



**Air Force leaders want longer, tougher basic training to instill warrior values.**

# The Harder Line in Training

By Sig Christenson

**A** rmy, Navy, and Marine Corps recruits used to call the Air Force the “chair force.” That’s because airmen did just six-and-a-half weeks of basic training, compared to eight in the Navy, nine in the Army, and 13 in the Marine Corps.

That’s changing, though. Starting this year, Air Force basic training jumps to eight-and-a-half weeks, the longest it has been since Eisenhower was President.

For some time, USAF has been preparing to begin tougher training with a goal of instilling warrior core values. The new wrinkles coming in the fall of 2008 are in some ways an extension of that service goal. The changes are a direct result of the Air Force’s experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other hot spots.

The extra time in training isn’t about transforming airmen into dogfaces, officers say. It’s about giving Air Force recruits more hands-on experience in learning such crucial skills as battlefield first aid and defending a base.

The harder line in training has already taken root. These days, recruits are issued demilitarized M-16 rifles at the start of boot camp. Come fall, they will spend a week in an austere environment that emphasizes old-fashioned warrior values.

“That’s a positive thing for the Air Force,” said retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Richard A. Coleman, a former director of the Air Force’s security forces. “It’s been needed for some time and it’s the right thing to do. It puts everybody in the fight no matter what [specialty] you’re in.”

The 68-year-old Coleman recalls spending 11 weeks in basic. That was back in the mid-1950s, before training was turned into a two-phase, 11-week course in which basic lasted only six weeks, followed by five weeks of technical training. The Air Force still considered it an 11-week basic training program, but reduced the two-phase course to eight weeks in 1960, said Dave Smith, spokesman for Air Education and Training Command at Randolph AFB, Tex.

The six-and-a-half-week basic program has been the norm since October 1964. The first few days—as is true in all of the services—are reserved for “in-processing”—getting the time-honored haircut, standing in line for dreaded inoculations, and collecting uniforms. The name for those hours is “zero week.”

Hand-to-hand combat isn’t yet part of the basic training curriculum at Lackland AFB, Tex., the entry processing point for new airmen. However, recruits





USAF photo by SSgt. Matthew Hammen

have been spending time in the field since 1999 when they began training at “Scorpion’s Nest” on Lackland’s Medina Annex.

In those days, the field training was a modest 36-hour exercise designed to give recruits a taste of the real world some troops were seeing in places such as Bosnia and Kosovo. The young boots ate meals, ready to eat, and were the first in years, if not decades, to train in semirugged conditions in the Texas sun.

**Cover and Concealment**

They awoke at 4 a.m. that July in eight tents, threaded their way through a hilly quarter-mile assault course, and hugged a winding, torturous sand trap. At dusk on the end of their first full day in the field, the fledgling airmen endured “Alamo’s revenge,” a mock probe of their camp defenses led by instructors known as “Hammer” and “Dark Angel.”

Never far from sight or mind was a faded black POW/MIA flag at the center of their camp. It was a reminder of where, over the years, airmen no less than soldiers have been.

Coleman argues that it’s essential for every airman to be ready for a firefight. “You need to know what cover and concealment means,” he said.

Training these days puts airmen at the Medina rifle range only once during those whirlwind six-and-a-half weeks.

In the fall, the recruits will fire an M-16 once in their training, as they do now, but they’ll also learn how to use an M-9 handgun. They’ll put more emphasis on tactical maneuvers and base defense, but perhaps one of the biggest changes will be the amount of time every boot spends on buddy care first aid.

The Air Force has tried to teach recruits ways to help injured troops survive long enough to reach medical care. That has meant an hour in class, then an hour of application, but field training has not included any first-aid scenarios of the kind provided by the Army.

The new training regimen will increase to 16 hours the amount of classroom and field training, allowing young airmen to become more familiar with the intricacies of splinting a broken leg or closing off a shattered femoral artery.

“I think it will be a lot better when we go from six weeks to eight-and-a-

*SSgt. James Coppola, a training instructor with the 342nd Training Squadron, gently encourages trainees at Lackland AFB, Tex.*



USAF photo by TSgt. Cecilio Ricardo

**Basic military trainees traverse the “confidence course” at Lackland.**

half because of the applications, the thoroughness of the classes that we will be able to provide for the trainees,” said one Lackland military training instructor, MSgt. Magdalena Cortez. “We are on such a condensed schedule now.”

