



by Benjamin Phocas

Urban warfare is a costly endeavor with a broad litany of demands. Among these vitally important demands, one that requires months if not years of preparation, is physical fitness.

The physical toll of combat has long been a known quantity. However, the nature of urban terrain means that warfare conducted within its environs presents more physical challenges compared to other environments. A useful starting point to better understand the demands of urban warfare is 9/11. Firefighters moved as fast as they could up 110 flights of stairs, wearing up to 75lbs of gear. Anyone who has replicated this grueling physical event as part of a memorial workout knows just how physically taxing this can be without gear or the added physical stressors of combat. In a modern urban battlefield, soldiers will be doing this with all the added stressors of combat, day after day, potentially week after week.

It is time to seriously consider how we prepare soldiers for the physical challenges of urban warfare.

Basing physical fitness training programs on the current standards set by the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) or their respective services fitness test will not cultivate the level of

physical fitness required in future urban warfare terrain. History has shown us that combat does not discriminate by age, gender, or military speciality. Therefore, a culture of physical fitness that incorporates additional, tough physical training programs must be further developed beyond just training for the ACFT.

Not to discredit the Army, the implementation of the ACFT and the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) across the force is a great step in the right direction and provides a baseline for units to develop better physical plans for their soldiers PT. Ultimately, this test is a diagnostic tool, not a panacea for the challenges of future combat.

The [FM 7-22](#), Holistic Health and Fitness "Physical Components and Occupational Tasks" table is a helpful starting point, but it fails to identify specific tasks. One of the best aspects of this publication is the baseline triad of "Strength Speed and Endurance" as it accurately targets the fitness that soldiers need. From this we can extrapolate more meaningfully built workouts that encompass all three pillars of fitness.

The events on the Army Combat Fitness Test are all designed to replicate physical tasks soldiers must conduct in combat. Lifting and moving casualties, bounding from cover to cover, sprinting with gear, dragging casualties, clambering over walls and obstacles, and conducting extended, strenuous movement. All are real world applications of the ACFT. These events assess potential real-world activities with a sufficient degree of verisimilitude. At a basic level they assess a soldier's combat strength, speed, and endurance.

Unfortunately, with the recent changes made to the ACFT, the Leg Tuck exercise was removed. While the intent behind this change was done with good intentions, this only serves to degrade soldiers' physical fitness for urban combat by removing the only exercise that was designed to replicate a specifically urban physical task: climbing over a wall or pulling oneself up onto a ledge. The maximum deadlift for female soldiers has also been lowered by over 100lbs. Without devolving into more sensitive arguments, these changes further reinforce the fact that the ACFT, and training to the standards set by it, cannot prepare our soldiers for the physical exertions of urban combat.

To properly prepare, units, leaders, or soldiers themselves must incorporate more into their PT and individual fitness planning.

With mobility in urban terrain being so critical, some posit that cardiovascular exercises should comprise the basis of training plans. However, as seen with the ACFT's implementation of the deadlift, standing power throw and sprint-drag-carry, a soldier's strength under load is a critical part of their fitness. A soldier with an impressive 2 mile time

who cannot lift a fallen comrade is useless in the operational environment.

Soldiers need to learn how to efficiently, and safely, pull, push and carry weight. A soldier's maximum number of back squats could directly correlate to their ability to buddy-carry a wounded comrade out of harm's way.

This does not mean that every soldier should aspire to physically look like a 1980's action hero. Hypertrophy work, which according to H2F diagrams is 8-12 reps at 60-85% of maximum, is the balance between pure muscular strength and anaerobic endurance. The goal is for soldiers to be able to lift heavy weight repeatedly, not an enormous weight once or twice. This is the baseline strength that the Army foresees for its soldiers, and that which combat requires. More the full-body musculature of a Crossfit physique rather than the Hulk Hogan 'strong man' build.

