

Drill Sergeants Make the Army and Build Warriors

Commentary by Col. Christopher T. Fulton/the Cannoneer

FORT SILL, Okla. (Aug. 30, 2004) – While serving as Army chief of staff, Gen. Dennis Reimer commented, “Drill sergeants do more than just touch our Army – they make it.”

This statement has never been truer than right now, where Soldiers are graduating from the Field Artillery Training Center – fondly referred to as “the other side of the tracks” – and within a matter weeks are arriving at their first duty stations deployed in distant countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Consider the case of Pvt. Kyle F. Turner.

Turner completed one-station unit training in 1st Battalion, 22nd Field Artillery, at Fort Sill in April 2003. His initial assignment was to 4th Infantry Division — specifically C Battery, 3rd Battalion, 16th FA.

At the time he graduated, C Battery, 3rd-16th FA was deploying to Iraq. Turner arrived just in time to fly with his new unit to Kuwait, and then on to Baghdad.

Just a little over a month later, Turner was a member of a security-checkpoint team when the situation turned bad. An Iraqi force attacked the checkpoint.

The citation for the Silver Star Turner earned that night states that his actions “broke the enemy attack and saved the lives of five fellow Soldiers. ... (He) willingly and selflessly placed himself under the direct fire of the enemy to protect his fellow Soldiers.”

When I first read his citation, I wondered just how this brand-new Soldier – probably one of the newest Soldiers in the unit – could respond the way he did.

Was it pure bravado in the face of an armed enemy? Was it just luck and coincidence he wasn't killed or injured, and was able to survive the fight so his story could be told? Or was it pure fear and lots of adrenaline?

I would guess all three of these reasons had their places in Turner's life that eventful night, but more than anything, I'm convinced his response – and resulting award – was simply a matter of good training.

It's so easy to say and so hard to do: taking a young man or woman from American society and turning him or her into a warrior as demonstrated by Pvt. Kyle Turner.

But this “magic” takes place every day, and the leaders who possess this magic are drill sergeants, easily recognizable because of their unique headgear – called a “brown round” and fashioned after the campaign hats of World War I.

They also are easy to spot by their “mother duck” appearance as they move their trainees around to various training sites.

The drill sergeant – the cornerstone of Army readiness – is an enduring theme under development at Training and Doctrine Command. This is an especially appropriate metaphor, given the task drill sergeants have to develop the readiness of the Army’s newest Soldiers.

This theme is supported by a number of accompanying messages that truly describe these great junior leaders who “make” our Army.

Drill sergeants reflect the professionalism, commitment and dedication of the Army noncommissioned officer corps. Look for yourself the next time you see a drill sergeant – the uniform is sharp, they stand tall and they tend to exude an air of confidence and quiet professionalism.

NCOs can become drill sergeants in two ways.

About 20 percent of current drill sergeants at FATC are “volunteers,” meaning they met the cut through a series of interviews with their chains of command. The remaining 80 percent are not volunteers but are hand-picked at Department of the Army level based on exceptionally strong personnel files.

Leadership abilities, fitness and responsibility are key determinants in who gets selected for this tough duty. The quality of our new Soldiers reflects the quality of our drill sergeants.

Have you ever heard the question, “Who was your drill sergeant?” Typically this is asked of a young Soldier who either made a mistake or did something impressive. Reports back from the field, particularly from deployed units, all provide glowing reports of the quality of the new Soldiers joining their ranks. This would not be true if we didn’t have dedicated and committed quality professionals who help prepare them for the challenges of today’s world.

Drill sergeants instill Army Values, discipline and adherence to standards.

For those with children, you understand the challenges in teaching life skills based on a set of moral values and sound judgment. This is normally about an 18-year process. Our Army is the recipient of these parental efforts, and in most of our newest Soldiers, their values, discipline and judgment is about where we want them to be.

That said, some new Soldiers definitely aren’t there yet.

Along comes their new “dad,” “mom,” “big brother” or whatever special title fits that drill sergeant for that particular Soldier. Every case is different.

Drill sergeants have nine short weeks of basic combat training, and a few more of advanced individual training, to get every Soldier to a common level of understanding of – and compliance to – the seven Army Values. Sometimes this means some “tough love”; sometimes this means

nurturing and coaching. This is no simple task, but it is the true heart of the initial-entry training process.

Of course, discipline forms the foundation over which all other aspects of service stand.

Does a Soldier do what is required – in the right, moral way – with little to no guidance or “prodding”? It is this instilling of values, focused discipline and adherence to standards that allow Soldiers like Pvt. Kyle Turner to do remarkable things under extraordinary circumstances.

Those of us in uniform are all informal recruiters of one sort or another – from helping Soldiers and their families make the decision to “stay green” to being the “face of the Army” to young people interested in serving their country. But another recruiting responsibility Army leaders have is identifying those young, professional NCOs who understand how to – and have the desire to – lead and train Soldiers.

I ask that all senior leaders look into the faces of our NCOs for “your drill sergeant” and recommend they consider serving “on the trail.”

By the same token, if you don’t see “your drill sergeant” in a Soldier who wants to go “on the trail,” make the tough call and recommend they consider other opportunities.

Molding America’s sons and daughters into warriors is a duty reserved for the best.

What kind of leader do we want training, disciplining and leading our children? Of course we want only the best – someone who has the capability, confidence and commitment to teach and take care of them as if they were their own children, yet who also understands the complexities of the strict training regimen to transform civilians to Soldiers.

Although, to some, this training regimen may appear that the Army is simply a “cookie cutting” factory, nothing could be further from the truth. The 50-plus new Soldiers who stand in front of their drill sergeant are individuals with varying levels of knowledge, skills and abilities. The drill sergeant’s challenge is to transform these individuals – train each so they are both competent and confident in their warrior skills and can act seamlessly as a member of a team.

Our Army’s future is in the very capable hands of our drill sergeants. In other words, “Soldiering starts here!”

Thanks to these professional, dedicated and committed NCOs, we will continue to produce Soldiers who will routinely impress all with their dedication and professionalism, sometimes under dire circumstances – just like Pvt. Kyle Turner.

(Editor’s note: Fulton commands the Field Artillery Training Center, Fort Sill, Okla.)