

Rebuilding Technical Proficiency

Many sustainment Soldiers have found that their technical skills have eroded during the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The author notes that one reason is that the Army used contractors for many sustainment missions while sustainers conducted tactical missions such as convoy security.

■ By Chief Warrant Officer 4 Nichole Rettmann

During the past 10 years, sustainment unit training efforts have focused on building and developing Soldiers' tactical skills at the cost of their technical military occupational specialty (MOS) skills. Units depended heavily on the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program for sustainment requirements. This off-balance training focus and overdependence on contract support has resulted in a battle-hardened force of sustainment Soldiers, many of whom lack technical proficiency because they have not been working in their MOSs.

Now, as we enter the current resource-constrained environment, funding for contracts is being significantly reduced along with several other resources, and our Soldiers are once again expected to perform their technical missions.

The difference between MOS qualified and MOS proficient is the difference between merely knowing how to do the job and being skilled at the job. A Soldier is MOS qualified when he graduates from advanced individual training. However, field-experienced proficiency comes from two other spheres of training: unit and self.

The Army Learning Model

The answer to MOS competency lies in the Army learning model, which is composed of three interlinked parts:

- Institutional schools for initial entry training and professional military education.
- Unit training and experience for building skill proficiency.

- Self-development training for total Soldier development.

Institutional training starts with initial entry training, which includes basic combat training and advanced individual training, and gives a Soldier the basic skills required to be awarded an MOS. Institutional training continues throughout the Soldier's career with the Warrior Leader Course, the Advanced Leader Course, and the Senior Leader Course. Each level of training addresses MOS critical tasks for that level.

MOS qualification by itself is not good enough. MOS qualification is merely the foundation—the point at which Soldiers begin their careers. Unit commanders are responsible for establishing training plans that build both technical and tactical proficiency. Every tactical training task has supporting technical tasks. Without the skills to perform these technical tasks, the tactical training event will not succeed.

MOS skills are perishable. They must be developed during every training period and exercise, or these skills can be lost.

Self-development training is the Soldier's sphere of the training model, where he uses his educational benefits to build skills through professional civilian education or credentialing programs.

Erosion of Skills

To free Soldiers up for tactical missions, many sustainment tasks were contracted out during recent

conflicts. The Soldiers whose specialties had been contracted out were used for missions such as convoy security. This is a typical method of continuing operations without affecting the mission while drawing down "boots on the ground" numbers. Unfortunately, this tactic has been used for the duration of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So for the past several years, many sustainment Soldiers have often worked outside of their MOSs.

Back to Basics

After years of many sustainment Soldiers not performing their MOS duties, how technically qualified are they? Sgt. Maj. of the Army Raymond Chandler has directed a "back to basics" approach to training. This was also the topic of an article by Brig. Gen. Steven A. Shapiro in the November–December 2012 issue of *Army Sustainment*. Our leaders are calling for us to refocus our training efforts and rebuild MOS proficiency skills in our Soldiers and across our force.

These goals need to be translated into tracked metrics on MOS proficiency, personnel utilization rates, equipment usage, work order turnaround time, and other aspects of our technical skill areas. These goals need to be clearly communicated by our senior Army leaders and added to the officer and noncommissioned officer evaluation report support forms.

We have spent the past 10 years focusing our efforts on tactical training at the cost of technical skill.

Now it is time to look at how we can reinsert technical skill enhancement into every training event. Mandatory training requirements are not going away, so we as leaders must take a creative approach to meeting these challenges—an approach that optimizes time and talent with precision effect and does not sacrifice the technical but rather re-emphasizes it.

We need to empower sustainment noncommissioned officers to ensure that mandatory training requirements

All of these ways will not fit all Soldiers, which is why we need to empower noncommissioned officers to lay out how best to train each specific Soldier in the unit.

We must get away from the routine of recurrent monthly mandatory stand-downs to accomplish all of our mandatory training. We have to get back to building our Soldiers up in their technical skills so that they will be proficient in the MOS tasks they need to know, the tasks they

elements. It also provides a means of building effective staff teams at the combat sustainment support battalion and sustainment brigade levels. Cycling these elements through the NMTC on a rotational basis to validate them on their unit missions before they enter the available year of the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cycle would be an effective way to sharpen their skills. In the past, units would focus training on their unit's mission; we need to get back to that.

Leaders, I challenge you. Look at your yearly training plan and where your units are in the ARFORGEN cycle. Look at the condition of your equipment and the technical skills of your Soldiers. Then re-insert technical skills into the plan if they are missing.

Establish a cyclic training program for your maintenance elements to rotate through the NMTC in your train/ready stage of the ARFORGEN cycle as a validation event before entering the available pool. Ensure that technical training is the foundation of your unit and command training events throughout your training plans.

Empower your noncommissioned officers and listen to your warrant officers as you are planning the training. They should be fully engaged in helping to develop the plan.

The results will be demonstrated in the product of technically proficient Soldiers who are ready to accomplish their mission of sustainment support.

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Two Soldiers recharge an environmental control unit as part of their hands-on training at the National Maintenance Training Center at Camp Dodge, Iowa.

are accomplished throughout the training day along with planned MOS training events directed to build each Soldier's technical abilities and skills. These mandatory requirements can be accomplished in several ways:

- Online training can be accomplished at home and certificates brought into the unit, resulting in two benefits for the Soldier: pay in retirement points (for Reserve Soldiers) and release from formation to proceed to the duty training area.
- Leaders can institute hip pocket or break area training throughout the day.
- Squad or platoon leaders can pull Soldiers together at the end of the day for an hour or so before closing formation or even after formation to wrap up whatever mandatory training was not completed throughout the day.

came in the Army to learn and perfect. A Soldier working in his MOS is a happy Soldier who will stay in the unit and in the Army. He may also develop into a highly proficient NCO or warrant officer candidate.

I recently paid a visit to the National Maintenance Training Center (NMTC) in Camp Dodge, Iowa, where we had two units participating in training. Other senior warrant officers and I observed Soldiers working on a myriad of military equipment. A member of our party asked one Soldier when he had last been able to train like this. The Soldier responded, "Probably about 10 years ago."

The NMTC is an excellent venue to rebuild technical proficiency for all our maintenance elements as well as brigade support battalion and forward support company distribution