their own medical care requires treatment. The list goes on.

*Bottom line: training doesn’t only exist in the classroom and field, it extends to every aspect of the soldierization process.*

**Quickly identify and correct misconduct.** Prior to taking command of an AIT Company, I had only observed one Article 15 action. By the time I left command, I had conducted over 45 Article 15's. I take zero pride in that number nor in the punishment administered to these Soldiers. However, I do fully understand my UCMJ authority was absolutely a tool used to steer Soldiers back onto the right path. No Soldier genuinely learns a lesson from a punishment administered to them; instead, they learn the lesson from the verbal reprimand and the words a Commander uses during an Article 15 hearing. I never lost sight of the incredible responsibility of having a young Private standing in front me of being reprimanded for their misconduct. In almost every case, my words and approach worked. I seldom had repeat offenders and I am beyond proud of every Soldier who received UCMJ action, corrected their behavior, and went on to serve honorably.

*Bottom line: to correct behavior, it is essential to intervene early and get Soldiers back on the right path.*

**Separate Soldiers not suited for the Army.** Own the decision to separate Soldiers from the Army. In AIT, the Drill Sergeants and the First Sergeant make their recommendations about which Soldiers are not performing to the standard despite efforts to rehabilitate. However, the final decision lies solely with the Commander.

I had many restless nights in command wrestling with the decision to separate certain Soldiers. At the end of the day, I viewed my role as a gatekeeper for every subsequent unit they would be assigned to. If I was a Battalion S2 out in the force receiving this Soldier to my section, would they be an asset or a liability. Are they trainable? Have we as their cadre tried everything we possibly can to rehabilitate them?

If I made the decision to separate, I would discuss my decision with the Soldier and help them understand the separation process, always treating them with dignity and respect, no matter their circumstance.

*Bottom line: it is a hard truth that not every Soldier is suited for service, but that's okay. As the Commander, own that decision and don't take it lightly.*

Prior to assuming command, my predecessor gave me the advice that command is a marathon, not a sprint. However, looking back I realize that there is a tremendous amount of work to be done and only a finite amount of time to do it.

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My advice to my successor is slightly different: sprint the marathon.

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