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DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING THE WARRIOR ETHOS IN ENGINEER UNITS

By Colonel Christopher W. Martin

This article is aimed at helping company commanders and platoon leaders develop the Warrior Ethos in their units. It is based on things that worked for the 91st Engineer Battalion and ultimately led to the successful completion of a 14-month deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Because of the way the battalion trained and the level of training reached, the brigade combat team commander had the confidence to let the unit fight as a task force in Baghdad. None of this happened overnight though; development of the Warrior Ethos began early and continued throughout the deployment.

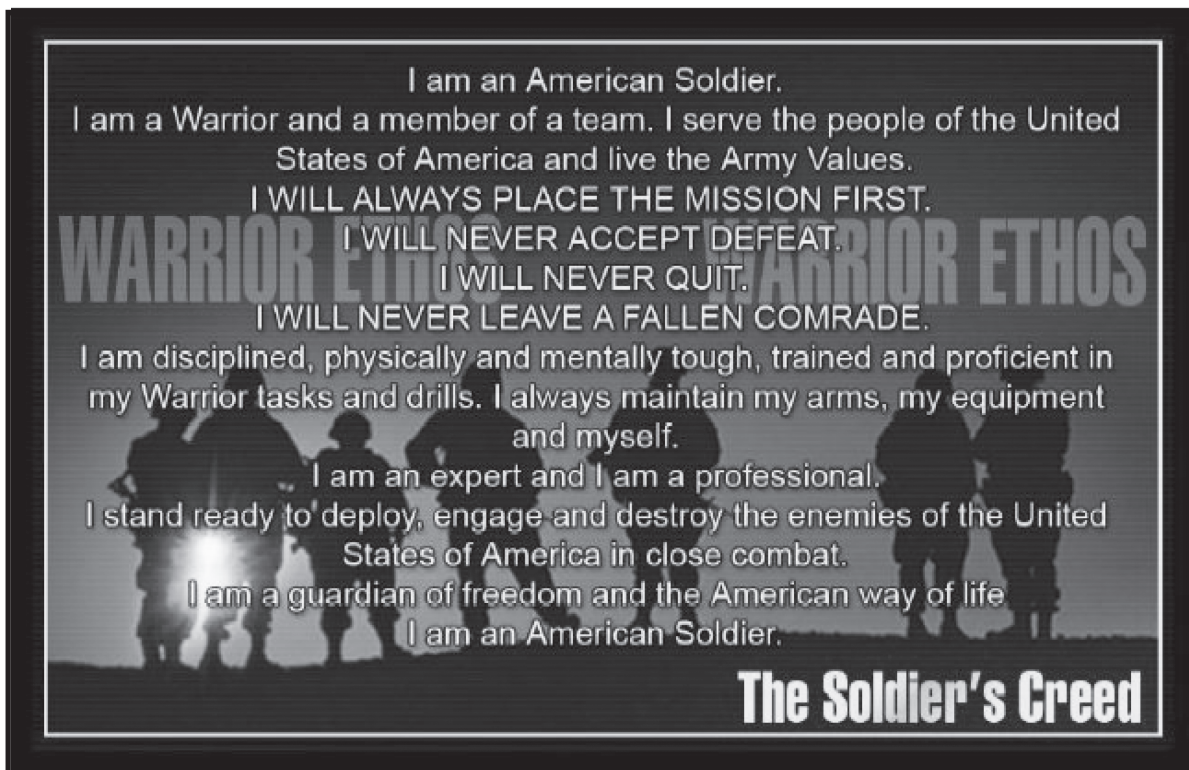
As an Army, we talk about the “Warrior Ethos” or “Warrior Spirit” and how important it is for Soldiers and units to have this mindset to make them successful in combat. The Warrior Spirit takes on particular importance as units prepare to deploy and focus their training on the missions they anticipate once deployed. Units that don’t make the development of a Warrior Spirit their priority are less likely to be successful in combat. Development of this ethos comes from discipline and training and is a continuous process, even when deployed. Units that develop and sustain a warrior mentality will find that their Soldiers are much more prepared mentally, physically, and emotionally to handle the rigors of continuous combat.

