

Bull Session On Replacements



Training for combat, according to veterans in Italy, should be a hell of a lot more realistic and a hell of a lot more thorough.

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WITH THE 88TH DIVISION IN ITALY—"They oughta learn them guys" is the favorite beef you hear from combat veterans when they talk about replacements who have just joined their outfits.

Some, like T/Sgt. Vincenzo Marino, a rifle-platoon sergeant in the 350th Regiment, feel that replacements should get more training in night operations. "I know they get night problems," Marino said, "but they don't get enough. They ought to be made to see that almost everything they do over here will be done at night.

"They should know how to move up on reliefs in the line and how to go into new positions, and they should get more training on night patrols and how to see and listen on outpost when it's pitch black. They should know how to do at night every damn thing they do in daytime."

T/Sgt. Roman J. Klein of Buffalo, N. Y., a rifle-platoon sergeant in Marino's company, added that while most replacements have had enough scouting and patrolling, they should be taught that most fighting—even in big offensives—is only scouting and patrolling on a large scale. "That," he said, "would help them, not just on patrols, but every minute they're at the front, because they would automatically take advantage of all cover and concealment; they'd always be alert and watch where they're going."

Somebody pointed out that a scouting and patrolling problem was usually a favorite time for a trainee to pick out a nice quiet spot for a couple of hours' break. "I'd take care of that," snapped Klein. "I'd have the problems last two or three days and make the patrols scrounge for their food and water. I'd give them maps and make them reach certain points where rations and water would be waiting."

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ANOTHER thing Klein mentioned was that the average replacement doesn't know enough about the weapons an infantryman uses. "He usually knows enough about one or two weapons," Klein said, "but he should know them all. He may know how to use and take care of the M1 or carbine, but if you need a BARman or machine-gunner quick you're up a creek."

William J. Cashman of Portland, Conn., chief of a small-arms unit, agreed that most replacements don't know enough about their weapons—how to use them and how to take care of them. "When the small arms come in for repairs," Cashman said, "all that most of my men can find wrong is that they need cleaning and oiling. Every replacement ought to know how to fire, clean and field-strip every small arm." One recent replacement asked Cashman how to load his M1, "and he was on his way up to the line."

"A lot of replacements are trained with the '03 and never see the M1 until they hit a line outfit in combat," put in T-5 George Brooks of Philadelphia, Pa., a member of the small-arms section. "And the GIs aren't the only ones who don't know their weapons. I remember the look on one lieutenant's face when he came back from patrol and found out that the tommy gun he was carrying was missing a firing pin!"

Combat veterans should be returned to the States to train replacements, in the opinion of S/Sgt. Albert Waidelich Jr. of St. Johns, Mich., a rifle-company supply sergeant. "And guys on cadre should be shipped overseas to do some of the fighting," he added. "I'm not saying that to get home myself, because it will be some time before I'm eligible. But I know what I'm talking about. I was a cadreman three years in the States.

"For instance, very few of the men training replacements at Camp Roberts had been in combat. The only ones I remember were a couple of fellows who had been at Anzio for five days before being wounded and sent home, and two others who came back from fighting Japs in the Pacific. GIs sent home on rotation would be a lot more valuable as cadremen, with all they've learned, than if they were sent back to fight."

PFC. Vernon Martin of Northern, Ky., a 60-mm mortarman with the 349th Regiment during the push from the Garigliano River, took a crack at the "by the numbers" systems of training employed in replacement-training centers. "They taught us to drop a shell in with the right hand from the right side of the mortar," he drawled, "and that was the only way they'd let us do it. When I joined the 88th last March, I found the best way for me to feed was by the left hand from the right side of the piece."

Martin's criticism is an oft-heard one. Like other combat men, the Kentucky redhead feels that "dry runs" are overworked and that in some cases they hinder operations because some men cannot quickly adapt themselves to "field expedients."

Pfc. Walter C. Roehrkasse of Independence, Iowa, who drives an ambulance and weapons carrier for the 313th Medical Battalion, complained about inadequate battle orientation. He joined the 88th as a replacement just after the May 11 offensive opened and served as a litter-bearer in the push to Rome. "When I came over I thought all of Italy was a battleground," he said. "I figured it was dangerous everywhere all the time, not just in areas very close to the front."

Roehrkasse put another twist on the need for more night training. He pointed out that the Medics, like the Infantry, operate chiefly at night. "In training," he said, "medics should practice more night evacuation of wounded and especially blackout driving over poor roads."

Sgt. Roger P. Milot of Watertown, Conn., a rifle-company communications sergeant, suggested that all infantrymen should know something about communications. "That's one of the most important things in running a company,"

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he said, "but the T/E doesn't allow enough equipment and you can't find enough men who know anything about running a radio or telephone. I have to train my own men, but when something happens to your communications man you play hell getting another one."

Pvt. George Measer Jr., a 19-year-old former machine-gunner from Williamsville, N. Y., would have more first-aid training and instruction for conduct under shellfire. "The company medic can't be everywhere when the stuff starts flying," he said, "and if everyone knew more about first aid some lives and a lot of arms and legs might be saved.

"And there should be some way to give replacements a preview of what it's like under shellfire—a few big ones sailing over their heads and hitting in a nearby impact area might do it. I remember my first time up. I couldn't tell an incoming shell from one going out, and I didn't know whether to stand still, hit the dirt or run. Of course, I soon learned—but a lot of guys get hit before they have that chance."

SOMEBODY remarked that since the time for training replacements is limited to 17 to 21 weeks, the period might have to be lengthened to include all these suggestions. But that was solved quickly.

"Give them less garrison training and more practical work under field conditions," Marino suggested. "If you cut some of the close-order drill, manual of arms, sex-morality lectures, military courtesy, Articles of War and a lot more stuff that doesn't help in combat there'd be plenty of time left to give replacements training in things that might some day be the difference between life and death."

YANK
APRIL 27, 1945
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