

Basic Training Today



Fighting through villages is part of the training at Camp Wheeler

By Sgt. WALTER BERNSTEIN
YANK Staff Writer

CAMP WHEELER, GA.—Basic infantry training has changed since the days when people still thought they were getting out in a year. It's smarter, better taught and more realistic. It has to be. When trainees finish their cycle now, they don't go out on maneuvers. They go right overseas and into the line.

This policy was started when the decision was made not to form any more new divisions. That was long before VE-Day. Everything is done now on the replacement system.

This system will continue during the war against Japan and, according to Army Ground Forces, the training cycle will also remain basically the same as it was before Germany was defeated.

Emphasis will be placed on new weapons, says AGF, and there will be some variation in the use of old weapons, "as their use conforms to lessons learned in the Pacific." But otherwise the same fundamental methods of killing an enemy will be retained and the main changes will be those normally made in keeping the cycle constantly up to date.

Back in 1941, when Camp Wheeler was set up as the first Infantry Replacement Training Center, its basic training cycle was 13 weeks. After basic training, the trainees were shipped to divisions, where they learned to work as a team. Today, Wheeler is still turning out infantrymen, but the cycle has been upped to 15 weeks (for quite a while it was 17) and the men go out as individual replacements.

This plan is based on simple necessity. A certain number of men are continually needed overseas and the WD figures a constant 15-week training program of replacements will take care of the quota.

This whole business of replacements has caused a lot of bitching, particularly by combat men overseas. Most gripes, however, seem to be caused by the incurable fact that men can't be sent into combat knowing already what combat is like.

But there have been more specific complaints: Men trained only as riflemen being sent to heavy weapons companies or sent into the line without a chance to know the men they are fighting with, or left to grow mold in a repple deppele until they forget everything they knew, or just sent up front without knowing what the hell is going on.

These complaints appear to have some justification, but the faults don't lie primarily with the IRTCs. The IRTCs have no control over replacements once they've finished training. The only job of a center like Camp Wheeler is to make

Basic Training Today

infantrymen out of civilians in a very short period —on the basis of a curriculum handed down by Army Ground Forces through the Replacement and School Command.

They do this job well enough, according to most of the ex-combat men who are now cadremen and instructors here at Wheeler. Many of the cadremen with whom I talked think the course could be improved one way or another, but on the whole they feel this particular IRTC uses the 15 weeks about as well as could be expected.

This is actually saying a good deal, since 15 weeks is not all the time in the world. There have been many changes in the curriculum as the Army has grown up, and the course, nearly everybody agrees, is being improved all the time.

It's only a 15-week course, but it's more complete and better taught than it used to be four years ago.

For instance, the tactical emphasis used to be entirely on company tactics; now it is on squad and platoon tactics. There used to be little live firing; now there are 14 more firing problems than there were a year ago. Trainees used to spend only three days in the field; now they spend two weeks in bivouac, with 16 hours of night work each week. There used to be six hours of military courtesy and much close-order drill; this has been cut down, although many cadremen think it could be cut even more.

U**NDER** the present system the first six weeks are given over to Branch Immateriel Training. This includes military courtesy, sex hygiene, mines and booby traps, malaria control, map reading, marksmanship and other fundamentals.

The next nine weeks are specialized. Wheeler is set up to train 18 battalions each cycle including one heavy weapons and one specialist battalion. The remaining 16 are all rifle battalions. The specialist battalion includes two companies of chauffeurs, one company of message center personnel and one company of pioneer troops.

During the specialized weeks, trainees in the rifle battalions get 79 hours in Tactical Training of the Individual Soldier, which takes in scouting and patrolling, cover and movement, hasty fortifications and not-so-hasty fortifications. They get 16 hours on the bayonet, 103 hours on the M1, eight on the carbine, 48 on the BAR, 62 on the light machine gun, 60 on the 60-mm mortar, 74 on tactics and eight on close combat and infiltration courses. All the infantry weapons are field-fired and live ammunition is used in the infiltration course.

Most of the formal instruction is handled by officers and it is done strictly by the book. If it isn't in the FM it isn't taught, even if it worked for you from Bougainville to Luzon. But the important thing is that the FMs are constantly revised according to lessons learned in combat.

Reports from overseas are received and studied all the time. Their recommendations are incorporated into the manuals. The system may be rigid in the sense that no deviation from the FM is allowed, but the manual itself is definitely flexible, and the instruction is always up to date.

Because a program as big as this one must be standardized, enlisted cadremen do not instruct, although they implement lectures by advice in the field and coaching on the range. This has POd some of the former combat men, who claim that they are not allowed to pass on what they've learned by experience, but it seems pretty clear that you can't have men leaving 15 IRTCs full of specialized combat knowledge familiar only to a particular outfit. The WD says that a trainee would only become confused if he were taught in the same cycle by men who had come from different theaters bringing with

Basic Training Today

them a conflicting variety of methods.

