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# ACFT: FESIBLE, PRACTICAL, SAFE?

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UNITED STATES ARMY  
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The introduction and soon to be application of the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) has raised many questions from Soldiers, NCOs and Officers at the Battalion and Company levels. As a former First Sergeant of three different companies, I definitely had questions of feasibility, application, time constraints as well as individual Soldier ability when it came to the new six event test. The sometimes downside of senior leaders in today's Army is that we often resist change, even before trying the new way first. Unlike some of my peers at the time, I took the ACFT as a challenge and faced it head on; I wanted to see exactly what my company was capable of and had full confidence their abilities.

I embarked on a crusade to research, analyze and develop a company level ACFT train-up that could prepare not only my Soldiers, but perhaps even set a precedent on how Soldiers should train across the Army. My objective was simple: Develop a program that would be effective, safe and feasible no matter the location. My target goal for each event was 70 percent; this was in large part due to the anticipated Airborne BCT minimum standard in which I was in at the time.

Over the next four months, I implemented my first pilot program with a group of 46 Soldiers and Staff Officers in 14 different Military Occupation Specialties (MOS). The purpose of this paper is to highlight the lessons learned from 10 weeks of training and research on the ACFT and to present a feasible option for all to train.

## Introduction of the ACFT

The Army Combat Fitness Test began circulating amongst us Soldiers in late 2018, marketed as the soon to be new test of record. Beginning in October 2018, there would be a year-long field test with an Active Army unit however, preliminary score cards already began to flood the internet (Myers 2018). Some of the biggest things to stick among Soldiers and were the most talked about, at least in my company, were the age and gender neutral standards, the six events which included a deadlift, and minimum standards possibly based on type of unit or MOS (Myers 2018).

The six events of the ACFT in order are: The Three Repetition Maximum Deadlift in which 140 lbs. would give you a score of 60 percent; The Standing Power Throw, four meters for 60 percent; The Hand Release Push-Up with 10 repetitions scoring 60 percent; The Sprint-Drag-Carry with an overall 3:35 to capture 60 percent; The Leg Tuck, completing one gets you 60 percent; and finally something familiar, the Two-Mile Run with a time of 21:00 to achieve 60 percent (Army 2018).

The feelings of this new test of record were varied. Some Soldiers whom barely met the current Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) standards were a bit nervous; Some Senior NCOs and Staff Officers mumbled complaints about the age neutral standards and the injuries the deadlifts would create; there were Soldiers applauding the gender neutral standards as well as some voicing their concerns. There were way too many “what-if” scenarios and rumors spreading this early in the game. Like any other good Command Team, my Commander and I decided to conduct the test ourselves so that we had a better understanding as well as some insight on how to prepare our Soldiers and eliminate the fear of the unknown.

## Lead by Example

I feel as though my Commander and I had a slight advantage going into the ACFT due to our normal workout routine involving deadlifts and extensive cross-training over the last year. We considered ourselves fit and both scored above 290 on our last APFT. Due to the unavailability of ACFT testing officials at the time, we had no choice but to grade each other. This is not ideal during a fitness test however, our overall objective of learning and implementing this program for our Soldiers kept us honest on standards, all pride aside.

First up was the deadlift; I immediately put 340 lbs. on the bar for the maximum amount of points, after all, I deadlift more than that usually (Army 2018). This time was different however, the immediate first lesson learned here is that the Trap Bar is not the same as a deadlift with a barbell. This event requires grip strength, balance and the most difficult part is fighting the bar from rotating forward or backward, rolling out of your hands. We had to readjust. I took the weight down to 300 lbs. and was able to complete my three repetitions needed; my Commander went next with much of the same results.

Next up was the Standing Power Throw with a 10 lbs. medicine ball. This event was not difficult for either of us however, it did require us to fabricate a measuring rope up to 25 meters for this event as well as the Sprint-Drag-Carry. We used a typical climbing rope, measured with tape every half meter so that we could always set-up a 25 meter course within minutes. The Standing Power Throw is a momentum and explosive based exercise, think Kettlebell swing. We both took our practice throw and managed to log around 12 meters for record which put us over 90 percent.

The third event was somewhat familiar, the Hand Release Push-Up (HRP). The goal here is to complete as many as possible in two minutes. The former Push-Up as well as this new Hand Release Push-Up events were similar in that they are both considered to be an upper body endurance test which replicates the sustained pushing used in combat (Army 2018). The difference

however, is that with the old event, Soldiers can take some of the endurance out of it by waiting in the modified front lean-and-rest position while arching their back. Yes, although this still puts a strain on the shoulders, anyone that has taken the APFT before knows that it is a definite rest on endurance. With the HRP there is no rest so to speak; once you reach 3-5 seconds (depending on the graders interpretation) you are considered to be in the rest position and therefore complete with this event.

