

THE KNIFE'S EDGE:

Adapting Army Combatives for Tomorrow's Fight

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Earlier this year, a chilling viral video out of Ukraine emerged depicting the stark reality of modern warfare. The footage showed a Ukrainian soldier engaging in brutal hand-to-hand combat with a Russian soldier, who mortally wounds the Ukrainian with his knife. As the Ukrainian soldier lay dying, he spoke to his enemy: "This is the end. Let me die in peace... You were better." The raw footage is a reminder that even in the age of drone warfare and precision strikes, hand-to-hand engagements remain a real possibility for Soldiers on the ground. The video is a testament to the fact that the technical skills required to fight and survive on the modern battlefield are not merely advantageous; they are essential for survival.

The Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) has been a cornerstone of the U.S. Army's close-quarters combat (CQC) training for nearly two decades. Born at the onset of the global war on terrorism (GWOT), MACP was forged in the fires of Iraq and Afghanistan, where it provided a vital skillset for Soldiers operating in environments characterized by asymmetrical warfare and frequent dismounted patrols. However, the strategic landscape has now shifted from counterinsurgency to the focus on Great Power Competitors, particularly China and Russia. This change necessitates an evolution in the current iteration of Army combatives to address the evolving threat. This article argues that while the foundational principles of MACP remain valid, adjustments to the program are necessary to best prepare Infantry Soldiers for the realities of potential large-scale conflict.

The Evolving Threat: A Different Kind of Enemy

The problem sets posed by potential adversaries such as China and Russia are complex and markedly different from those faced during GWOT. These countries have shown an ability and willingness to employ aggressive offensive tactics of varying scale. Their strategies encompass both conventional large-scale assaults and small-unit actions designed to disrupt, delay, or isolate U.S. forces. These can involve probing attacks, feints, and audacious maneuvers aimed at overwhelming key positions.



Above, a Soldier engages a combatant during the tactical scenario of the 2025 Lacerda Cup Competition on 11 April. (Photo by Daniel Marble)

China, for example, will likely engage in combat with a much larger force, preferring to fight with a 4:1 dismounted troop advantage and up to a 10:1 advantage against a main effort target force. Additionally, the hybridization of these modern armies means that U.S. Soldiers may not only encounter large amounts of conventional military forces but also well-trained irregular forces operating in support of their nation's strategic objectives. These irregular soldiers, at the very least, will likely be proficient in close-quarters combat techniques.

MACP and Threat Combatives Comparison

MACP's development and proliferation in the 21st century is undeniably a success story. It is a valuable tool for commanders to provide not only physical conditioning but also a means to build confidence and foster a warrior culture, all the while instilling a fundamental understanding of grappling through a tactical lens. The emphasis on positional dominance and ground control lays a solid foundation to build a combatives framework. However, the program's strong focus on unarmed grappling may tend to overlook other important aspects of a fight, potentially putting Soldiers at a disadvantage against opponents trained in a broader variety of striking and weapons-based martial arts.

Heavily influenced by Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, MACP prioritizes ground fighting by recognizing that engagements often transition to the ground. Training focuses on achieving and maintaining positional dominance — securing mount, rear mount, or side control — and utilizing submissions to subdue an opponent. While striking techniques (punches, kicks, knees, elbows) are incorporated, they are primarily taught as ways to close distance, initiate takedowns, or create openings for submissions.

In contrast, Russian Systema and Chinese Sanda/Sanshou are combatives systems that emphasize fluidity, adaptability, and the exploitation of an opponent's weaknesses. They are known for their dynamic kicking and punching combinations, relying more on instinctual movements than rigid technical sequences. Both systems incorporate weapons training, including knife fighting and the use of bayonets, into their regimens as well.

Taking down a Russian or Chinese fighter to the ground might initially seem like a suitable option to neutralize their striking advantage. However, the superior number of enemy combatants must be considered as well. Combatives can no longer be viewed as a one-on-one cage fight scenario; Soldiers need to be able to anticipate multiple threats and work as a team to eliminate them effectively.

The threat's heavy focus on the integration of firearms, knives, and improvised weapons into close-quarters engagements demonstrates that it must be an area of renewed focus moving forward. While weapon retention is currently addressed, the dynamic interplay between transitioning from a firearm or knife to a grappling exchange and back again is a vital skill that must be stressed. The ability to seamlessly blend shooting, moving, and grappling is paramount in a modern battlefield.

Lastly, the current curriculum lacks a robust focus on fighting in restrictive terrain and under stress. Most of the current training takes place in relatively controlled environments, such as on a padded mat with a referee closely monitoring the participants. Infantry Soldiers will likely face CQC engagements in complex urban environments, dense forests, or within the confines of a bunker or trench system — conditions that significantly alter the dynamics of a fight. Furthermore, the psychological stress of combat substantially impacts performance, and MACP needs to incorporate more realistic scenario-based training such as limited visibility and confined spaces to better prepare for these situations on the battlefield.

Recommendations for Program Enhancement

To prepare Infantry Soldiers for the challenges of large-scale conflict, MACP must evolve. Here are some recommendations:

- **Refine the Technical Curriculum:** Introduce training in a broader range of disciplines, including those found in threat systems like Systema and Sanda. This doesn't mean abandoning the MACP's core principles but rather augmenting

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them with techniques that address potential vulnerabilities.

- **Prioritize Weaponized Fighting:** Invigorate a focus on the integration of firearms, knives, and grappling. This should include drills on transitioning between shooting and grappling, fighting while armed, and defending against attacks while reloading or manipulating a weapon. Reintroduce bayonet fighting techniques.

- **Enhance Reality-Based Training:** Increase the emphasis on training in realistic environments. This includes conducting CQC training in confined spaces such as trenches and bunkers, as well as in urban terrain such as hallways and stairs. Utilize force-on-force exercises with realistic weapons and protective gear. Integrate stress inoculation into tactical scenarios, including physical challenges, sleep deprivation, and exposure to simulated combat scenarios such as fighting in smoke and noise or at night.

The Way Forward

The U.S. Army Combatives School at Fort Benning, GA, is committed to providing the most dominant and lethal combatives program to the force. The primary focus of instructors is revising Training Circular 3-25.150, *Combatives*, to reflect large-scale combat operations (LSCO) and making subsequent adjustments to the Combatives Master Trainer Course. This includes in-depth research on knife, bayonet, rifle, and improvised weapons techniques that are being tested and refined. Additionally, instructors are looking at LSCO scenarios that can simulate close combat engagements and aid in the application of offensive tactical collective tasks (enter/clear a trench, enter/clear a room, etc.) The work being done at Fort Benning will prepare our Infantry Soldiers to fight and win in the complex and dynamic environment of LSCO.

Conclusion

The Modern Army Combatives Program has served the Army well, but the evolving threat landscape demands adaptation. By addressing the threat outlined above, we can ensure that Infantry Soldiers are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to prevail in close-quarters combat against a determined and capable enemy. Investing in a more comprehensive and realistic combatives program is not merely a matter of improving individual skillsets; it's a matter of ensuring the survivability and effectiveness of our Infantry forces on the modern battlefield.

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