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**Full Training Benefits
From Army's Combat
Training Centers Are Not
Being Realized**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are pleased to be here today to discuss our preliminary observations from our ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of training at the Army's three maneuver combat training centers—the National Training Center (NTC) Fort Irwin, California; the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) Fort Polk, Louisiana; and the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTTC) at Hohenfels, Germany. The Army considers the exercises conducted at these centers to be the premier training event for units and unit leaders, and it spends more than \$1 billion annually to provide this training.

I would like to first provide our preliminary observations. Then, I will discuss the information supporting these observations. My remarks are based on our first-hand observations of training at all three centers and on extensive discussions with officials at each of the centers as well as at Army Headquarters, Forces Command, Training and Doctrine Command, Center for Lessons Learned, and the 3rd Infantry Division. An important dimension of our work was a survey sent to the commanders of all 123 battalions that trained at one of the centers during fiscal year 1998. We believe that their insights are particularly important since they are the primary beneficiaries of the training and are in the best position to evaluate its benefits and weaknesses.

Summary

The Army's three maneuver combat training centers offer an extraordinary opportunity for units and their leaders to train at a level normally unavailable to them at their home stations. They offer large maneuver areas and opportunities to train on mission-essential tasks and wartime missions against an opposing force under realistic and demanding conditions. They also provide sophisticated systems that provide real-time assessments of the unit's performance as they proceed through the exercise. Although 80 percent of the commanders who responded to our survey said that the exercises were very useful in improving their units' proficiency, our work has led us to conclude that the centers are not being used to their full potential. There are four principal reasons for this.

First, units are arriving at the centers ill prepared for the type of training to be provided and, as a result, cannot take full advantage of the training opportunity they are given. To obtain the maximum benefit from these exercises, units should be proficient at battalion level tasks when they arrive. However, many units have trained only to the company level and their leaders struggle with the more complicated planning and

synchronization required for the battalion and brigade-level exercises conducted at the centers.

Second, because training units lack proficiency at the battalion level when they arrive, the content of the training is frequently modified to provide less challenging scenarios than would normally be expected. While such adjustments permit the unit to engage in meaningful training for longer periods of time than would otherwise be possible under more demanding conditions, they undermine realism and thereby limit the value of the training.

Third, commanders cannot take full advantage of the lessons learned from their participation at the centers. This is because, after returning to their home stations, the combination of personnel turnover, lack of training opportunities, and ineffective take-home materials from the centers prevent commanders from attending to the deficiencies identified at the centers. The result is that systematic weaknesses demonstrated by units during training center exercises are not being addressed.

Fourth, despite spending millions of dollars to collect data from each of the exercises at the combat centers, the Army still has not developed a plan for fully integrating training results with its training and doctrine development activities. Nor has it or periodically assessed whether the centers are achieving their objectives. As a result, the Army is not taking full advantage of the lessons it learns from its training centers and does not know the extent to which center exercises are improving the proficiency of its units and leaders.

Background

The Army's three combat maneuver training centers offer distinctly different training environments. The NTC offers an open, mountainous, desert setting while the CMTC provides rolling wooded terrain. The training areas at the JRTC include swamplands, dense forests, and steep ravines.

The NTC and the CMTC sponsor exercises designed to train armor and mechanized infantry units, such as brigades from the 1st Armored and 3rd Infantry Divisions, in a high intensity threat environment. The JRTC provides non-mechanized or light forces, such as the 82nd Airborne and the 10th Mountain Divisions, with exercises in a low to medium threat environment. Forces from the other military services as well as special operations units are also brought into the exercises at all three centers.

Brigades and battalions deploy to these centers with their associated combat service and service support units.

Each center has an active Army battalion or cavalry regiment, consisting of 450 to 2,400 soldiers, permanently stationed there to serve as a dedicated opposing force. These units are organized and specially trained to replicate a hostile force complete with distinctive uniforms, visually modified vehicles, and both U.S. and non-U.S. weapons. In addition, the centers offer large maneuver areas that allow several battalions to train simultaneously during force-on-force exercises against the opposing force. The training area at the NTC, for example, is roughly the size of Rhode Island.

