



Sunday, Sep. 06, 2009

## Samurai Mind Training for Modern American Warriors

By Bonnie Rochman



Not long ago at Fort Bragg, N.C., the country's largest military base, seven soldiers sat in a semi-circle, lights dimmed, eyes closed, two fingertips lightly pressed beneath their belly buttons to activate their "core." Electronic music thumped as the soldiers tried to silence their thoughts, the key to Warrior Mind Training, a form of meditation slowly making inroads on military bases across the country. "This is mental push-ups," Sarah Ernst told the weekly class she leads for soldiers at Fort Bragg. "There's a certain burn. It's a workout."

Think military and you think macho, not meditation, but that's about to change now that the Army intends to train its 1.1 million soldiers in the art of mental toughness. The Defense Department hopes that giving soldiers tools to fend off mental stress will toughen its troops at war and at home. It's the first time mental combat is being mandated on a large scale, but a few thousand soldiers who have participated in a voluntary program called Warrior Mind Training have already gotten a taste of how strengthening the mind is way different — dare we say harder? — than pounding out the push-ups.

Warrior Mind Training is the brainchild of Ernst and two friends, who were teaching meditation and mind-training in California. In 2005, a Marine attended a class in San Diego and suggested expanding onto military bases. Ernst and her colleagues researched the military mindset, consulting with veterans who had practiced meditation on the battlefield and back home. She also delved into the science behind mind training to analyze how meditation tactics could help treat — and maybe even help prevent — post-traumatic stress disorder.

Rooted in the ancient Samurai code of self-discipline, Warrior Mind Training draws on the image of the mythic Japanese fighter, an elite swordsman who honed his battle skills along with his mental precision. The premise? Razor-sharp attention plus razor-sharp marksmanship equals fearsome warrior.

The Samurai image was selected after careful deliberation; it was certifiably anti-sissy. "We took a long time to decide how we were going to package this," says Ernst, who moved to North Carolina in 2006 and teaches classes at Fort Bragg as well as Camp Lejeune, a Marine base near the coast. "There are a lot of ways you could describe the benefits of doing mind training and meditation. Maybe from a civilian approach we would emphasize cultivating happiness or peace. But that's not generally what a young soldier is interested in. They want to become the best warrior they can be."

The benefits of Warrior Mind Training, students have told instructors, are impressive: better aim on the shooting range, higher test scores, enhanced ability to handle combat stress and slip back into life at home. No comprehensive studies have been done, though a poll of 25 participants showed 70% said they felt better able to handle stressful situations and 65% had improved self-control.

The results were intriguing enough that Warrior Mind Training has been selected to participate in a University of Pittsburgh study on sleep disruption and fatigue in service members that will kick off early next year.

For now, success is measured anecdotally.

On patrol in Iraq two years ago, John Way would notice his mind straying. "Maybe I should be watching some guy over there and instead I'm thinking, 'I'm hungry. Where's my next Twinkie?'"

With privacy at a premium, he'd often retreat to a Port-A-Potty to practice the focusing skills he'd learned from Ernst at Fort Bragg. "To have a way to shut all this off is invaluable," says Way.

The importance of the mind-body connection is being acknowledged at the highest levels of the military. The West Point-based Army Center for Enhanced Performance (ACEP), which draws on performance psychology to teach soldiers how to build confidence, set goals and channel their energy, has expanded to nine army bases in the past three years since the Army's chief-of-staff praised the program.

"The Army has always believed if we just train 'em harder, the mental toughness will come," says Lorene Petta, a psychologist at Fort Bragg who works for ACEP. "A lot of times with this population, because they're so rough and tough, they tend to say, 'This is too touchy-feely for me. No thanks.' But we talk about the importance of being a good mental warrior too."

Free to members of the military and their relatives, Warrior Mind Training classes are offered at 11 U.S. military installations and veterans centers across the country; an online option opened up this spring. At Naval Amphibious Base Coronado in California, for example, Warrior Mind instructors prep elite Navy SEALs candidates for Hell Week, when potential newbies are vetted in a 5 ½-day sleepless trial of physical and mental endurance.

Beefing up the brain for combat is one aspect of the training; another is decompression. If one day you're dodging snipers in Iraq and the next you're strolling the aisles at Wal-Mart, Warrior Mind Training techniques can ease the transition.

"It's kind of like a reset button," says Erick Burgos, a military paramedic who takes classes at Coronado. "It's a time-out for you to take a break from the chaos in your life."

If the Army's new mental-toughness initiative, set to kick off in October, is to be successful, it needs buy-in from the people it plans to train. It can be a tough sell. At Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, in N.C., Adam Credle, who teaches military, law enforcement and Coast Guard personnel how to drive boats equipped with machine guns really fast, has encouraged his students to try out the meditative techniques. So far, he's been rebuffed, though he continues to try to persuade them to give the discipline's central exercise a chance. The mental focusing technique is called deep listening and it sounds super-simple but — unless you're accustomed to meditation — it requires exquisite concentration.

To help develop this skill, Warrior Mind, relies upon music. The idea is to listen, really listen, to the wail of the guitar or the staccato tap of the drums instead of letting your mind wander. In athletics, this concept is called being in "the zone."

As with anything, practice makes perfect, which is reassuring for rookies — like me — who find it next to impossible to rein in their thoughts at first. During the course of one five-minute song, I thought repeatedly about whether I'd remembered to lock my car and turn my cell phone to vibrate. And, because I'm a reporter, I thought about what everyone else might be thinking about, which, if they were doing it right, should have been nothing at all.

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