This event is a true endurance test of the upper body; I have maxed my Push-Ups on the APFT for the last 20 years however, I could only complete 43 out of the required 70 to max. The repetitions must be streamlined and efficient; removing your hands noticeably from the ground and locking out at the top has to be a well-oiled machine that is constant. What I learned here is, two minutes goes quickly. The 43 executed HRPs earned me 87 points so I was not too disappointment and felt, if I could take it again, I would use the time more wisely.

The fourth event, the one we were dreading, the Sprint-Drag-Carry (SDC). This event is a test of strength, endurance, and anaerobic capacity and in my opinion, the most applicable to a combat scenario. With this event we had to conduct a shuttle sprint 50 meters, a 90 lbs. sled drag 50 meters, laterals for 50 meters, two 40 lbs. kettlebell carry 50 meters and finally one last 50 meter shuttle sprint. The anticipation grew as we walked to our lanes, this is where I believe Soldiers will begin to feel the pressure and anxiety of the test. Once we began however, the adrenaline took over and I immediately noticed the real life, combat applications to this event. This is one of the best events to demonstrate to your Soldiers the "why". As in why is this applicable? Why are we being tested on this? Etc. If Soldiers cannot make the combat connections with this event, NCOs that have deployed, need to educate them. My first time on this event, I logged a 2:01 which put me at 78 percent; not bad considering I put in about 78 percent effort knowing I still had a two mile run to complete.

Next was the Leg-Tuck. This event wasn't a major source of stress to be honest; I was very accustomed to doing pull-ups in my normal routine and saw this as not very different. Although, this

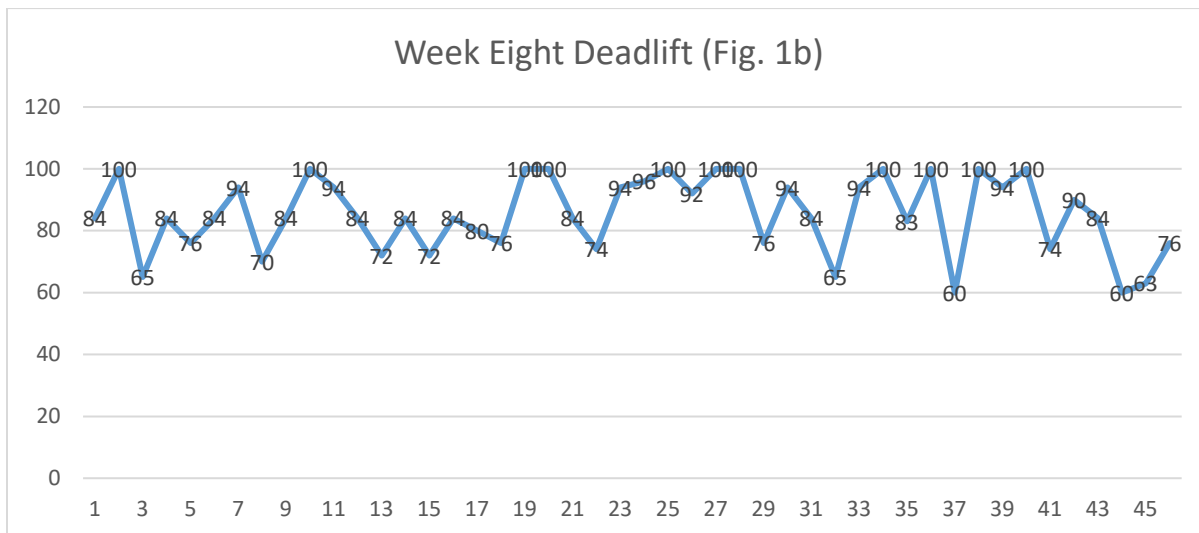
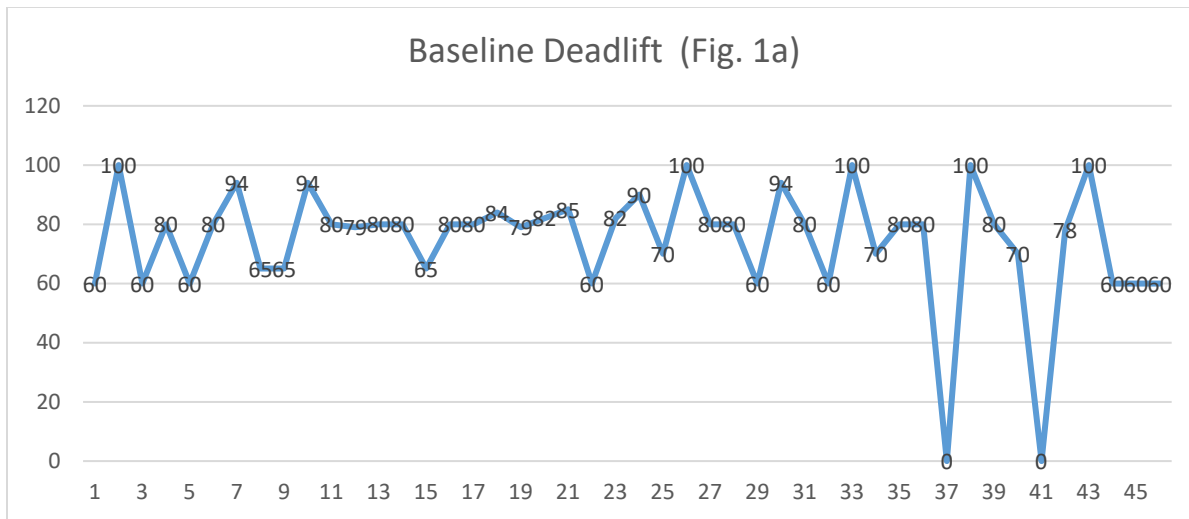
event wasn't that difficult, we did learn the role the other events, such as the Deadlift, play on your grip strength. My grip strength was the source of failure for my Leg Tucks, not my abdominal muscles. I was able to log 12 repetitions, earning 84 percent. My Commander was able to muscle out 16 repetitions on this one, and pulled ahead of me on the scorecard. I made a mental note on this event to incorporate grip strength training for the pilot course for the Soldiers.

