

Selections vs. Qualifications Training

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Back in 1985, when I was a not-so-young U.S. Army 2nd Lieutenant, I found myself attending a grueling two week school called the “Army Air Loader” course. As I originally understood it, this course would teach me all about loading my battalion’s equipment on to an airplane for deployment somewhere overseas. To this day, I am still trying to figure out what running several hard miles a day in full combat gear, climbing an obstacle course at 2 a.m., and suffering through numerous impromptu inspections had to do with loading an airplane with beans, bullets and band-aids. When I finally decided to ask the instructors why we were doing all that extra work, the only reply I was given was that, “only the best can be army air loaders!”

One thing I should mention before I go on is that by the time I was sent to that goofy air loader course, I had already done a six-year hitch with the elite U.S.M.C. Recon Teams. To earn a position in that type of unit, I had successfully completed an ungodly long list of schools (i.e. Reconnaissance Indoctrination, Jump school, SCUBA – the list goes on). Each school was an intense test of my inner strength. The daily question was – How bad did I want it? Though it was difficult – even humiliating at times – I knew that the training was for a reason related to combat. Conversely, at the air loader course, other than allowing instructors with obvious latent drill instructor tendencies to treat soldiers like dog meat, I saw no purpose to what was being done to us. I still don’t.

(Fast-forward 22 years) Last year, I was contacted by a representative from a local police department and asked if I would consider teaching a Basic SWAT school in the north Texas region. My initial response was to decline on the premise that I only teach the more advanced tactical subjects. Left unsaid, but in the back of my mind, was that I really did not feel like writing yet another curriculum, then organizing the logistics for a school. Besides, I was still recovering from a near fatal illness that had taken my left leg above the knee. Taking the caller’s number, I told him that I would do some networking and find him (and his team) a Basic SWAT course. Little did I know that by the end of the day I would receive a dozen other phone calls asking me for the same type of training. Evidently, these officers had recently attended (and failed) the same Basic SWAT School. In their collective opinions (much like my experience with the air loader course) they had been treated like military recruits attending boot camp rather than the professional police officers that they are.

I wish I could say that this was an isolated incident. Unfortunately, that appears not to be the case. Over the last 12 months I have spoken with numerous officers looking for not only Basic SWAT, but also intermediate and advanced levels of tactical training. During these conversations the officers complained about previous SWAT schools that they failed to pass. Or worse, completed, but felt that they had learned nothing. Based on these conversations, it seems that some tactical trainers are using the military style “Selections Course” concept instead of assuring that their SWAT students are well qualified for their jobs when they graduate.

The military uses the selections phase (or process) of training to weed out those individuals that do not, for whatever reason, meet the criteria to be in Special Operations. Military wide, there are thousands of such applicants every year. Conversely, a qualifications course is just that – it is designed to assure that the graduate has the necessary qualifications (training & skills) to fulfill a job or an assignment. In the Special Operations world of the military, qualifications training generally follows some type of grueling selections process. This methodology yields about a 75 - 80% washout rate. I emphasize three points here (i) the military has the numbers to tolerate this failure rate; (ii) the selections phase is not run congruently with qualifications training; and (iii) most military schools of this nature are several months long.



USMC's "Reconnaissance Indoctrination Course". We graduated 18 students out of 90.

In law enforcement, *individual SWAT teams* are responsible for selecting an officer for SWAT duty. The appointment is based on departmental policies and team standards. Once selected, officers are sent to basic, intermediate and advanced tactical schools to be trained up (and therefore be qualified) for an assignment in SWAT. By virtue of the fact that an officer is attending a tactical school, the instructors should understand that the officer has already been selected for tactical duty by his department. At that point, an instructors' job is to train the officer in all things SWAT. Our goal should be to turn out (graduate) the best-trained tactical novice we possibly can.

The key word in the above paragraph is "train". Replacing the current selections mentality with the needed training philosophies will be difficult at best. It might mean a complete revision of what some instructors (and teams) envision SWAT to be. For those that struggle with this idea, please keep these five points in mind:

1. **“PT” should not be used as a baseline standard to wash students out of a SWAT school.** The reason physical training is so often used in this manner is because it is easy to evaluate and requires little work on behalf of the instructors. Unfortunately, it tells almost nothing about the SWAT student’s potential. Many organizations that use the selections concept during SWAT training use physical fitness as the mainstay to their training philosophy (as opposed to, let’s say, concentrating on entry work). I agree that SWAT officers must be in good physical condition and that a Basic SWAT School should have physical training in its curriculum (especially an assessment test); however, I disagree with any concept that washes out an officer who is excellent SWAT material simply because he cannot run well. This makes very little sense and is often a waste of time and talent.

