

ARMY TEAMS UP WITH OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER TO SAVE LIVES

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – April 27, 1944 was an extremely tense and highly stressful time for many Soldiers. Orders had come through that an exercise, named Operation Tiger, was to take place to prepare for a counter offensive that would later be widely know as D-Day.

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The morning of April 28, Operation Tiger was underway. Everything was going as scheduled until German E-boats on patrol spotted the convoy of eight tank landing ships (LST's) carrying vehicles and combat engineers. The Germans attacked the unsuspecting transports resulting in over 600 casualties. Many service men drowned in the cold sea waters. Soldiers not acclimated to being at sea panicked and put on their life belts incorrectly. In some cases the panicked Soldiers jumped into the water and the weight of the packs flipped them onto their backs, pushing their heads underwater and drowning them. Operation Tiger would bring about the realization that water survival training was of extreme importance in the field. The relevance to learn such training was now more important than ever.

The need for this training still proves to be vital for Soldiers during the present wartime. Although the climate of Iraq is mostly dessert, there are portions of the country that can incur heavy flooding from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and since the start of the war, a number of American Soldiers have drowned in the canals that run through Baghdad.

According to CPT Erich Atkins, the 1st Space Battalion S-4, "We lost three Soldiers to drowning when I was in Baghdad with the 3rd ACR, and it was because they couldn't get their equipment off in time."

These tragedies made Atkins realize the importance of water survival training for Soldiers, especially the ones in his battalion. As luck would have it, Atkins ran into an old friend from high school, Jeanine DeSalvatore, who just happened to be the chief of aquatics at the Olympic Training Center here. After some reminiscing on old times, DeSalvatore and Atkins came up with



MEMBERS OF THE 1ST SPACE BATTALION CONDUCT WATER SURVIVAL TRAINING AT THE OLYMPIC TRAINING CENTER. PHOTOS BY MICHAEL KAHL

the idea of the battalion conducting water survival training at the Olympic Training Center. The original plan was for members of the Olympic swim team to be there for the training, but due to schedule conflicts they were unable to attend. Atkins proposed the training to his battalion commander, LTC Tom James and CSM James Ross, and was given the go ahead to conduct the training.

"The main objective for Lieutenant Colonel James was to build esprit de corps," said Atkins. "He wanted us to get Soldiers in the water, to get them into a situation that they're not in normally, and to have some fun learning. It was not supposed to be if you don't complete this you fail. He does want us to get up to a level where we have some proficiency, but for now this was the first step in building a relationship with the Olympic Training Center and also having our Soldiers realize swimming is important as well as just a fun thing to do."

The training, which was conducted on Nov. 30, consisted of a 50 meter swim with and without uniform, survival swimming, and remedial swimming; however, swimming in general was new to a few individuals who had never

BUILDING ESPRIT DE CORPS



been in the water.

“The one stipulation we did have was you will get into the water,” added Atkins.

Everyone had to get in the water, some with flotation devices, and at least hold onto the side of the pool. As the non-swimmers got more comfortable toward the end, some were out trying to do some water treading and what they renamed the survival float.

“It is no longer called the dead man’s float. That didn’t really go over very well, so now it is the survival float,” Atkins said with a laugh

The S.A.F.E. principle, a method to counter the tendency to panic in the water, was taught to the Soldiers during the training. This reminds a Soldier to use Slow easy movements, Apply natural buoyancy, have Full lung inflation and be Extremely relaxed. Each step remembered assists the Soldier and increases the chance for survival in a dangerous situation.

Other portions of the training taught the Soldiers how to remove their MOLLE vest once they hit the water. This training highlighted the importance of hitting the water in a survival mode. “It was a lot easier this time because there were no plates in the vests, but generally speaking, the weight of a vest with plates is about 35 pounds, so if you don’t get it off, you’re going to tire quickly and go under,” said Atkins.

The Soldiers also had to create a flotation device out of the pants of their Army Combat Uniform. This was accomplished by removing the bottoms, tying them together, putting them around their neck and filling them with air bubbles.

After the training was finished, those interested competed to see who could swim the farthest underwater. According to Atkins, “it happened to be Staff Sergeant Tidd who is a former Marine, so that was kind of funny. He was like, ‘we didn’t do too much swimming in the Marines,’ but it just happened to work out that he was a Marine and he ended up swimming the furthest and got a four-day pass and a sergeants major coin.”

“The overall training went well so we’re planning another one for the springtime, and this time we’re going to step it up a

little bit with more equipment and events,” added Atkins. “We also identified a few people we want to send to lifeguard school, so this was actually an added benefit.”

Although the Olympic swimmers could not be there for this event, they have expressed interest in participating in future training. “We can get them some Army uniforms and we can do the survival swim test with them, that way they can see exactly what we’re doing and then maybe they can race somebody and win by a lot,” Atkins said laughingly.

“Seriously, this is something we are trying to work and this is a great initial step to establishing a good relationship between the Army and the Olympic Training Center, two groups that represent America all over the world.”