Training Warriors

It is our job as leaders to train and lead warriors. We must ensure that our units are ready to deploy at any time or anywhere and accomplish any mission. Even when a mission is not from a trained skill set, the mission must still be accomplished. Good units are able to accomplish any mission because they are disciplined, physically ready, and able to execute basic fundamental skills (blocking and tackling drills). They have leaders who have developed trust and confidence through hard, aggressive training.

Training is continuous, but ultimately begins and ends with noncommissioned officers (NCOs). In combat, NCOs must have the confidence to make decisions quickly; the ability and confidence is instilled during training. The commander’s function is to guide NCOs and leaders in the unit to conduct the right training, under the right conditions, and according to standards. The commander (battalion, company, and platoon) is responsible for ensuring that NCOs know the standard and train to meet that standard. The commander arms his NCOs with the most valuable resource—adequate time to train. This is done by focusing on the tasks the unit will train on and determining what tasks will not be trained.

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Tasks

Commanders determine the skills and tasks Soldiers will train on—refinement of the mission-essential task list (METL) and battle tasks accomplish this. Engineers typically have more “perceived” tasks and responsibilities than can possibly be trained and must determine what tasks should be trained. For instance, the likelihood of constructing an abatis or destroying a bridge is low, and therefore the 91st did not train on those tasks. They got more out of their training by focusing their squads and platoons on the most likely demolition missions they would receive: breach a lane through a minefield using hand-emplaced explosives, breach a lane through a wire obstacle, and breach a door or wall in a building. All demolitions training focused on performance of these tasks. Once deployment orders were received for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the unit’s METL was changed to include the tasks most likely to be executed in Iraq; those that were not anticipated were deleted.

Live-Fire Exercises

Probably the most important training conducted involved live-fire exercises (LFXs). Several LFXs were conducted at the squad and platoon levels, independent of the maneuver task forces, to give the Soldiers confidence in their weapon-handling abilities and their leaders confidence in coordinating and directing fires. LFXs also provide a valuable opportunity to train communication skills at the leader level. The 91st required the company commander to be present at the range and running the exercise for a squad-level LFX, and a field grade officer was required for all platoon-level LFXs. This allowed platoon

leaders to communicate with squad leaders at squad-level LFXs and company commanders to work with platoon leaders at platoon-level LFXs.

LFX scenarios were based on combat, initially for the invasion into Iraq and later for the actual mission. Because the unit built the scenarios themselves, they had to understand Army Regulation 385-63, *Policies and Procedures for Firing Ammunition for Training, Target Practice, and Combat*. The principles outlined in this regulation carry over into combat and ensure that officers and NCOs have a good understanding of surface danger zones (SDZs) and weapons orientation.

The ability to clear a room and building is a task every combat engineer unit should have. It is a task that the 91st performed almost daily and often multiple times in a day. It is also a task that must be retrained constantly. Field Manual 3-06.11, *Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain*, explains how to do it properly, and commanders should coordinate with infantry units to help train leaders on this important battle drill. Every patrol and every Soldier that rolls off the forward operating base in Iraq, regardless of their military occupational specialty, stands the chance of making contact with the enemy and must be prepared to defeat the enemy through aggressive actions. Quite often, this will include clearing a building to kill or capture the enemy initiating the attack.

Weapons Training

The importance of weapons marksmanship and reflexive-fire training cannot be overemphasized. The confidence

Soldiers develop in their weapon systems from constant shooting will be manifested when they are in a firefight. Likewise, training on crew-served weapons and squad automatic weapons (SAWs) is vital, and proficiency on these weapons must be attained. There are other extremely useful means to train; for example, the Engagement Skills Trainer, which allows leaders to exercise rules of engagement (ROE) training is a great resource, if available.

