

PRODUCING WARRIORS:

The Modern Army Combatives Program

CPT D. REX WINSLOW
SFC (RETIRED) DIRK D. MCCOMAS

It is time for Infantry leaders and Soldiers to fully embrace the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP). Few programs, if any, offer low-risk, high-reward training that cross several functions as effectively as MACP. The Infantry closes with and destroys the enemy; provided that remains the Infantry's primary function, the need for close quarter training is vital. Infantry One Unit Station Training (OSUT) and the Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course (IBOLC) both do an excellent job of teaching our Soldiers tactics at range; from kilometers away to the 15-meter hand grenade range. However, MACP teaches fighting at the "zero-meter range," as stated on the entrance sign to their building.

History is brimming with examples of opposing ground forces engaging at the zero-meter range. American Infantrymen fought hand-to-hand engagements in every major war throughout history from large-scale combat operations (LSCO) to counterinsurgency operations (COIN). An infantry unit fighting hand-to-hand is neither the ideal nor the standard range of engagement in modern warfare; however, it is indisputably the range we can't eliminate from the battlefield.

As we train and prepare for a LSCO fight in the future, or if we return to smaller scale conflicts such as COIN, our next enemy will eventually meet us at the zero-meter range and our Infantry Soldiers must be well trained and prepared for this engagement. Centralizing MACP in training prepares our Soldiers for this confrontation.

This article will first lay out what Soldiers and units gain by implementing MACP. Second, we will demonstrate the low cost and low risk of implementing MACP as well as address some common concerns including injuries.

MACP provides three levels of training: Basic Combatives Course (BCC), Tactical Combatives Course (TCC), and Combatives Master Trainer Course (CMTC). The program continues with unit-level training as well; reinforcing the techniques taught in BCC.¹



Soldiers compete during the quarter finals of the Lacerda Cup Combatives Championship at Fort Benning, GA, on 11 April 2024. (Photo by Daniel Marble)

At the individual level, Soldiers who graduate any of the courses or participate in MACP at their unit develop valuable intangibles. Soldiers cultivate self-confidence, self-discipline, resiliency, mental fortitude, and personal courage. They acquire the skills to handle combatants and non-combatants in lethal and non-lethal ways at close quarters. Their physical fitness is assessed in real-life application which steers and motivates them in their physical training (PT) goals and programs.

Units that invest in MACP improve their lethality, build comradery, provide controlled ways to relieve stress for their Soldiers, and bridge the gap between PT and tactics.² Further, units will provide valuable training for all Soldiers, particularly their junior leaders by allowing them to compete against a fully resistant opponent. Outside of situational training exercises (STX), unit leaders get few repetitions to train against a strategic adversary. Training in combatives offers this opportunity almost every time. Unit leaders will learn to be adaptable, clever, assess risk in real time, and how to exploit weakness.

As the adage goes, "no plan survives first contact." Those who train in combatives learn this lesson well. The boxing

champion Mike Tyson put it another way: “Everybody has plans until they get hit.” Considering a fight and a war are mostly separated by their scale, they share many of the same principles, lessons, and philosophy.³ Soldiers trained in MACP can carry those lessons learned with them to the battlefield.

Effectively, units that prioritize MACP into their training will turn their Soldiers into warriors. These warriors “understand controlled aggression and remain focused while under duress;” they “possess the skills requisite to the mission, at all levels in the spectrum of force.”⁴ Whether called upon to kill the enemy in close combat or to use non-lethal force to control noncombatants in a peacekeeping mission, MACP-trained Soldiers are well equipped for any mission.⁵

The appeal is obvious. Who wouldn’t want a unit of warriors, experienced in fighting thinking enemies, high in esprit de corps, physically fit, and trained in controlled aggression? With such a high reward, why don’t more units prioritize MACP? Below are a few common concerns and explanation as to why these concerns are a lower risk than perceived.

The first obstacle for Soldiers to overcome is usually fear. It is a bit scary to think about getting pulverized by a superior combatant. They might fear injury (which will be addressed at length below), embarrassment of getting beaten by an opponent (leaders are especially prone to this fear of losing to a subordinate), or the task of learning many new techniques and skills. These fears are real, but Soldiers need not heed them. The training path in Training Circular (TC) 3-25.150, *Combatives*, works in a logical and natural way.⁶ The techniques are fundamental and simple. Most of what is covered in BCC is teaching Soldiers how to avoid being beaten up and how to restrain an opponent. The beginning techniques in MACP are low threat and designed to set all novice combatants on a solid foundation from which to train.