Lastly, we had a very familiar event, the Two Mile Run. This event was a little surprising to see, especially with five events prior to conducting it. Not many of us do a leg-day workout then go for a run but that's exactly what you need to prepare your Soldiers to do, run while fatigued. You're not always going to be refreshed and rested when you have to move quickly in combat, and that is exactly what this event makes painfully aware. From my APFT a few month prior, I added 1:30 on my overall run time! This was probably the biggest shock and disappointment for me. I knew it wasn't just me, my Commander also saw the same increase in his run time. This is something you need to voice to your Soldiers; their run times may increase but they need to understand that it's all about adjusting your training so that running after Deadlifts and a Sprint-Drag-Carry event becomes commonplace. That's exactly what my pilot will do.

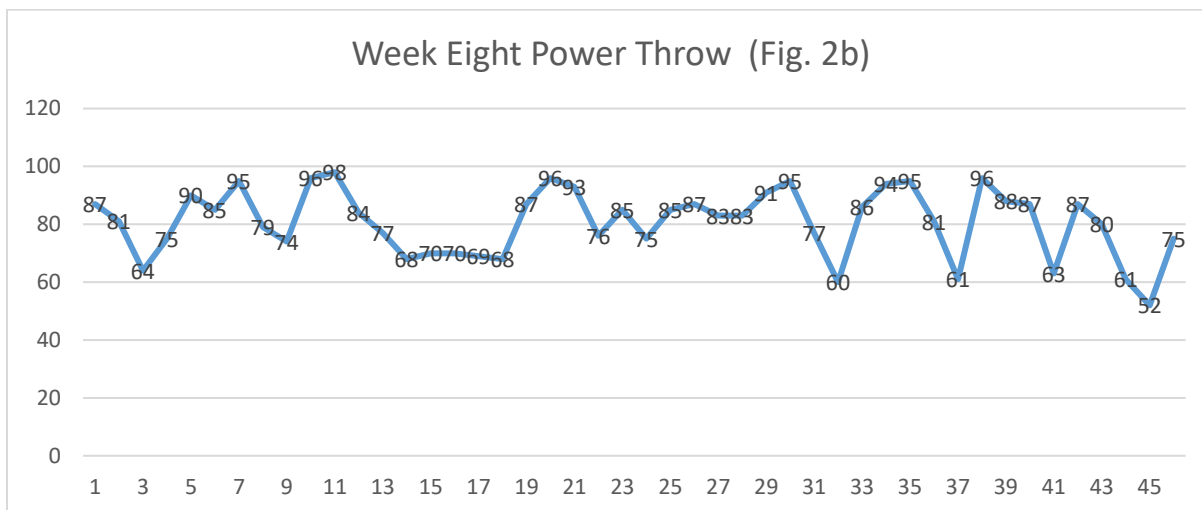
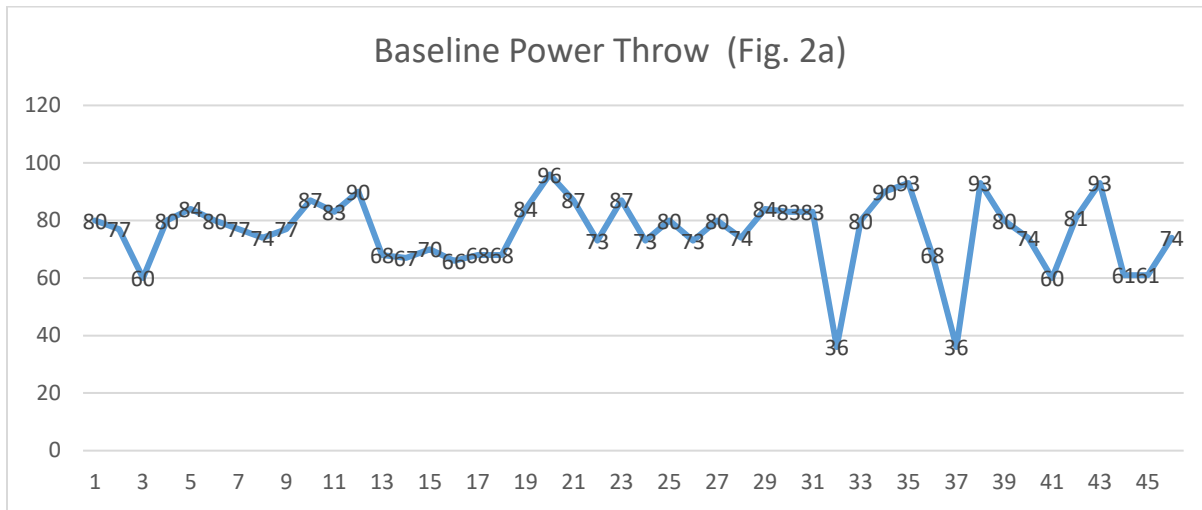
### The Baseline and Pilot

