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THE EFFECTS OF THE MERIT REWARD SYSTEM ON MORALE  
IN BASIC COMBAT TRAINING

HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

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Consulting Report

THE EFFECTS OF THE MERIT REWARD SYSTEM  
ON MORALE IN BASIC COMBAT TRAINING

by

Eugene H. Drucker

October 1970



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HumRRO Division No. 2  
Fort Knox, Kentucky  
HUMAN RESOURCES RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

## PREFACE

This report is a summary of a test of the effects of the Merit Reward System on morale in Basic Combat Training. A successful feasibility test of the System was conducted at Fort Ord. CONARC then directed that evaluations of the System be conducted at all Army Training Centers except Fort Bragg.

This report is a result of Technical Advisory Service provided by HumRRO Division No. 2 during the evaluation of the System at Fort Knox. During the evaluation, trainees earned points for successful performance of required duties. These points were exchangeable for certain specified privileges, and were therefore assumed to serve as incentives.

The Director of HumRRO Division No. 2 is Dr. Donald F. Haggard. Military support is provided by the US Army Armor Human Research Unit. The Military Chief of the Unit is LTC Joseph A. DeAngelis.

## ABSTRACT

The Multiple Affect Adjective Check List, a measure of morale, was administered to trainees in two Basic Combat Training companies--once before training and at one-week intervals during training. The men in one company were trained using the Merit Reward System as a source of incentives, while the men in the other company were trained using the Army's normal incentive system. A comparison of the scores obtained from the two companies suggests that the Merit Reward System may prevent morale deterioration in Basic Combat Training.

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THE EFFECTS OF THE MERIT REWARD SYSTEM ON MORALE  
IN BASIC COMBAT TRAINING

## INTRODUCTION

In August 1969, the Training Management and Evaluation Committee was established at Fort Ord by the Commanding General, US Army Training Center, Infantry and Fort Ord, to recommend ways of improving performance and reducing training costs. The Training Management and Evaluation Committee consisted of 17 study groups. One group was the Study Group on Trainee Motivation and Morale, whose objectives were to improve both the morale of the trainees and their attitudes toward the Army, and to improve performance.

A major recommendation made by the Study Group on Trainee Motivation and Morale was the adoption of a system of positive incentives or rewards as the major sources of motivation in basic training in place of harassment.<sup>1</sup> The Study Group observed that the present training system fails to reward trainees for good performance, and that this failure causes a loss of motivation and a decrease in morale. The Study Group indicated that trainees expect to be rewarded for good performance because they have been so rewarded previously. When the trainees discover that harassment and abuse are used as incentives instead of rewards, morale and motivation suffer.

To prevent these losses in motivation and morale, the Study Group recommended that rewards be used as incentives, and that harassment and abuse be eliminated. In particular, they recommended the adoption of a system of rewards based on psychological principles--the Merit Reward System. The basis for the system is the empirical finding that actions followed by rewards will occur with increasing frequency, while those not followed by rewards will occur with decreasing frequency. Thus, when trainees are rewarded for meritorious performance, such performance is likely to occur more frequently. When trainees are not rewarded for meritorious performance, such performance is likely to occur less frequently.

The Merit Reward System is a system of issuing merits to trainees on the basis of their performance. These merits are recorded on a card by means of a special punch, and can be accumulated and later exchanged for various rewards. Because they lead to rewards, the merits themselves take on reward value. The issuing of merits for meritorious performance would be expected to cause an increase in the frequency with which such performance occurs.

Before the adoption of the System, it is important that it be tested. For this reason, a test of the Merit Reward System has been ordered.<sup>2</sup> Companies of men in different training centers were trained

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<sup>1</sup>Letter, AMNOR-SUR, Hq US Army Hospital, Specialized Treatment Facility, Fort Ord, Cal. 93941, 27 Oct 1969, subject, "Action Report, Study Group P3, Trainee Motivation and Morale," with Annexes A - H.

<sup>2</sup>Letter, ATIT-AT, Hq CONARC, 11 June 1970, to Commanding Generals, CONUSA, subject, "Test of Merit Reward System in Basic Combat Training."

using the Merit Reward System, and their morale and performance were compared to those of companies not so trained.

This report is a summary of the evaluation conducted at Fort Knox. It is concerned specifically with the effects of the Merit Reward System on the morale of trainees. It was expected that the morale in a company trained using the Merit Reward System would be greater than morale in a company using the regular incentive system.

#### METHOD

To determine the effects of the Merit Reward System on morale during basic training, a test of morale was administered weekly to the men in two different companies. The Merit Reward System was used in training one company (the experimental company). The traditional incentives were used in training the other company (the control company). The men in the two companies took the test once during their fill week and once each week for the duration of basic training. They took the test nine times, the first two on Saturday mornings, the next six on Friday afternoons, and the last on a Thursday morning. Although all the men in each of the two companies were supposed to take the test each week, the actual number varied from week to week for various reasons. The number of men present in the experimental company varied from 194 to 227, while the number in the control company varied from 143 to 218. Table 1 lists the dates of the test administrations, and the number of men present on each date.