The Army's stated objectives for establishing the combat training centers were to (1) increase unit readiness; (2) produce bold, innovative leaders; (3) embed doctrine throughout the Army; and (4) provide data for improving doctrine, training, leader development, organizations, and materiel. To achieve these objectives, the combat training centers were designed to create a realistic training environment, challenge unit leaders with missions against a well-trained opposing force, and provide in-depth analyses of performance to units and their leaders.

Combat training center exercises consist of both force-on-force engagements against an opposing force and separate live-fire exercises under conditions that are intended to closely parallel actual warfare. Active Army brigades train at one of the centers about once every 18 months, and each of the National Guard's enhanced brigades train at the NTC about once every 8 years. Generally, units ship their wheeled vehicles and unique equipment items to the centers and draw their tanks, fighting vehicles, artillery, and other tracked vehicles from stocks that are prepositioned at the centers.

To add realism to the exercises and provide a real-time assessment of casualties, force-on-force exercises are conducted using the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System. This system, carried on both equipment and troops, lets both soldiers and units know immediately if a kill or near kill is scored. Separate live-fire exercises at the NTC and CMTC (at nearby Grafenwohr) are conducted against sophisticated target arrays and involve armor, infantry, artillery, and air elements. At the JRTC and CMTC, live-fire exercises involve operations in urban terrain as well as combined arms exercises. The JRTC and the CMTC also conduct mission rehearsal exercises for units deploying to Bosnia and other contingency

operations. All of the centers also have a cadre of experienced officers and non-commissioned officers who are responsible for coaching, mentoring, and evaluating training units at all levels of organization. The centers also provide unit leader training programs for the units prior to their deployment to the centers.

The NTC and the JRTC are the joint responsibility of two Army commands in the United States: the U.S. Army Forces Command and the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. In Europe, the 7th Army Training Command is the parent organization for the CMTC.

Many Units Are Not Adequately Prepared for Training at the Centers

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, units conducted intensive training programs prior to reporting to the centers. The training periods included small-unit exercises; live-fire and combined arms exercises, and field training exercises through the battalion level.¹ In the past, units training at all three centers were required to conduct battalion level exercises at home stations prior to deployment to the centers. The training centers provided the next level of proficiency that could not be achieved at home stations: that is, up to two battalions as well as support units operating collectively in a highly realistic environment to execute a wartime mission.

Today, the situation is very different. In March 1998, the prerequisite that units train at the battalion level before rotating to the NTC was dropped. While units rotating to the JRTC and CMTC are still required to conduct such training, this requirement is not enforced. According to FORSCOM officials, these changes reflect the reality of training constraints that commanders now face.

Because there is no requirement for units to be at a specific level of preparedness to train at a combat training center, many units arrive without the requisite skills to execute battalion and brigade level missions, the level of training that the centers are expected to provide. For example, opposing force commanders and exercise observer/controllers at all three training centers told us that, in general, units lack proficiency in reconnaissance, planning, communication, synchronization, and breaching obstacles. Moreover, many units, according to these officials, have not mastered even company level tasks when they arrive at the training

¹Prior to 1995, rotations to the NTC were conducted at the battalion level. In 1995, the Army switched from battalion to brigade level training.

centers. They said that they had observed a marked decline in unit proficiency between units arriving for training in fiscal year 1998 and units in prior years.

Commanders' responses to our survey confirmed the perception of training center officials. Nearly half of the 85 respondents said that their units were only somewhat or marginally ready to execute battalion level tasks at the training centers. Over 50 percent of the respondents cited personnel shortages, personnel turnover, or high operating tempo as one of their top three reasons for being ill prepared for their training experiences.

Personnel shortages are not a new phenomenon and are caused by many factors. We discussed some of these in our testimony before this committee last year at Fort Riley.² These include (1) Army-wide shortages of certain specialties and personnel at specific levels, such as combat troops, technical specialists, experienced officers, and non-commissioned officers; (2) personnel transferred to fill vacancies in deploying units; and (3) personnel temporarily borrowed from their units to meet other Army or installation requirements.