The second obstacle is time. All training requires time allocation and MACP is no different. With all the other obligatory tasks to complete, lack of time is often cited as a reason not to implement MACP. However, the time allocation necessary for combatives can be flexible. It only takes a week of full-time training for Soldiers to complete BCC; but training can be broken down into smaller segments over a longer period. A unit only using PT time to learn combatives would likely complete the BCC techniques in a month or less. Time allocated to sustaining this training is minimal as well. Soldiers could spend as little as 10-15 minutes at the end of a normal PT session going over drills 1, 2, and 3 to maintain their baseline knowledge.⁷

The third obstacle is funding. Commanders especially need to know how much things will cost their unit. When thinking of a combatives program, the image of large mats and protective equipment comes to mind. Truthfully, these are useful resources for combatives training, but they are not necessary. Most, if not all, of combatives training can be conducted in the Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP)

Whether called upon to kill the enemy in close combat or to use non-lethal force to control noncombatants in a peacekeeping mission, MACP-trained Soldiers are well equipped for any mission.

uniform in a grassy area.⁸ Many installations already have gyms with matted areas if desired. Sand pits and rubber pits work just as well. The remaining basic equipment, useful but not necessary for training, are boxing gloves, pads, and a body suit — all of which are relatively inexpensive, especially given their training value.

The fourth obstacle is a lack of support from commanders. Commanders who do not place an emphasis on combatives signal to their Soldiers that it is not a priority. Commanders set the priorities for their units. A simple and effective way to incorporate combatives into a unit, and thus its culture, is to hold competitions. Because Infantry Soldiers should be willing and able to fight when called upon, commanders should hold regular competitions.⁹ This provides Soldiers a reason to develop their fighting skills, promotes a fighting spirit, gives motivation and consistent training opportunities, and allows Soldiers to earn the title of champion.¹⁰ Adding combatives into Appendix F of Army Regulation 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*, as required training, rather than merely suggested training, would solve much of this. However, there is no reason why a commander cannot implement a combatives program at the company, battalion, or brigade level on their own. If commanders prioritize MACP, it will work, but this program can hardly survive in a unit where the commander does not make it a priority.

The purpose of this article is to persuade commanders to prioritize MACP, a program with high benefits and low costs and risk. This brings us to our last obstacle — injuries. Both Soldiers and commanders may hesitate to embrace MACP because they fear injury. Soldiers fear personal injury, and commanders fear that their unit will become combat ineffective due to a non-mandatory training program. These fears are overblown.

First, let us put injuries into perspective. The leading cause of injury to Soldiers, and therefore mission readiness, has consistently been running, followed by rucking, then free weights, then basketball.¹¹ Another study listed the most common causes of injuries, in order of likelihood as overexertion, falls, being struck by or against objects at work, environmental factors, and motor vehicles.¹² Combatives-related injuries are few, resulting in almost never having their own category in these large studies. Some will point out that if all units began MACP then the number of combatives-related injuries would rise. This is true, but again, not as dramatically as one might assume.

According to a MACP instructor on Fort Benning, GA,

of the 306 Soldiers trained in the three levels during Fiscal Year 2024, only seven were injured. Of those, four were medically dropped and three completed their training course. That means they suffered a 2.2-percent injury rate with only 1.3-percent injury rate that resulted in halted training.¹³ Most injuries sustained during combatives require no more than a few days of recovery.¹⁴ As stated in TC 3-25.150, “Ignorance and loss of control are principal reasons for most combatives-related training injuries.”¹⁵ Proper training and supervision result in safe and effective training as demonstrated by the MACP on Fort Benning.

Another study looked at injuries during combatives tournaments, revealing what to expect in a unit. Competition will obviously result in more injuries than training would, as competitors have a different goal in mind, but the injury spike is still not that great. Unsurprisingly, they found that more training significantly reduced risk. The study concluded that “injury rates in MAC tournaments are comparable with those of other combat sports and military training.” Finding that within a competition, 15 percent of fighters experienced a one-month loss of readiness on average. The study went on to find that 80 percent of fighters experienced no injury during grappling, and this number jumps up to 90 percent when they included minor injuries that had no duty-limiting effects. By contrast, striking only had a 48 percent no-injury rate, but a 78 percent rate to include minor injuries that resulted in no duty-limiting effects.¹⁶ Simply put, with proper training, MACP is low risk to Soldiers and unit readiness.