While we stated that cardiovascular endurance alone is not a standalone solution, it still plays an important role. The movement alone to reach the fight is a brutal workout in-and-of itself. Soldiers must be able to climb floor after floor of buildings or crawl down and through small sewers. In structures with no stairs, they will be lifting themselves and each other up and through windows or other openings. Streets follow grid shapes that leave massive linear danger areas. Unfortunately, unless buildings are close enough together to be cutting through walls (mouseholed), soldiers will have to cross these kill zones to move from objective to objective. It will be a gritty sprint, under load, over broken ground, up and down steep gradients. This is a dangerous test of a soldier's speed. Their 100m sprint time under load could be the difference between life and death. Conducting repetitive sprint work, with accompanying strengthening exercises of hamstrings and glutes, is infinitely better than slow-paced, occasional PT runs.

Once soldiers have reached the fight, they will more than likely be exhausted, but now the real battle begins. In dense urban terrain, the enemy is often holed up, walled in on all sides by concrete and metal. To clear them out, soldiers will move room to room engaging with the enemy in close quarters, even hand to hand combat. The brute force required to kill an enemy soldier with one's bare hands is immense. Further, it requires an aggressive, warfighting mindset. This level of fitness and mindset can only be inculcated through the regular training of combatives. Physical and psychological capabilities will not suddenly appear or heighten under stress, fear, and fatigue; rather, we must anticipate the opposite and train to compensate for the rigors and brutality of combat

Our soldiers need to have the physical strength and violence of action to beat, stab or choke the life out of another person. This can be developed in many ways, either through

deliberate training of the Army combatives program, platoon wrestling matches in the barracks, and civilian MMA gyms. Over time, through repetition, matches and scuffles, soldiers will build higher levels of stamina. This type of cardio cannot be developed just by running laps around a track. There are few substitutes that can replicate the full body exertion and fatigue of a vicious fight.

In the Urban Operations section of [ATP 4-02.13](#), it states "As urban areas may have significant trouble to vehicular movement due to rubble, road conditions, and other obstacles, much of the casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) may require the use of litter teams." The arduous movement made to objectives now must be made in reverse while bearing the load of a fallen comrade. Wounded soldiers must transport themselves, or be physically carried by their comrades back through hallways, down broken stairs, or out of subterranean complexes. Soldiers must have an extremely high level of anaerobic endurance to be able to conduct litter or buddy carries over great distances of severely restricted terrain. Lifting a litter bearing a soldier loaded down with modern equipment, weighing hundreds of pounds, is challenging when done in isolation. This becomes exponentially more difficult when soldiers must carry the litter across treacherous terrain that can easily snap ankles or legs, a dynamic physical feat that requires significant grip strength and stamina. And it cannot be overstated that soldiers will likely conduct these tasks in close proximity to hostile forces. The current United States Army fitness standards, especially with the most recent version of the ACFT, do not aptly prepare soldiers for this level of strain.

Lastly, the mental health benefits to tough physical training cannot be ignored. H2F mentions that a key component to fitness is mental toughness. This too can be developed through physical fitness. Beyond the release of endorphins during exercise, and feeling good about one's self after a workout, doing tough training as a unit builds cohesion and resiliency. This is entirely worthy of an article of its own, but the essential takeaway is that regularly conducting challenging exercises as a team strengthens it immeasurably. Not only are formations tested and strengthened, but individual soldiers build the resiliency and discipline to continuously rise to the challenge and push themselves to become better physically. With peers and leaders around them to support and drive them to achieve their individual potential, soldiers are given the opportunity to develop themselves physically and mentally beyond what they may have imagined in themselves. In my own short time in the Army, I have found physical fitness, and my peers who support me, to be outstanding teachers of character.

To conclude, modern urban combat will be more physically demanding than any of the other types of environments in which we usually focus our Army training. Wars are won through

preparedness long before the first shots are fired. With this in mind, if we implement more rigorous physical training now, we will be ready to fight-and win-in the future.

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