Such peacetime personnel shortages impact training at the centers because commanders arriving with personnel shortfalls are limited in the options they have for executing missions. Some shortages are quite pronounced. For example, for fiscal year 1998, the infantry battalions that trained at the JRTC on average arrived with only 42 of their 54 authorized rifle squads. Many of these consisted of six soldiers on average rather than the nine authorized. In other words, units arrived with only about half of the personnel authorized for their rifle squads. Similar data on squad and crew shortages upon arrival was not available for the other two centers.

Personnel turnover also hampers units trying to prepare for their rotations to the training centers. Thirty-four of the 85 commanders that responded to our survey provided comments concerning the negative impact of turnover on unit training. In general, the commanders told us that personnel turnover requires them to train basic tasks more often, which reduces the time available to develop proficiency at higher levels. They also reported that turnover significantly impedes unit integrity.

²Military Readiness: Observations on Personnel Readiness in Later Deploying Army Divisions (GAO/T-NSIAD-98-126, Mar. 20, 1998).

Over 45 percent of the respondents to our survey commented on the toll that high operating tempo had on their ability to prepare for their rotations to the training centers. The full significance is clearly illustrated by units from the 1st Infantry and 1st Armored Divisions located in Germany, which participate in training exercises at the Hohenfels training center. These units have not been able to conduct battalion level exercises since they returned from Bosnia last year. Because they were unable to train on many mission essential tasks at the company or battalion levels while in Bosnia, the exercises in which they participated at Hohenfels were modified to reduce their complexity. For example, units that we saw during our visit were not conducting force-on-force battalion exercises but instead were conducting unopposed company level exercises.

Training Conditions Are Routinely Limited

According to Army regulations, CTC training is designed to increase units' proficiency by replicating the most realistic and challenging battlefield available. However, we found that, because units have arrived at the centers at lower levels of proficiency than in the past, the centers now routinely limit the capability of their opposing force by restricting its use of chemical weapons, mines, obstacles, artillery, and tactics. As a result, units have not been fully tested for the demanding conditions they may face on today's battlefields. For example:

- A ceiling is placed on the numbers, types, and times that the opposing force can use chemical weapons and mines. As a result, units that initially demonstrate a low level of training in chemical environment operations or breaching mine obstacles will face fewer of these events.
- A ceiling is also imposed on the numbers, types, and time of employment for artillery. The opposing force commander must obtain permission to use additional artillery above this ceiling from center officials, who determine whether the additional artillery fires will detract from the training objectives.
- Opposing force reconnaissance elements are now limited to destroying a specific number of friendly vehicles with artillery at night. This limit is imposed to ensure that training units have sufficient forces to commence their mission in the morning.

Officials at the centers emphasized that there are definite tradeoffs between providing scenarios with the most challenging conditions and limiting the conditions to better match unit capabilities. On the one hand, it makes sense to limit exercise complexity so units can accomplish some training objectives; on the other hand, units will not be adequately prepared

to face the most demanding threats. As one Army official told us, many commanders acquire an unrealistically high assessment of their individual and unit capabilities because they leave the centers thinking that their units performed better than they really did. Moreover, a battalion task force commander told us that many subordinate units complete their training experience without ever engaging the opposing force on the battlefield.

Exercise Results Are Frequently Not Used to Improve Proficiency

According to the Army's training center regulation, take-home packages are provided to each unit to document all of its after action reviews, describe performance strengths and weaknesses, and recommend a focus for home station training. However, we found that ineffective take home materials from the centers as well as a lack of training opportunities at their home stations diminish the value of their training experiences at the centers. The result is that systemic weaknesses demonstrated by units during training center exercises are not being addressed.

The remarks that surveyed commanders shared about their take-home packages were telling. For example, several described their packages as worthless because they were written in generic language and lacked specificity. One noted that the package arrived a full 3 months after the rotation ended; another noted that he had not received any feedback or materials from his unit's rotation to the training center. A third described the take-home materials as an afterthought, built around the shortcomings of people, not systems. Finally, one seemed surprised at his package, noting that its content did not seem to match the comments provided at the after-action reviews provided during the exercise.