Over the next 10 weeks, my Commander and I analyzed the results of our test, created a train-the-trainer program for the NCOs that would be grading, and set-up our Baseline ACFT, pilot program, and our week eight ACFT. Total there were 98 Soldiers that participated at some point during the entire process, however, I have narrowed the results down to 46 that took the baseline, participated in the pilot program as well as took the second ACFT. This was in large part due to the PCS and ETS cycles.

The following figures are the recorded results of both ACFTs; the baseline being their first ACFT and then their eight week follow-up.



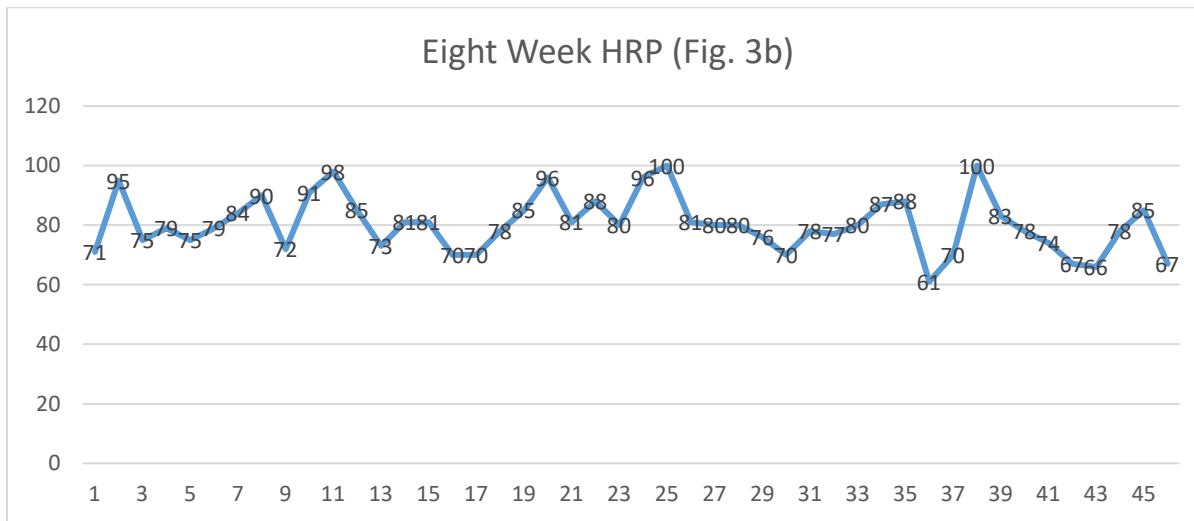
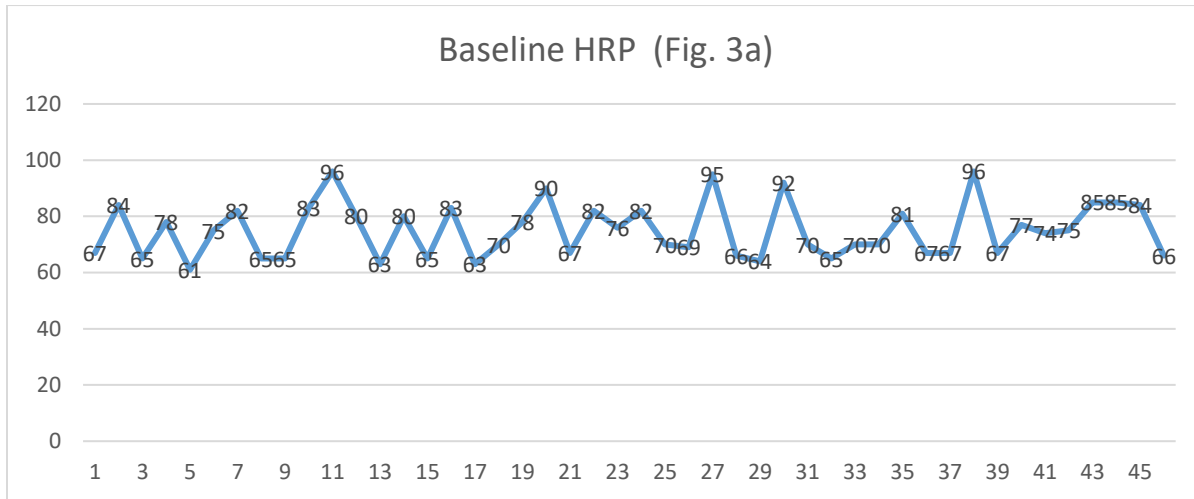
From our baseline, we found that 14 out of our 46 Soldiers tested could not achieve a minimum of 70 percent on the Deadlift event while five were able to earn 100 percent. The overall median score for the group tested was 80 points with a mean of 74.5. Eight weeks later, after the pilot, the same Soldiers tested now displayed that only five were unable to complete the 70 percent standard and 11 achieved 100 percent. The mean grew to 85.3, the median to 84 and absolutely zero Soldiers failed this event.