The test used to measure morale was the Zuckerman-Lubin Multiple Affect Adjective Check List.<sup>3</sup> The checklist contains 132 adjectives

Table 1

Dates of Morale Test Administration and Number of Trainees Present

Week of BCT	Date	Number of Men Present	
		Experimental Company	Control Company
Fill	11 Jul 70	227	218
1	18 Jul 70	220	208
2	24 Jul 70	210	204
3	31 Jul 70	212	197
4	7 Aug 70	210	199
5	14 Aug 70	207	199
6	21 Aug 70	194	190
7	28 Aug 70	208	201
8	3 Sep 70	204	143

<sup>3</sup>This test may be obtained from the Educational and Industrial Testing Service, San Diego, Cal. 92107.

describing the psychological feelings that occur during emotion. The trainees were asked to indicate which of these 132 emotions they had experienced during the previous week of basic training. While the checklist contains items for three different categories of affect (anxiety, depression, and hostility), the tests were scored by combining the three scales into a single 88-item scale designated as morale. A trainee who described himself by checking adjectives indicating positive affect (e.g., cheerful, secure, free, safe, amiable) and not checking adjectives indicating negative affect (e.g., afraid, tense, blue, tormented, sad, cruel) was assumed to have high morale. A trainee who described himself by checking adjectives indicating negative affect and not checking adjectives indicating positive affect was assumed to have low morale.<sup>4</sup>

The test was scored by assigning one point for each negative adjective that was checked, and one point for each positive adjective that was not checked. Thus, a high score on the test indicated that a trainee had low morale and a low score indicated that he had high morale. Since only 88 of the 132 adjectives were scored, the range of possible scores was from 0 to 88.<sup>4</sup>

To help insure that the trainees responded truthfully, the tests were administered anonymously. In addition, they were administered by either a civilian psychologist or an enlisted man dressed in civilian clothes.

During the final week of basic training, a 22-item questionnaire was administered to the trainees in the experimental company in addition to the checklist. These items were designed to determine whether or not the Merit Reward System was being conducted properly and if the men understood its operation. The Appendix is the 22-item questionnaire.

## RESULTS

The mean scores for the experimental and control companies are presented in Table 2. During the fill week and during all eight weeks of basic training, morale was higher in the experimental company than in the control company. During the fill week, there was a difference of only 2.24 points between the means of the two companies. However, this difference increased to 10.77 by the third week of basic training. A slight decrease occurred during the fourth and fifth weeks; then the difference between the means for the two companies increased again, reaching its peak, 13.69, during the seventh week.

Morale in the control company deteriorated during the first three weeks of basic training. Although the company initially had a mean

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<sup>4</sup>All aspects of the testing and scoring procedures summarized above were established during a Fort Ord conference of the Army training personnel involved in the testing program.

Table 2

Mean Multiple Affect Adjective Check List Scores\*  
for Trainees in the Experimental and Control Companies

Week	Experimental Company	Control Company	Difference Between the Two Means
Fill	42.95	45.19	2.24
1	42.45	47.74	5.29
2	43.63	52.11	8.48
3	44.38	55.15	10.77
4	43.47	53.07	9.60
5	43.82	51.75	7.93
6	42.75	52.85	10.10
7	41.17	54.86	13.69
8	39.20	47.33	8.13

\*Higher scores indicate lower morale.

score of 45.19 during the fill week, by the third week the score rose to 55.15, the highest score obtained by either company. The score fluctuated during the next four weeks, showing a recovery effect during the last week of training.

Although morale in the experimental company also deteriorated during the first three weeks of basic training, the deterioration was slight compared to that in the control company. The mean score in the experimental company rose from 42.95 during fill week to 44.38 during the third week of training. Morale then improved slightly for the next four weeks, showing a slight recovery effect during the final week of training. The score of 39.20 obtained by the experimental company during the eighth week was the lowest score obtained by either company.

The median responses made on the 22-item questionnaire given to the experimental company are presented in Table 3. The medians indicate that the trainees agreed with the statements contained in each item except Item 3, although agreement was slight for Items 13, 19, and 22. The disagreement with the statement made in Item 3 indicates that the trainees said that the standards for assigning merits varied within the company. However, the trainees indicated in Item 10 that their own behavior determined how many merits they received, and in Item 12 that the rewards were made available as promised. They also indicated in Items 2 and 6 that they understood the operation of the Merit Reward System.

The three items in which there was only slight agreement (Items 13, 19, and 22) dealt with make-up periods, the Miscellaneous Merit-field, and the upper 35% promotion rule respectively. These responses indicate that more make-up periods were needed, that improvements could be made in using the Miscellaneous Merit-field, and that the upper 35% promotion rule should be followed more closely.