The latest changes in basic training emerged after a tri-annual review of Air Force basic military training. The review brings in Air Force chief master sergeants and their analysis of lessons learned from around the world. The study looks at what airmen face on a day-to-day basis in such far-flung places as Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Mongolia, and the Philippines.

The Air Force is in other places as well, among them, Liberia and Morocco. Airmen find living and threat conditions far different from those at traditional rear bases. As the war on terrorism has expanded to places such as the Horn of Africa, the issue of how to get people ready for anything has only become larger and more complex.

“How do you prepare an airman to get into an austere environment with his gear, with his team, and do the job they’re called upon to do?” asked Col. Robert J. MacDonald, head of Lackland’s 737th Training Group.

The question goes to the purpose of Air Force boot camp: providing indoctrination, training, and education while focusing on the chief core values of integrity and excellence.

“Everybody knows about the tangible

aspects of basic training, and that means those things that you can see, touch, and hear,” MacDonald explained. “Anybody who’s seen movies about basic training or has any understanding, those tangible aspects are evident everywhere.”

### Creating Warrior Airmen

The intangibles are just as important, however—how training instructors inspire their charges to dedicate themselves to excellence.

It is something that occurs at the “eyeball level” of training, MacDonald said, and begins with first-rate instructors who are the warfighters of boot

camp in much the same way as pilots. He sees wall lockers and the Scorpion’s Nest, which is undergoing construction in anticipation of the new basic training, as weapon systems, the kind used to create “warrior airmen.”

The six-and-one-half weeks of boot camp today are used to introduce recruits to discipline, military department, and attention to detail—whether it’s wearing a uniform, making a bed, keeping a wall locker organized, or even seemingly simple tasks such as rolling socks, shirts, and underwear.

The Air Force’s beefed-up war skills training next fall dovetails with the now-familiar Air and Space Expeditionary Force concept that keeps airmen on deployed duty longer but has given airmen greater predictability in deploying overseas.

The result is that airmen are taught to be deployable at any moment. Special operations forces and tactical air control parties routinely do this in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These days, airmen begin to put their classroom instruction into practice during their third week at a Lackland facility called the “Torch Site,” adjacent to Wilford Hall Medical Center. But this fall they’ll return to a new \$28 million expeditionary skills training exercise that replaces the famed Warrior Week. In its place will be BEAST—the Basic Expeditionary Airman Skills Training Exercise.

This area will have four encampment areas, each with a series of tents and a centralized tent for living and working. An entire class of 600 to 900 trainees will deploy to the training area for the

USAF photo by TSgt. Larry A. Simmons



**Airmen trainees practice techniques to properly establish and defend a perimeter before they begin actual field training.**

week and face a series of escalating challenges.

### The BEAST

The recruits will be responsible for field security, integrated fighting positions to protect the camp, knowing entry control procedures, and operating in the area under simulated attack situations.

“The whole thing is based on being able to withstand an attack at an austere location and yet be able to continue air operations,” MacDonald said.

Recruits will see what airmen on convoy escort duty endure on a daily basis—incoming mortar rounds, complex



USAF photo by Robbin Crosswell

**Trainees unload duffel bags and check their issued items at Lackland.**



USAF photo by TSgt. Larry A. Simmons

**A training group crawls through the mud of a half-mile-long tactical training obstacle course at Lackland.**

attacks, roadside bombs, car bombs, and unexploded ordnance. They’ll be taught how to identify potential threats and who to report them to in their chain of command. BEAST week will be entirely devoted to scenario training, thanks to the extra classroom training time. As they take advantage of more field time to hone their newly acquired infantry skills, the recruits also will have more hands-on instruction in buddy care, culminating in a final exercise on Friday.

There, the recruits will experience the sounds, sights, and smells of combat in hopes of “inoculating” them against the fog of war—which in these days of explosively formed projectiles that blast through armor plating is exceptionally bloody.

One of the scenarios involves aggressors trying to gain access to your base, said Cortez, who has trained 11 flights since becoming a military training instructor two-and-a-half years ago. The aggressors come in shooting blanks, and the recruits have to react to that. “They’re only doing that twice [today], and so throughout the entire week they’ll get those scenarios more often.”

Repetition and reinforcement, MacDonald said, is the key to this new era of basic training.

“You don’t want people to be shocked by what they see,” he said, “and be overcome once they reach the AOR.” ■

*Sig Christenson is a writer covering military affairs for the San Antonio Express-News. He has made five reporting tours to Iraq since 2003, and covers the military in San Antonio and Washington, D.C. This is his first article for Air Force Magazine.*