The Power Throw baseline presented that 12 Soldiers could not attain the 70 percent minimum, and no Soldiers could max this event. The mean was 75.9, the median 78.5 and the lowest attained score was 36 percent. Test two however, had just 9 Soldiers falling under 70 percent,

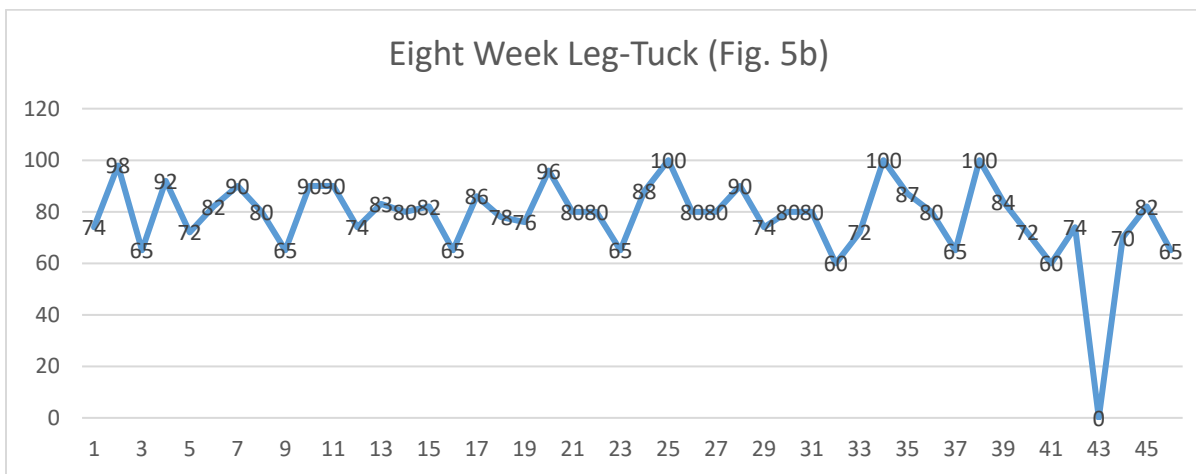
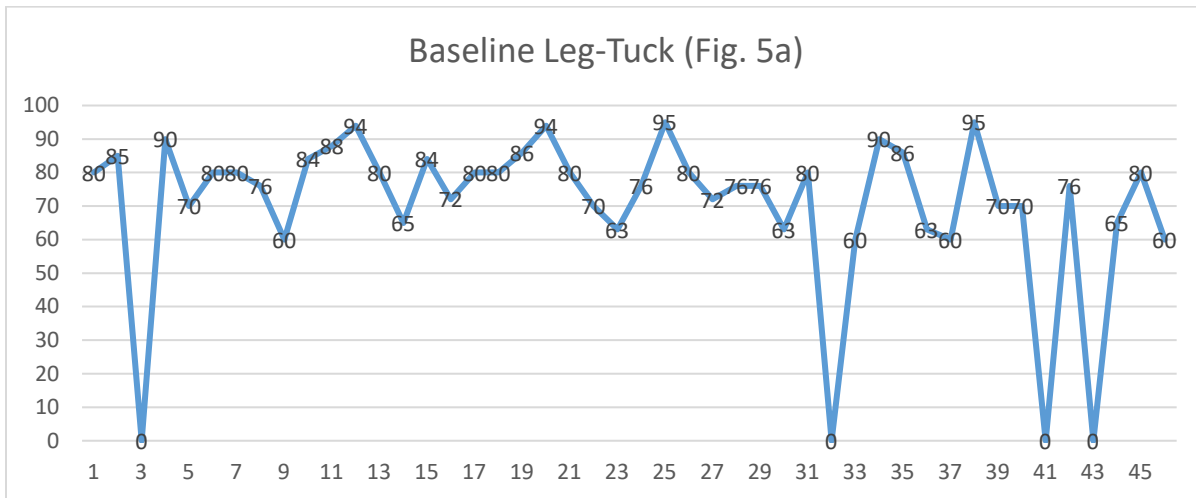