Table 3

## Median Responses on the 22 Items of the Questionnaire

Item	Median Response*	Item	Median Response*
1	5.43	12	6.29
2	6.17	13	4.28
3	3.89	14	5.58
4	5.91	15	5.27
5	6.06	16	5.05
6	6.17	17	6.34
7	6.19	18	5.48
8	5.16	19	4.91
9	6.17	20	5.03
10	6.43	21	5.73
11	5.81	22	4.34

\*See Appendix for Rating Scale.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present investigation suggest that the Merit Reward System successfully prevents morale deterioration during basic training. While there was a substantial deterioration in the morale of the control company during the first three weeks of basic training, there was only a slight deterioration in the experimental company. On the other hand, while the Merit Reward System may prevent morale from deteriorating during basic training, it does not appear to improve morale. According to the Study Group on Training Motivation and Morale, the average score obtained even during the full week of basic training is higher than the average score for the general population. This fact implies that morale among inductees is somewhat low. The Merit Reward System did not raise morale to as high a level as that of men not in the Army. However, it prevented it from getting even worse.

While these results suggest that the Merit Reward System successfully prevents morale deterioration during basic training, the results can be considered as being no more than suggestive. There are three reasons for this conclusion. First, the difference in morale between the two companies could have been caused by some factor or combination of factors other than the Merit Reward System itself. The men in the two companies had different officers and different NCO's. They lived in different barracks, and trained in different classrooms. Any of these differences or any other differences between the two companies could have caused the obtained difference in morale. For example, it is possible that there were personality differences between the NCO's in the two companies. Since no effort was made to control these other factors that could influence morale, there is no way to establish with certainty whether the difference in morale was due to the Merit Reward System or

to these other factors.

Secondly, the difference in morale could have been caused by an awareness in the experimental company of participation in a unique program. It should have been obvious to these trainees that they were the only men being trained at Fort Knox using the Merit Reward System. Regardless of the merits of the system itself, the fact that it was new and unique could have helped to improve morale.

Finally, the validity of the present investigation depends on the degree to which the requirements of the Merit Reward System were followed in the experimental company. While the responses to the questionnaire seemed to indicate that the system was being followed closely, there was one significant aspect of the system about which the trainees were not asked. This aspect concerns harassment and abuse, which the Merit Reward System is required to eliminate from basic training. However, there was no way of determining from the data the extent to which harassment was actually eliminated. If harassment was not eliminated, then the Merit Reward System may be more effective than the data indicate. It may be possible, for example, to improve morale rather than to simply maintain it. On the other hand, if harassment was eliminated, then the level of morale obtained in the experimental company may be as high as can be obtained when the Merit Reward System is employed.

APPENDIX

MERIT REWARD SYSTEM EVALUATION

Your Unit \_\_\_\_\_ Your Platoon Number \_\_\_\_\_

You are requested to rate the efficiency with which the Merit Reward System was conducted in your company. It is not necessary for you to identify yourself by name on this form. However, we do ask you to do an accurate and conscientious job in evaluating the Merit Reward System as it was conducted in your company.

Attached you will find a list of statements about the Merit Reward System. With each statement you may agree, disagree, or be undecided. If you agree with the statement, we ask you to indicate whether you agree strongly, moderately, or slightly; if you disagree with the statement, we ask you to indicate whether you disagree strongly, moderately, or slightly. Use the following scale of numerals in making your agree-disagree ratings:

- 1 = Disagree strongly
- 2 = Disagree moderately
- 3 = Disagree slightly
- 4 = Undecided (neither agree nor disagree)
- 5 = Agree slightly
- 6 = Agree moderately
- 7 = Agree strongly

Indicate your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements by encircling one numeral for each item. There are 22 statements in all. DO NOT OMIT ANY ITEMS.



	Disagree				Agree		
	Strongly	Moderately	Slightly	Undecided	Slightly	Moderately	Strongly
1. The Merit Reward System was operated in an honest, fair, just manner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Trainees understood what was required of them to earn more merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. The cadre followed common standards throughout the company in assigning merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Merit Cards were never taken from trainees for "mass punching" or punishment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. The Merit Log was accurate and was kept up-to-date.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. The cadre made it clear how the trainee had to improve to earn more merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Suspensions of cash-in were applied correctly (that is, for just cause).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Whenever there was a change in, or an addition to, the merit-earning schedule, the trainees were informed in advance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Trainees were permitted to spend their merits the way they wanted.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. It was the trainee's own behavior and performance that determined how many merits he received.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Merits were punched soon after they were earned.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Privileges did become available as promised.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	Disagree			Agree			
	Strongly	Moderately	Slightly	Undecided	Slightly	Moderately	Strongly
13. The company provided make-up periods whenever possible.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. The "rules" and "agreements" of the Merit-Reward System were observed by the cadre.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Trainees helped each other to earn more merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. "Cash-in" time on Saturdays was run in an efficient manner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. A total of 50 merits was, in fact, available for each of the first 7 weeks; 80 merits were, in fact, available for the 8th week.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. The Drill Sergeants were fair and conscientious in assigning merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. Good use was made of the Miscellaneous Merit-field each week.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. The cadre provided materials, equipment, and instruction to help the trainee earn more merits.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. Trainee leaders were fair and conscientious in assigning merits on the Week-end Trainee Leader Evaluation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. Trainees were selected for promotion according to the upper 35% rule.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7