Some of the cadremen claim that this makes for a situation in which a young officer without any experience tries to tell trainees what to do, when men with combat experience are forbidden to do so. About 30 percent of the officers have been overseas; the rest may be over age, limited service or fresh out of OCS. These new second lieutenants are sent to IRTCs mainly for experience in leading troops, and they also learn while teaching.

The teaching here is done on the committee system, similar to that of the Infantry School. Each battalion has a mortar committee, M1 committee and so on, made up of cadre officers and enlisted men who teach only that specialty. The only trouble with this system, according to the major in charge of battle courses, is that the personnel of the committees is not permanent. Officers are always being shipped out and the members of the committee changing.

Two nights a week cadre officers and men must attend Cadre School. Instruction is discussed at these sessions, so that all the instructors will know what is expected of them. Practically all the cadremen I saw disliked this school, claiming that combat men could not open their mouths without having the manual pulled on them.

OPINION is divided among the cadremen as to particulars of the course itself, although most of them think it quite adequate as a whole. A rifleman who had fought with the 36th Division through Italy said: "These trainees get a much better idea of combat than we did when we trained. But there's too much of this tent pitching and military-courtesy crap. I mean, they got it too formal. They should teach them military courtesy and discipline, but in the field where the men can see right there why it's bad not to have it."

A corporal who fought with the 88th Division in Italy said: "The trainees don't get enough night work and they don't get real enough combat conditions. I'd send them out there for a couple of days with just a belt and a rifle and make them eat K rations. They should also have more speed and forced marches. Another thing they teach these men is to stand up and shoot when they get fired on, instead of hitting the ground. They ain't going to live very long that way."

A platoon sergeant from the 32d Division in the Pacific said: "They get these second lieutenants instructing and teach them that the FM is God. That's why second lieutenants get killed so quick. The FM says they should be out in front like a big-assed bird and they always follow the FM."

A corporal who had been with Merrill's Marauders said: "They throw the stuff at the trainees too fast and they don't let the overseas men talk to them. They should have at least one hour a week for a bull session between the trainees and the combat men."

From a rifleman out of the 36th Division in France: "The weapons training is good, but they don't get enough time on the M1. The full field inspections are a waste of time. The only thing they should inspect are messkits."

From a 45th Division man: "There's too much chicken, but otherwise it's a damn good course. They teach these guys a hell of a lot, when you think they only have 15 weeks. The only place I think they're weak is scouting and patrolling. They don't get nearly enough of that. They should also get more map and compass work."

A platoon sergeant who had been with the 43d Division in the Pacific agreed: "They don't get half enough scouting and patrolling. Prac-

Basic Training Today

tically all we did in the Pacific was that kind of work. One good thing they're getting is more instruction in first aid. That'll come in handy."

A rifleman from the 4th Division said: "More map and patrol work. Also, most of the training films are out of date. They should use more and better movies. The firing they get on the battle courses is good, but they don't get enough of that. They should also get some amphibious training."

did and we would squeeze in more if we could. The bivouac period is also not rough enough, but you have to remember that 13 weeks ago these men were all civilians."

That is what you hear all over Wheeler: Time, time, time. Everything in the course must be necessary, because there is no margin for error.

I found only two major differences of opinion between enlisted cadremen and officers on how the time is spent at this IRTC. The cadremen feel that there is too much formal discipline, and that this time could be better spent on weapons or tactical combat work. The officers feel strongly that this disciplinary training is necessary to make a soldier.

Then most of the officers to whom I spoke, particularly those removed from actual contact with the men, felt that the 22 hours given to Orientation could be cut, and the time allotted to other work.



Field firing the M-1 in combat patrol classes. The area contains targets which pop up before the trainee.

Practically all the cadremen I met thought that the orientation hours were a good idea. Their reasons varied from "It's good because it makes the blood boil," to "It's good because a man should know what's going on." But they all thought that some kind of orientation period was valuable.

On the whole, this emphasis on orientation, slight as it is, gives a fair indication of how infantry training has changed. The cycle at Wheeler tries to bring out the individual initiative of each trainee. It tries to make him feel that while he is part of a group, he is also a man who must look out for himself and, if necessary, lead others.

I remember that during the first week of my training back in 1941, our platoon of trainees was taken out on the drill field and told by our lieutenant that a good soldier is supposed only to take orders and that we were not being paid to think.

In the first week at an IRTC a trainee is told: "The best soldier is the man who thinks. The American soldier is good because he knows what's going on."

Infantry training has changed, all right.

YANK

OldMagazineArticles.com