still zero maxing this event. The mean climbed to 80.6, the median to 83 and the lowest score increased to 52 percent.



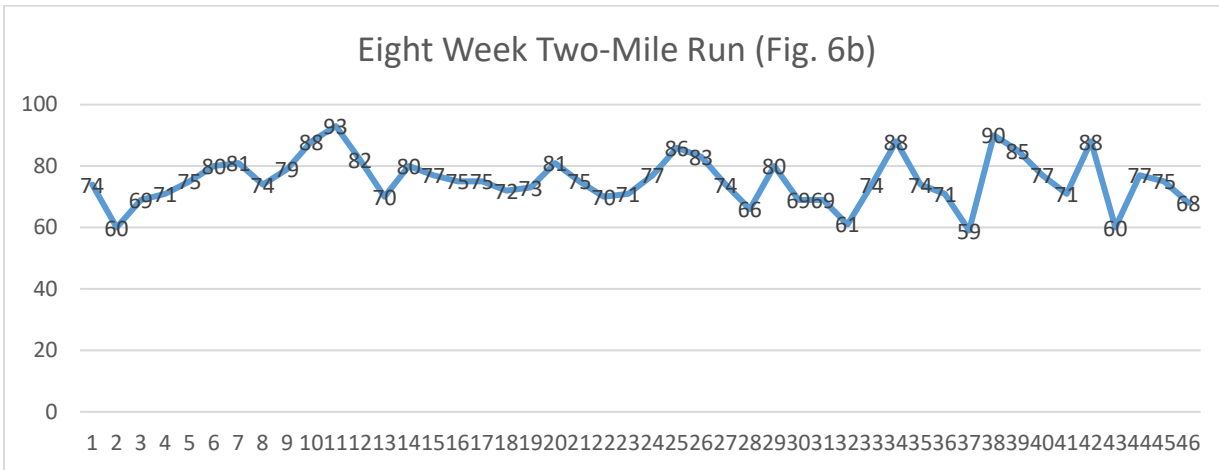
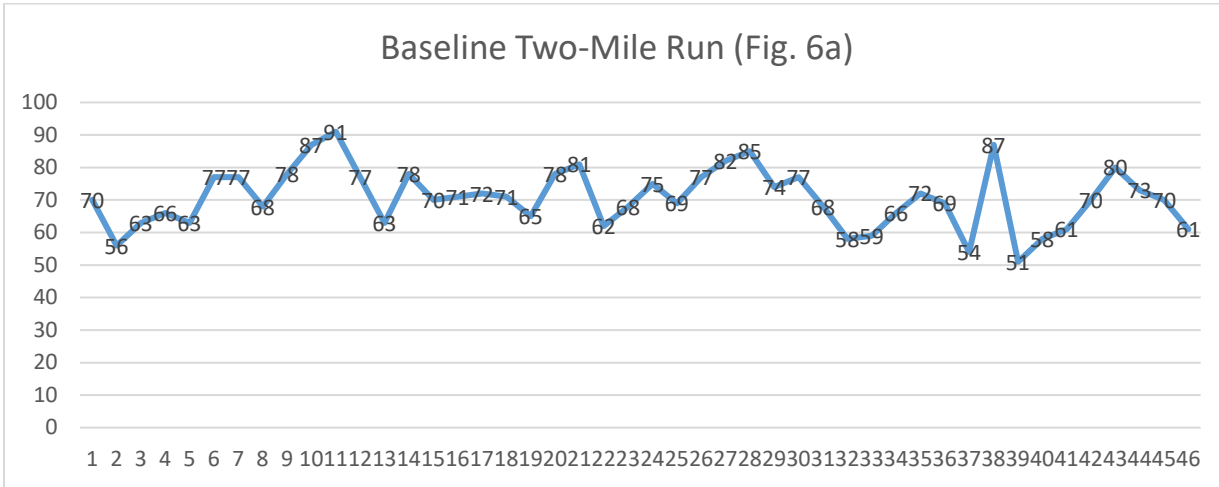
The Hand Release Push-Up event was somewhat familiar to all the Soldiers, we had 17 Soldiers that failed to achieve 70 percent, and no Soldier maxing it. The mean was 75.1, the median 74.5 and the lowest achieved score was 61. Still by the Army minimum standards, everyone passed this event. In the test two, the number fell to only four soldiers not able to attain 70 percent and two actually earned a 100 percent score. The mean grew to 80.4, the median to 80 however, the lowest achieved score stayed at 61 percent.





