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by **STEVEN LECKART**

Thin the Army Now

CAN THE ARMY'S NEW AND IMPROVED BASIC TRAINING PROGRAM REALLY TURN GUYS FROM FAT TO FIT? WE SHIPPED OUR MAN OUT TO SEE IF UNCLE SAM HAS A FIGHTING CHANCE.



48th Infantry Regiment are sidelined due to injury (or nerves). But believe it or not, this is an improvement for the Army.

NEW BASICS

I've driven to this outpost two hours from St. Louis because "Fort Lost in the Woods" is one of the inaugural bases to instate the first major overhaul of basic combat training—and advanced forms of it—since 1980.

Now called Army Physical Readiness Training, basic has retained the heinous ropes courses, 10-mile marches, and hand-to-hand combat. The 10-week crash course still starts with a haircut and a shave. "You look like the Taliban," says the base's top dog, Maj. Gen. David Quantock, when he sees my beard. Soon after, I start to find out that from day one recruits are now treated like D-1 athletes. If old-school basic was about breaking a guy down to build him back up, the new school aims to keep him in one piece. Personal trainers run beside drill sergeants, correcting recruits' strides, form, and posture. Instead of jogging long distances every morning, strength and conditioning days are alternated in. Drill sergeants' training techniques tap into Pilates, yoga, and plyometrics. Recruits learn tuck jumps, back bridges, and V-ups, emphasizing core and flexibility. Post-workout stretches are now mandatory.

Drill sergeants do go ape-shit—but mostly when recruits don't down enough milk. Even the mess halls look (and smell) different. Deep-fried chow, white flour, and

Razor wire's a bitch. I'm wriggling under a chain-link fence in the dark when my glove snags. I hear gunshots. Then chanting in Arabic. Suddenly, *boom!* A burst of white illuminates dozens of camo'd bodies in the cold, wet sand. Sweat fogs my glasses. A 16-pound flak vest jabs my ribs. And my hips are aching. "It's just like *Call of Duty!*" says the 18-year-old panting next to me. Except our fingers and toes are numb, and those gunshots are real. Two M240

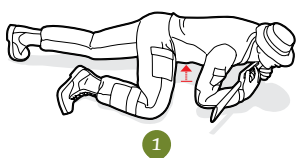
machine guns are blasting 12,000 live rounds of 7.62 mm caliber bullets overhead.

Tonight I've joined 205 recruits at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, one of five Army bases that transform 160,000 average Joes and Janes into soldiers each year. The platoon I've been assigned to is 75 yards away from finishing its final challenge of basic combat training. It's called "movement under direct fire," or MUDEF, and it's kicking my ass. More than a dozen recruits in this wing of the

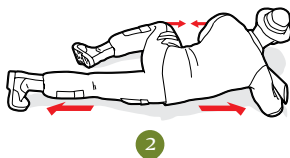


DO THE MILITARY CRAWL

BORED WITH RUNNING? TRAIN WITH A "HIGH CRAWL," A FULL-BODY WORKOUT THAT'S GREAT FOR CARDIO.*



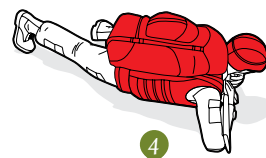
1 Stay on your toes. If you're dragging your gut, you're doing it wrong. Use your forearms and lower legs to balance and prop your midsection off the ground.



2 Move side to side. Touch your left knee to your left elbow, then reach with your right forearm and push with your left leg. Repeat, alternating opposite limbs.



3 Mind your weapon. Keeping a rifle off the ground ensures it won't get clogged with debris. Practice with something delicate on your forearms—like an unwrapped hoagie.



4 Pack on some pounds! Soldiers crawl wearing more than 100 pounds of armor and provisions. You can try practicing at the beach with a backpack full of beer.

*AND PERFECT FOR STEALTHY WALKS OF SHAME.

HOW THE BASIC TRAINING TABLE IS
CHANGING FOR THE BETTER. OR:
KICKING ASS WITH PEELED ORANGES.

sodas are being replaced with oven-baked lean proteins, whole grains, and electrolyte recovery drinks. Healthy foods are placed toward the front of the line. Cooks preslice fresh fruits to make them easier to scarf.