Recall again that MACP is a high reward, low-risk program. It turns Soldiers into warriors, provides some of the most realistic training against a real opponent, cultivates an esprit de corps, incorporates fitness, and gives Soldiers motivation for self-improvement. Training options are flexible, requiring minimal adjustment to calendars and equipment. Commanders can take their unit to a grassy field in OCPs during PT and drill their Soldiers in the fundamentals of ground fighting. This is a no-cost, no additional time requirement, and low risk



Trainees in the 198th Infantry Brigade practice combatives techniques on 28 March 2025 at Fort Benning, GA. (Photo by Joey Rhodes II)

training, where injury with loss of unit readiness is likely less than 1 percent.¹⁷ Which other program in the Army produces such benefits with so little risk?

It is time for Soldiers, but especially commanders, to prioritize the Modern Army Combatives Program. Combat at the zero-meter range will find us in our next conflict, whether LSCO or some smaller campaign. Commanders owe it to their Soldiers to prepare them for this fight, and MACP provides the answers in a logical, realistic, and safe way. “Units must develop their own combatives programs to spur troop involvement and encourage commanders to invest resources.”¹⁸ It is time for commanders to fully implement it into their ranks. Your Soldiers will thank you; your unit will thank you; the Infantry will thank you; the Army will thank you; and your enemies will curse you.

Notes

¹ Basic Combatives Course instruction is designed to produce fire team, squad, and platoon trainers who can teach the basic tasks and drills that all Soldiers must know, according to Training Circular (TC) 3-25.150, *Combatives*, March 2017, 2-17.

² TC 3-25.150, 1-1.

³ For example, see *Ibid.*, 3-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-36 and 2-86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1-8, 2-31, 2-42, and A-1.

¹¹ Defense Health Agency, “U.S. Army Injury Surveillance 2021 Summary,” February 2024, <https://ph.health.mil/Periodical%20Library/cphe-ip-army-injury-surveillance-report-2021.pdf>.

¹² U.S. Army Public Health Center, “Fact Sheet: Installation Injury Summaries for Active-Duty Soldiers,” <https://ph.health.mil/PHC%20Resource%20Library/cphe-ip-active-duty-injuries-factsheet.pdf>.

¹³ Information given to the authors from the U.S. Army Combatives School at Fort Benning, GA.

¹⁴ Rick McBride, “Staying in the Fight,” *Risk Management Magazine*, 1 January 2016, <https://safety.army.mil/MEDIA/Risk-Management-Magazine/ArtMid/7428/ArticleID/5648/Staying-in-the-Fight>.

¹⁵ TC 3-25.150, 1-13.

¹⁶ Jonathan I. Stuart, Ian L. Hudson, Simon A. Sarkisian, Michael P. Simpson, and Benjamin P. Donham, “Injuries Sustained During Modern Army Combatives Tournaments,” *Military Medicine* 183/9-10 (September-October 2018): e378–e382, <https://academic.oup.com/milmed/article/183/9-10/e378/4840555>.

¹⁷ The 1.3 percent of Soldiers dropped from the course may have still been able to complete their normal duties back in their unit.

¹⁸ TC 3-25.150, 1-7.

CPT D. Rex Winslow currently works as a current operations (CUOPS) officer in the 3rd Cavalry Regiment at Fort Hood, TX. His previous assignments include serving as an instructor at the Officer Candidate School and Direct Commission Course at Fort Benning, GA. Prior to that he served as a rifle platoon leader, mortar platoon leader, and executive officer in 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). CPT Winslow earned a bachelor’s degree in computer science from Southern Virginia University and a master’s degree in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies from the University of Edinburgh.

SFC (Retired) Dirk D. McComas serves as a Modern Army Combatives Program senior instructor with the 316th Cavalry Brigade at Fort Benning. He completed 14 years service on active duty and has served as a U.S. Army Combatives Course instructor since 2012. SFC McComas also helped develop the Combatives Master Trainer Course and assisted with combative doctrine updates to TC 3-25.150.