2. **You cannot get a person in shape in a week.** You can make them sore and miserable. You can pad your ego by running them into the dirt. You can make them hate life – but you cannot get them in shape. Those same hours spent running each day could be used to teach and perfect tactical skills. If you want to drive home the point that SWAT officers need to be in good physical condition, try having students do “button hooks” or “cross-overs” *correctly* through the door 50 times or more. Or have the students do high crawls, low crawls and 3 to 5 second rushes until they are exhausted. Those are life saving skills needed by all tactical officers while running several miles in tactical gear, though impressive, is not.



Try doing 50 button-hooks through the door to reinforce Physical Fitness (Basic SWAT Course 3-06)



Making entry correctly while under intense gun fire takes numerous reps, not pushups!

3. **An intentionally high washout rate is nothing to be proud of.** There are SWAT schools that, by design, strive to reach a high failure rate of 50% or more. Some courses are so difficult that it becomes survival of the luckiest, not the best. Students that do not get sick or injured and those that are willing to put up with the harassment generally graduate. The question is: are these graduates really the best trained? Or, were those students so beaten up, so sore and tired that they subconsciously switched to autopilot, learning little, but doing just enough to stay healthy (and out of trouble) to pass the course?

4. **Just because an individual is on a tactical team in no way indicates that he or she should be allowed to teach at a SWAT school.** In the last ten years I have fired three instructors for mistreatment of students. While doing this has caused me some backlash (angry people love to run their mouths seemingly forever), I will not allow instructors to abuse students. Instructors that are intentionally overly combative while role playing as bad guys or that constantly drop students for push-ups for real or perceived infractions either do not know how to teach or they enjoy causing others pain. One is bad. The other is borderline criminal. Unless those that are responsible for choosing the training cadre are very careful in whom they select to teach, abusive conduct by bad instructors *will eventually occur*. Regardless of your training philosophy, your instructors must be the very best that you can field. Unprofessional conduct displayed by instructors will destroy the validity of your school and our profession.

5. **We only have the students for a week.** Wasting time playing games (constantly dropping students for pushups or harassing them while running or during other activities) under the guise that it will instill self-discipline in the student is absurd. Military boot camp is generally three months long. In that time frame a recruit is stripped of his identity and then slowly, over the course of time, rebuilt into what the military wants him to be. One of the most disturbing conversations I have had was with a much-respected tactical commander who had sent several of his officers to a Basic SWAT school in this region. Evidently, when one of his officers could not keep up on a run several of the instructors surrounded him, got in his face and began to severely demean him, his team and his department. I am sure the instructors that did this were trying to motivate the student into “digging deep” and trying harder, maybe thinking that it would instill some pride and discipline in the officer. This type of negative reinforcement rarely works for very long. The military stopped using it years ago. So should we.



During a scouting mission, students get physical conditioning and some practical hands on training

I understand that there are tactical instructors that disagree and will continue to run SWAT schools in a selections manner. That is their prerogative. If that is the case, I recommend that the course title reflect that training viewpoint (i.e. Selections / Basic SWAT course), publish the course rationale and furnish the potential students with a reference list of former attendees that they can contact. If an officer has attended a SWAT school that, in his/her opinion, was unduly abusive or unprofessional, he/she should report it. Almost all states have tactical associations that, to some degree or another, review or sanction tactical training curriculum – they need to be involved. If they have sanctioned the curriculum then they have a right to know what is occurring under their stamp of approval. Contact them!

Lest you think that I am endorsing we train a kinder and gentler SWAT officer, I am not. SWAT, by its very nature, is a dangerous and demanding profession. Shifting from a selections course approach to a qualifications course will mean changing the focus of the course standards – not lowering them or dummifying the standards down. The same level of intensity found in a selections course can be achieved in a qualifications course through repetition of techniques, professional instructors that teach – not harass – and demanding that students perform learned techniques under high standards of evaluation.

Over the last 15 years, I have come to believe that as a Tactical / SWAT instructor, I am given a special trust by the students that attend my courses. These students are relying on us (my cadre and I) to teach them the skills they need in order to stay alive in the near-combat environment that SWAT can become. To place importance on any training (or training philosophy) that diverts attention a way from this reality is to break that trust.

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