In the Leg-Tuck event, we had 13 Soldiers that could not attain 70 percent, however we also had four that could not even complete one correct repetition. Specifically, three of them were female Soldiers and the other was the one male Height and Weight Failure I had in the company. The mean was just over 70 percent, the median at 76 percent and absolutely zero earned 100 percent. This proved to be the toughest event for many.

Eight weeks later, nine Soldiers did not achieve 70 percent but three actually achieved 100 percent. The mean grew substantially to 78, the median to 80 but not everyone passed this event after the pilot. We were only down to one Soldier that could not complete one Leg-Tuck; specifically this was the one over-weight Soldier in the Company who was making great progress, he just could not get this exercise down. All three females, passed with one achieving 70 percent.



As we predicted from our own ACFT, my Commander and I saw a decline in scores for the Two-Mile Run. This was expected and we already knew what we had to do for training. With the Two-Mile Run event, we had 20 Soldiers that came in under the 70 percent minimum, and zero achieving 100 percent. Much of them complained of “wobbly” legs and tight hamstrings from the Deadlift event; and a couple even throw-up along the way trying. This event proved to be tough for the 46 Soldiers tested with a low mean of just over 70 percent, a median of 70 percent and low score of 53 percent.

After the completion of the pilot, the Soldiers now only had nine that fell under the 70 percent mark, and a few that came close to maxing the 12:45 standard. The mean increased to 75, the

median increase as well to 75 and the lowest score achieved was 59 percent; barely failing by seconds but this was after five events. For record, the Soldier did pass his APFT with 71 percent.

Since I displayed my personal scores in the beginning, I felt it was only fair to include my specific scores on test two to demonstrate the effectiveness and belief I have in the program. For the Deadlift, I went from 94 percent to 100 percent; in the Power Throw I went from 87 to 96 percent; the HRP increased from 83 to 91 percent; the SDC was my biggest improvement from 78 percent to 100 percent; the Leg Tuck went from 84 to 90 percent; and my Two Mile Run increased from 87 to 88 percent. So from a 513 overall score to a 565 out of a possible 600.

## Final Thoughts

46 highly motivated Soldiers, with no training on the ACFT and a 270 company APFT average debarked on a crusade with their Command Team, only 9 were able to achieve a 70 percent minimum in all six events. Fast forward eight weeks, 26 of them could now take the ACFT and earn at least a 70 percent in all six events. This took us from 19 percent, to 56 percent; a 37 percent increase in combat capability in just eight weeks with absolutely zero injuries sustained. Injuries do not have to be a byproduct of combat training; they should be viewed instead as one of the greatest consequences of failure to plan, and prepare the field for success. The lessons learned with our endeavor was that the AFCT is an outstanding physical event, everyone walked away from it feeling as though they accomplished a great workout. It is feasible in the sense of Soldiers training and testing on major installations with the proper turf, equipment and trainers however, I am unconvinced of the feasibility when looking at Reserve, National Guard and Recruiting elements not co-located near a major installation. The three event APFT is simplistic and can be conducted in any environment with zero equipment; one thing we must realize is that the APFT is simply a basic requirement for Soldiers to get their foot in the door, not a test of combat capability. I honestly feel as though the ACFT came about because on a slideshow, it is hard to judge combat capability based off three events that only tests 30 percent of combat effectiveness. The issue with this is, that assumes that the Team Leader and Platoon Sergeant were only doing three events for everyday Physical Training; when we should be trusting and verifying training on the ground, not via PowerPoint. The one size fits all, or one camouflage to blend in everywhere doesn't work, we have learned that from the Army Combat Uniform; where is the trust of the Team Leaders and Platoon Sergeants to train their Soldiers effectively based on their METL and Collective Task List? With that being said, I did enjoy the AFCT, my Soldiers enjoyed it, and I look forward to my continued train-up.