The officers I meet are adamant that the Army hasn't gone soft. This new approach is a reaction to hard data. Between 1996 and 2009, the Army observed a significant increase in stress fractures, iron deficiency, cavities, and obesity—not to mention a decrease in muscle growth. After years of eating garbage, we're not just a little out of shape: We're anatomically deficient. I'm no stranger to lazy self-indulgence. I was raised on Doritos, what basic training overlord Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling calls part of the "os food group," which also includes Cheetos and Fritos. After high school I gained 23 pounds thanks to fourth meals, beer, and a desk job. But as Hertling, a triathlete who looks like a 50-year-old superhero, tells me, "It's never too late to reverse the trend." Forget combat-readiness—I'm hoping what the Army's learned might keep me fit. Permanently.

STAYIN' ALIVE

"There's a difference between being frickin' hard and being re-tard," smirks Capt. Jesse Moore. He's about to send out a battalion of



recruits on Operation Beast Cracken. The plan is to infiltrate a village at night. We'll set off explosives to penetrate steel doors, then clear rooms and neutralize the opposition (kill the enemy). Moore isn't worried I'll get popped. Everyone's got blanks. He's making a larger point about true grit—recruits often stay silent despite injury. Determining soreness versus pain is a skill drill sergeants are trying harder to learn and impart. Our mission commences with a 45-minute covert march through thick brush. In pitch dark. Uphill and downhill. No flashlights. When a recruit goes down in front of me, it takes two battle buddies to get him back on his feet.

"Your ankle OK?" whispers a drill sergeant. "I think so."

"Good, 'cause we ain't carryin' you out."

Although most of my fellow recruits are more than 12 years younger than me, and despite my tweaked knee, I'm hanging in there. That's because before shipping out to Fort Leonard Wood, I downloaded the official Army Physical Readiness Training app to my iPhone. I concentrated on the new strength and conditioning drills. There are 81. Many focus on core strength, but also hip stability. The regimen includes movements like bicycle kicks, kettle bell squats, and Supermans (no, not the kind Soulja Boy performs on "Dat Ho"). Many of these exercises are more effective than push-ups or sit-ups at building muscle groups soldiers need. "We don't do push-ups or sit-ups or long-distance runs in combat," remarks Col. David Wilcox. "We rely more on core strength and sprints."

Despite all the changes to basic training, the military has yet to amend the way they evaluate it all. The Army Personal Fitness Test requires a set amount of push-ups in two minutes, followed by two minutes of sit-ups and a timed two-mile run. The minimums for all three are determined according to age and gender. You don't graduate if you can't hit the numbers. Thus recruits often train just to pass. Since adopting this new fitness program, the Army's seen approximately a



30 percent spike in APFT scores. Nevertheless, I meet recruits who are on their third and fourth stints at basic. They simply can't pass the APFT, most likely because they're in terrible shape to begin with or they aren't trying hard enough to improve.

FINAL EXAM

All those V-ups and tucks I did at home come together when my Humvee flips over. I'm stationed in the gun turret, where the metal plating is meat-locker chilly. Ironically, we're doing HEAT training. Instead of wheels, the Humvee Egress Assistance Trainer sits on a hydraulic axle. Instructors use a control box to shake and overturn the truck body. It simulates an accident.

Sit-ups



V-ups (works the lower back, too!)

Standard kicks



Fitted running shoes (suck it, high arches!)

Coca-Cola



Powerade (electrolytes!)



Fried drumsticks



Baked, breaded chicken breasts (no more greasy spoons!)

Whole oranges



Peeled, precut oranges (timesaving!)



My instructors slap a Kevlar helmet and flak vest on me, then shove a yellow mouth guard (used and probably festering with herpes) into my pie hole. The Humvee tips to 10 degrees. I drop down from the turret into the cabin. Since I'm without a seat belt, I kick out my legs toward the windshield. The driver and passenger grab my ankles. I press my palms into the cabin ceiling. Just when I'm steady, we pitch again. First to 20 degrees. "Roll! Roll! Roll!" Then to 35 degrees. A Styrofoam rifle conks me in the face. I bite down on my secondhand dentures. We're all grunting. Seconds later we're upside down. My arms are quivering. The veins in my neck are throbbing. My abs are as engaged as they've ever been. We roll back over and start again. These minutes in the HEAT trainer are the most physically demanding moments of my entire life. All at once I can see how the single-leg push-ups, back bridges, lateral leg raises, and a better diet can all come into play.

When I get back home, I'm sore all over. It takes a few days before I can bring myself to do even one push-up. Or get back to the gym. When I finally do, a personal trainer compliments my new haircut. He says he was Special Forces—so I tell him we used to eat pussies like him for breakfast when I was in the Army. Maybe it's the fact I'm not smiling. Or that my biceps and shoulders actually do look bigger. But I swear he believes me.