



by Oren Abusch

In the early spring of 2020, my Battalion ran a two-week marksmanship course. Each day, NCOs would go to the range to hone their shooting skills and, on one particular range day, I noticed an NCO kitted in the most expensive after-market gear money could buy: an OpsCore helmet, Peltor ear-protection, a water-cooled plate carrier, Lowa boots, and a Crye-Precision Combat blouse and pants. Simply stated, he looked the part of a tried and tested warrior.

However, he was struggling to zero. Finally, in a fit of frustration, one of our more senior NCOs looked at him sarcastically and said “all that Crye, and no precision.”

His remark captures a core issue in our current army: a culture that values looking lethal over lethality itself.

The current conventional United States Army has too many soldiers who would rather invest in their appearance than their competence. They believe they are “too cool for (Army)

schools” and that they are above self-development through tough realistic training. They eschew the value of mastering skill level 1 tasks. They mock collective training.

The conventional Army has reached a point where many of its small unit leaders don't want to change, grow, or leave their comfort zone. This dangerous attitude is a blindspot in our Army, of course perceptible to senior leaders, but likely worse than they realize. It may cost us in our next war. There are many people out there who do not ascribe to this philosophy, but they are fighting an uphill battle, and our future is at stake.

Eschewing the Basics

While I have not served in Special Operations, I have spent time with many NCOs who have. Time and time again when I ask them the difference between the conventional army and Special Operations, they explain that they take the time to master the basics. Many NCOs from the Ranger Regiment have told me stories of their time as Privates. Their NCOs would blindfold them and give them a crate full of parts from various weapons. They would race their peers to have the fastest time assembling and conducting functions checks on multiple weapons systems. In time, with decisive feedback from their superiors, they gained mastery.

Too often, we see ourselves as above practicing these skill level one tasks. Loading an M249 is more complicated under NVGs and with an elevated heart rate than when you're sitting out on a range. As such, it is imperative that we practice under all conditions, so we are capable in any mission profile.

Likewise, the first time jumping out of a plane is terrifying. But if you do it frequently enough, it becomes second nature. I have spent over a year as an officer in reconnaissance units and watched half a dozen soldiers attend Sniper school. One of the most failed events is the shoot-in, in which Snipers must demonstrate extreme accuracy with an M4 iron sight zero at 25 meters. After our unit had a rash of failures, one of my NCOs who had previously passed the school came and spoke with me, explaining that many of the people who had failed had done only cursory preparation for this while he had done washer and dime drills every day for months before attending Sniper School. Sadly, many leaders think they are above training the most simple basics day in and day out even though training like this requires almost no prior planning or resourcing.

Too Cool For School

In my formation, I have all sorts of Paratroopers chomping at the bit to go to “cool” schools

such as Air Assault or the Foreign Weapons Course. However, few of them are willing to invest in the schools that provide the toughest, most realistic training (or provide the unit with the greatest value).

A few months ago I had a new Infantry NCO tell me "I want to spend my career proving that I don't need a Ranger Tab to be successful." What he failed to understand was that his unwillingness to learn and grow was closing him off from the hard-learned lessons of Ranger School. The same lessons that may very well keep him, or his men, alive in combat-and some lessons which he might not learn outside of Ranger School. Young soldiers who return with their Ranger Tab may have an (earned) air of arrogance about them, but they distinguish themselves in training as field-seasoned soldiers who take the basics of patrolling seriously. Conversely, many of their peers have been toiling in the aforementioned training starved environments, and struggle to master their job's tactical tasks.

I have spent my Lieutenant time in an Airborne unit, where mobility schools are vital to our mission requirement of rapid deployability. None more so than Jumpmaster school. Being a Jumpmaster is an additional duty, and it can come with extra work, but there is no difference between Jumpmaster duties and the additional responsibilities inherent in being a leader. Jumpmasters are the ones who command Aircraft, check the aircraft's safety, and who conduct PCC/PCIs on their Paratroopers before sending them out of the Paratroop door mid-flight. Yet, any Airborne leader can tell you that convincing Paratroopers to go to Jumpmaster school can be like pulling teeth. Once again, the prevailing attitude is that individuals are above these simple schools.

My Brigade recently held an Expert Infantryman Badge train-up and testing, and I was disappointed with the overall effort displayed by many. During our train-up week, many of the Junior leaders complained that the training was not worth serious effort. They argued that, because not all the blocks of instruction were perfect, because there were so many candidates to graders, and because many of the sequence standards are arbitrary, that the Expert Infantryman's Badge was degraded in value and not worth the effort. EIB, like many of the other hard training the Army offers, is not perfect, and can feel like a game at times. Graders would sometimes say "I know you may do this differently in real life but this is the standard we are grading against." Yet the training was tougher and more realistic than most I have done in the Army, and forced me to train 30 different skill level one tasks to a near perfect standard, either teaching me new skills or refreshing old ones. After two weeks, I am confident I have emerged a better Soldier and Infantryman for it. Yet many of those who criticized the training did not take it seriously and did not want to master patrols, weapons, and medical care. Many failed the initial physical fitness test on day one, and some certainly

did so on purpose.

Overvaluing the 6th Principle of Patrolling

According to the Ranger Handbook there are 5 principles of patrolling: planning, security, reconnaissance, control, and common sense. The often joked about 6th principle of patrolling is looking cool. The joke has gone too far. We now train and operate in a culture where we value the 6th principle over the first five. With the emergence of kitted out pictures on instagram, veteran operated facebook pages, morale patches, and flags, parts of the military community have leaned into the importance of image. Many people explain that they are investing in their profession, dumping thousands of dollars into lighter, more comfortable kit, and other non-issued equipment. There is no direct issue with that, but many of them subconsciously compensate for other professional shortcomings. While I have purchased a few non-issued pouches, the top investments that I made were a squat rack and an Audible membership.

In truth, these arbitrary gear purchases are an attempt to appear like a Special Operator. People want others to look at them and think that because only above-average soldiers wear this gear, they are inherently above average. The reality is that many of them want to posture as above average rather than taking the time to improve themselves to *be* above average. Instead of exceeding the standard, we take time to simply appear as if we have done so.

We Only Have One Army

On the front of my office door is a quote from *The Centurions*, [a book documenting](#) the fight of French Paratroopers in Algeria. The quote unpacks the dichotomy between an army that looks good, and an army that fights good.

"I'd like to have two armies: one for display with lovely guns, tanks, little soldiers, staffs, distinguished and doddering Generals, and dear little regimental officers who would be deeply concerned over their General's bowel movements or their Colonel's piles, an army that would be shown for a modest fee on every fairground in the country.

The other would be the real one, composed entirely of young enthusiasts in camouflage uniforms, who would not be put on display, but from whom impossible efforts would be demanded and to whom all sorts of tricks would be taught. That's the army in which I should like to fight"

The great irony is that many soldiers and junior leaders think that their investments in fancy kit and equipment puts them in the latter category, those who care about fieldcraft and

lethality. However, expensive gadgetry is just the newest version of the army for display, while those committed to mastering the basics are the real enthusiasts. Those are the soldiers with which I should like to fight.

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