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Is the Military Getting Soft?

By TIM HSIA

Robert Nickelsberg/Getty, for The New York Times A U.S. Marine does pull ups while wearing nearly 50 pounds of gear and ammunition in Khan Neshin, Afghanistan. Rank doesn't matter, nor does it count if your father was a general or a sergeant major: Anyone who reports to his or her unit on Day One in poor physical condition has lost the respect of fellow soldiers.

One company commander in my previous unit enjoyed testing his new lieutenants with a five-mile run at a blistering pace the day they arrived, followed by pull-ups, push-ups and a gamut of other calisthenics.

Perhaps this commander was channeling his inner Gen. David H. Petraeus, who once said, "When we bring a new guy in, I take him out for a run I want to know how he'll react and respond to the challenge, what his strength of character is."

While the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have changed the military's doctrine and equipment, physical fitness is still a trait that commanders state is of paramount importance. When my unit was deployed, the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Rod Coffey, stressed the importance of physical fitness by holding several athletic competitions. My previous commander, Maj. Charles Ford, often stressed the importance of physical fitness by citing statistics that correlated survivability on the battlefield after receiving a wound with one's physical fitness level.

As a platoon leader I tried to inspire my privates at 6:30 a.m. to be motivated about their physical fitness, telling them, "Besides professional athletes, the military is one of the few places where you get paid to work out."

Today's military has spiced up physical fitness in numerous ways such as incorporating crossfit, which has a large military following. It also encourages soldiers to move beyond calisthenics by utilizing the weight room in gyms. Additionally, combatives (grappling) competitions or playing soccer while wearing body armor are some ways in which leaders have creatively incorporated physical fitness into their military training.

Despite the military's stress on physical fitness, many senior officers and noncommissioned officers I have spoken to are adamant in their beliefs that today's soldiers are physically softer than the soldiers of yesteryear.

One recent study substantiates this notion, as a Pentagon estimate stated that close to one-third of youths in America are physically unfit to serve.

These statistics point to a troubling trend for the services as the quality of future recruits could deteriorate. Lt. Gen. Mark P. Hertling, in the Training and Doctrine Command, has stated that the physical fitness of new recruits is his number one priority. But is this push for physical fitness too late in the recruits' lives to effect meaningful changes in their physical fitness level? And will the downward trend in society in terms of obesity and general health inevitably lead to a softer, less capable military?

Many leaders complain that more of their soldiers gain weight while deployed than lose weight. They cite the lack of mandated time set aside for physical training and the "all you can eat" buffet style of military dining facilities overseas.

While the conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq vary from base to base, in the majority of the large bases, the food in the dining facilities overseas is better, and the portions are larger, than ones Stateside. So while some defense analysts worry that the United States is falling behind in terms of cyberwar capabilities, at the other end of the spectrum is the fear that American troops today are just not physically tough enough.

Toughness beyond just physical fitness is a trait that cannot be quantifiably measured. In one instance when the Taliban scavenged the equipment from fallen American soldiers, they "took nothing ... other than their boots", presumably because they lacked proper footwear. Stories like these, and the Taliban's ability to defeat the Soviet Union, are why many in the military have a healthy dose of respect for their adversaries.