Limited training opportunities at their home stations were also cited as inhibiting units from using training center results to improve their skills. Most units begin a support and recovery cycle immediately following training center exercises and at the same time begin to lose many of the people who participated in the exercise. Of the 85 commanders who responded to our survey, 33 or about 39 percent said that personnel turnover after returning to their home stations inhibited their use of exercise results. One commander at Fort Hood, for example, said that personnel turnover had left the battalion mostly untrained within 30 days of its return from the NTC. For example, this unit lost the 16 tank crews that it had borrowed from other units for the exercise, 14 platoon leaders had changed jobs, 4 company executive officers and 10 platoon leaders also left the unit. As a result, the unit that was left to put its lessons learned to use was far different from the one that trained at the center.

Only 21 percent of the commanders that used a center in fiscal year 1998 said that they had been able to maintain strengths and train on weaknesses after returning to their home stations. About 24 percent said that their units had been able to conduct only a minimum amount of training, and 8 percent said that no unit training had been conducted.

Effectiveness of Center Operations Has Not Been Assessed

The Army has not accomplished one of its primary objectives for establishing its combat training centers, namely, to provide a data source for lessons learned so that it can improve doctrine, training, leader development, organizations, and materiel. Because the Army has not developed a plan for fully integrating training results with the Army's training and doctrine development activities, the potential contribution of the centers to the Army is not being realized. In essence, many of the lessons for improving training, doctrine, tactics, and techniques that could have been learned from nearly two decades of training have been lost.

The Army has been gathering large amounts of data at its combat training centers for more than 15 years. However, the Army has never standardized data collection programs at its centers, and as a result, the information from the centers cannot be combined to assess trends. Moreover, each center has a different contractor for data collection and each uses its own proprietary computer software. The cumulative effect is that much of the information collected cannot be used by the Army's Combined Arms Center to develop lessons learned from the exercises.

An even more fundamental weakness is that the Army has no objective measures to gauge how well the centers are carrying out their assigned responsibilities and has not conducted an overall assessment of the centers' effectiveness either individually or collectively. As a result, it is unclear to what extent the objectives of the centers are being met.

Commanders that we surveyed clearly believed that they derived benefits from participating in the centers' exercises. Notwithstanding their expressed concerns about certain aspects of their training center experience, 80 percent of the respondents to our survey said that the exercises were very useful in enhancing battalion and company level proficiency. In addition, center officials emphasize that the collective benefits gained from individual experiences improve the Army's overall proficiency. However, a review done in 1998 of unit take-home materials conducted by the Army's Center for Lessons Learned showed that units

have made many of the same mistakes at the National Training Center since 1994.

The problems with data collection and analysis at the Army's training centers are not new. In July 1986, we reported that the Army had not adequately defined its analysis needs and corresponding data requirements nor developed criteria for performance measurement.³ We concluded that the Army had spent millions of dollars collecting information that it was reluctant to rely on for developing Army-wide lessons. Today, the situation is essentially the same as reported 13 years ago.

Conclusions

The Army is operating training centers that are rightfully the envy of allied and enemy armies around the world. Collectively, they offer diverse physical environments that provide realistic battlefield conditions enabling the Army's personnel to experience the closest thing possible to actual combat. Their sophisticated instrumentation and network of trained observers provide unparalleled opportunities to develop leaders and improve the readiness of the Army's units to engage in combat. But, despite these advantages, the weaknesses that we have highlighted today need to be addressed if the Army is to gain the full benefits of these outstanding training facilities. For example,

- the Army must find a way to overcome the impact of personnel shortages, personnel turnover, and operating tempo so that units can come to the centers better prepared to realize the full benefits of their experiences there;
- to maximize the value of their participation, units must be afforded exercise conditions that closely approximate the threats that they are likely to face on future battlefields;
- the Army must provide units with meaningful and specific feedback that they can use to improve their proficiency and readiness once they return home and put their experiences to use; and
- finally, the Army must take a serious look at how it can best capture its lessons learned from the training centers and plan now for periodically assessing their effectiveness;

³Army Training: National Training Center's Potential Has Not Been Realized (GAO/NSIAD-86-130, July 23, 1986).

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.