Commanders should look for other unique capabilities their unit may require and find ways to train Soldiers on those tasks. A capability that builds confidence in units and in individual Soldiers is advanced marksmanship courses and sniper training. Snipers and excellent marksmen are invaluable in the urban environment and play an important role in many missions. The 91st trained snipers in each company down to platoon level. They were able to field an M14 sniper rifle in each line company, but had already purchased scopes for M16A2 rifles to develop platoon snipers. Even if it is not possible to field sniper rifles, the best shooters should be identified and sent to advanced marksmanship courses.

Combat Lifesaver Course

Another morale builder is the combat lifesaver (CLS) course. The battalion's standard for combat lifesavers is that every Soldier must be CLS-trained. The 91st held CLS courses weekly, even in Iraq, and Soldiers were recertified while deployed. Soldiers knew that if they were wounded while on a mission, their friends could take care of them. In Iraq, CLS-trained Soldiers were vital to saving lives because they provided initial aid until the wounded Soldiers were medically evacuated to Level II care.

Equipment

Part of developing the Warrior Spirit is making Soldiers feel like warriors. One way to achieve this is to get the special equipment they need to conduct the mission. The Rapid Fielding Initiative goes a long way toward fulfilling that goal, but other pieces of equipment were recommended by Soldiers, such as door breaching kits, sniper scopes, spotlights and spotting scopes (for identification of improvised explosive devices [IEDs]), and collapsible ladders. Training on this equipment at Fort Hood, Texas, instilled confidence at the Soldier level prior to deployment. No matter how much equipment a unit buys, if Soldiers aren't trained on it, it doesn't matter. Mount M68s on weapons and train Soldiers to shoot with them. Learn how to use AN/PAS-13 Thermal Weapon Sights (TWS) before deployment. Enforce mounting all optics on weapons for every training event. The advantage over the enemy in Iraq using these weapon systems—fully-mounted with all optics—cannot be overstated.

Civilian Training

Get Soldiers the training they need to be successful, even if it is not available in the military. The 91st contracted with a civilian specialty school to ensure that their NCOs learned the

correct standards and techniques for explosive breaching of a building. School personnel came to Fort Hood for a training session and trained 91st Soldiers using condemned apartments in a nearby community, and later the 91st sent several NCOs to attend the course at a civilian site. The morale of the NCOs who attended the course rose, and the battalion became expert at explosive breaching.

Training During Deployment

Good units continue to train even after they are deployed. Training should be focused on tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP); lessons learned; and the fundamental skills needed for the unit to continue to be successful. Commanders should use this training to refine the lessons learned, develop methods to counteract the enemy's actions, and retrain areas identified as weaknesses in the unit. Again, continuous training improves Soldier morale and confidence.

Leaders should read and discuss after-action reviews and lessons-learned documents for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and incorporate that information into training. It makes the training more relevant and gives Soldiers a sense of why they are doing the training. This is a baseline only, and things change.

Attitude

Not every aspect of developing the Warrior Spirit involves training. There is a psychological element also. If commanders constantly tell their Soldiers how good they are and how good their unit is, soon they will live up to that billing—if they are not already. Soldiers will have pride in their unit, and NCOs will develop a mindset that they can overcome any problem they face. Confidence developed in their capabilities will be manifested in their everyday attitude and actions. Soldiers cannot be trained for every contingency, but commanders can develop a Warrior Spirit in Soldiers that allows them to adapt to the situation and prevail.

Conclusion

As a commander, you should evaluate your unit and see where you are in establishing the Warrior Spirit in your Soldiers. If it is not at the level you want, begin to instill it now. Be creative in your approach to training, and emphasize to your Soldiers why they are training a particular way. Try to build flexibility and an attitude that the unit can do anything, and you will not be disappointed. 

Colonel Martin is currently a student at the United States Army War College. His previous assignments include Commander of the 91st Engineer Battalion for 36 months, as well as assignments in the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), Southern European Task Force (SETAF), 1st Infantry Division, and the 101st Airborne Division.