WEEKS 1, 3, 5, 7							
MONDAY (COMPANY)							
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION	
WARM-UP	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	600	COMPANY FORMATION AT BARRACKS	
TRAINING	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
	COMPANY RUN	1	4 MILES	N/A			
TUESDAY (SECTION)							
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION	
WARM-UP	AIR SQUATS	5	5	BW	600	HANGAR 5	
	BOX JUMPS 24"		5	BW			
	POWER THROW		2	15 LBS			
	25M SHUTTLE SPRINT		1	BW			
TRAINING	STANDING POWER THROW <i>PARTNER UP/ THROW TO EACHOTHER</i>	8	1	15 LBS			
	STANDING POWER THROW <i>PARTNER UP/ THROW TO EACHOTHER</i>	8	1	20 LBS			
	100M SLED DRAG	3	1	180 LBS			
	100M LATERAL SHUFFLE	3	1	BW			
	100M KB CARRY	3	1	50 LBS			
	100M SHUTTLE SRPINT	3	1	BW			
	RUN 1 MILE <i>REST 8 MINUTES</i>	1	1	BW			
	RUN 1 MILE	1	1	BW			
	WEDNESDAY (SECTION)						
		EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION
WARM-UP	DEADLIFTS (HEX BAR)	5	10	40% ACFT	600	BUCKNER	
	HR PUSH-UPS		10	BW			
	25M SHUTTLE SPRINT		1	BW			
	SIT-UPS		10	BW			
TRAINING	DEADLIFTS (8 TOTAL SETS)	1	3	65% ACFT			
		1	3	75% ACFT			
		1	3	85% ACFT			
		4	3	95% ACFT			
	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
THURSDAY (SECTION)							
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION	
SGT's TIME	BATTLE DRILLS (AB6)				345	COMPANY	
FRIDAY (SECTION)							
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION	
WARM-UP	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	600	COMPANY FORMATION AT BARRACKS	
TRAINING	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW			
	SECTION CHOICE/ TEAM BUILDING						

WEEKS 2, 4, 6, 8									
MONDAY (SECTION)									
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION			
WARM-UP	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	600	COMPANY FORMATION AT BARRACKS			
TRAINING	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
	PLATOON CHOICE/ MOBILITY TRAINING								
TUESDAY (SECTION)									
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION			
WARM-UP	DEADLIFTS (HEX BAR)	5	10	40% ACFT	600	BUCKNER			
	HR PUSH-UPS		10	BW					
	25M SHUTTLE SPRINT		1	BW					
	SIT-UPS		10	BW					
TRAINING	DEADLIFTS (8 TOTAL SETS)	1	3	65% ACFT					
		1	3	75% ACFT					
		1	3	85% ACFT					
		4	3	95% ACFT					
	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
WEDNESDAY (SECTION)									
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION			
WARM-UP	AIR SQUATS	5	5	BW	600	HANGAR 5			
	BOX JUMPS 24"		5	BW					
	POWER THROW		2	15 LBS					
	25M SHUTTLE SPRINT		1	BW					
TRAINING	STANDING POWER THROW <i>PARTNER UP/ THROW TO EACHOTHER</i>	8	1	15 LBS					
	STANDING POWER THROW <i>PARTNER UP/ THROW TO EACHOTHER</i>	8	1	20 LBS					
	150M SHUTTLE SPRINT <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	1	BW					
	BOOM RUN AT INTERVAL PACE <i>REST 4 MINUTES BETWEEN ROUNDS</i>	4	1	BW					
	THURSDAY (SECTION)								
		EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS			WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION
WARM-UP	MMD 2	1	1	N/A	600	TBD			
TRAINING	NON-TACTICAL RUCK	N/A	N/A	35 LBS					
FRIDAY (COMPANY)									
	EXERCISE	ROUNDS	REPS	WEIGHT	TIME	LOCATION			
WARM-UP	MMD 1	1	1	N/A	600	COMPANY FORMATION AT BARRACKS			
TRAINING	HAND RELEASE PUSH-UPS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
	LEG TUCKS <i>EVERY 60 SECONDS</i>	6	30% ACFT	BW					
	AGR RUN	1	3-5 MILES	N/A					
	A = 14:00 OR LESS								
B = 14:01 - 15:59									
C = 16:00 - 17:30 D = 17:31+									

## References

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