

Sapper Leader Course

A New Rope to Climb

by CPT Michael J. Grove

The UH-1H banks hard to the right and accelerates down the final approach along the shoreline. As the butterflies begin to surface, the soldier receives the signal to unhook the safety belt and prepare to execute. The helicopter lurches as the speed decreases.

The soldier pushes the rucksack out and follows it to the water's surface. After recovering from the impact of the water, the lightfighter pulls his rucksack to the shore and prepares to move out on his combat mission. A scene from ranger school? No. It is the Sapper Leader Course for the members of the newly formed or newly forming light engineer battalions.

The helocasting operation just described is one of the many exciting and demanding blocks of training. The Sapper Leader Course was conceived to prepare members of the new light engineer battalions to better support their new light infantry divisions. The course is divided into four phases: the confidence phase, the engineering phase, the battle drill phase, and the situational training exercise phase.

Symbolic of the course was the 20-foot rope that hung in the barracks area. This obstacle was negotiated before breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It represented the difficulty of the course and became a symbol of the strength we would gain and the team building we would undergo. At the beginning of the course, little more than half of the students could negotiate the rope all the way to the top. Students failed for several reasons: lack of upper-body strength, improper technique, or fear of heights. As the course progressed, our class went farther and farther up the rope.

During the confidence phase, physical training was stressed as well as other confidence building skills

critical to light forces. During this phase the students learned and practiced rappelling, helocasting, helicopter rappelling, hand-to-hand combat, and RB-15 movement. The difficulty of the course was increased by the severe heat and humidity of July at Fort Leonard Wood, MO, the home of the Sapper Leader Course.

The confidence phase also provided training on both hand-to-hand and bayonet fighting. The way the cadre handled these blocks of instruction indicated the professionalism and innovation that made the course such a worthwhile experience. Instead of starting from the basics, they took off from our levels attained at the Rites of Passage Course conducted at Fort Ord, CA. The Sapper Leader Course cadre taught us kicks, punches, street fighting and other tricks picked up from collective experience in ranger battalions, special forces, and other units. The way they treated us and

Expedient poncho rafting trains soldiers for engineer missions in hostile environments. In the light infantry, engineers will take to war what they can carry on their backs (photo by Steve Gaynor).



The 28-day Sapper Leader Course stresses physical stamina, technical expertise, and troop leading skills under simulated combat conditions (photo by Steve Gaynor).

gave us more than the basics made us yell louder, throw harder, and feel more special—another foot up the rope.

Instruction on rappelling was both a great confidence builder and a valuable movement tool for light forces. Several classes were given on buddy rappelling, litter rappelling, and helicopter rappelling. It was the first time that many students had used these advanced techniques. One NCO insisted he could not do the buddy rappel, but the cadre refused to let him fail. With the entire class at the bottom of the cliff screaming encouragement, the instructors skillfully talked the student down the rope and then made him do it on his own to standard. He was obviously still terrified, but we as a unit were stronger because he had conquered his fears and learned an important technique in casualty evacuation.

One of the most exciting days was insertion training at the Lake of the Ozarks. In the morning the students participated in several helicopter rap-

pels, and in the afternoon each man performed at least four helocasts. For individuals who were not strong swimmers and afraid of heights, this was a double horror show. These soldiers getting ready to board the helicopters were portraits of fear; but after the first jump into the water, the war stories were flying hot and heavy and people were running back from the beach to jump again. The day ended with RB-15 training, and the class was ready for the engineering phase—another foot up the rope.

The engineering phase provided demolitions training that was extensive and extremely valuable. The instructors from the Sapper Leader Course had attended the special forces demolitions course and brought back much information. The two most worthwhile concepts were the cherry knot and the dual detonating assembly. The advantages of these techniques are that they significantly reduce the time it takes to set up a complete firing system and they enable a soldier to set up a firing system safely and quickly in complete darkness.

We used these techniques on a night mission where the patrol moved down a stream using poncho rafts. When the demolitions team reached the target, a bridge, all they had to do was place the

charges, attach them to a ring main by pulling the running end of the cherry knot, and attach the dual detonating assembly with a square knot. Safe, simple, and effective. Considering the importance of night operations to light forces, this knowledge is invaluable.

We also learned about several special-purpose charges: platter, satchel, soap dish, and dust initiator charges. We got hands-on experience with each.

Mountaineering was also given special attention. Expert instructors gave extensive rigging and climbing classes that will be extremely beneficial to the light engineer. Some of the NCOs who had problems with rappelling did extremely well climbing, and the soldier that had difficulty with the buddy rappel went right up the mountain. We also discovered that some mountaineering equipment can be adapted to other techniques that will help us and the division become more mobile.

Air assault operations were covered. We did extensive work with preparing and hooking up sling loads, aerial resupply, and helicopter insertions. Team building was becoming more evident as the two air assault corporals in the class shared their skills. The fact that the corporals volunteered their





Light engineers can respond rapidly to a wide variety of threats anywhere in the world. The light infantry is 100 percent air-transportable, is equipped to defeat tanks, and can sustain itself in rough terrain (photo by Steve Gaynor).

expertise was not earth-shaking, but the fact that everyone else was eager to listen showed the unifying effect that the course was having. The actual hooking of a sling load was a unique and valuable experience that provided still more war stories. Imagine what the pilot of the helicopter thought when one of the students wanted to cut the sling load and gave the pilot the patrolling hand and arm signal for danger area ahead.

We received extensive instruction on patrolling techniques during the course and incorporated them into all facets of training. Troop leading procedures were stressed as each hands-on portion of the training was conducted on a mission basis. The patrolling classes were given in a field setting by former members of the ranger battalions with emphasis on walk-throughs and practical exercises. Besides the patrolling techniques, the course provided an excellent preparation for light force operations because we moved almost always on foot. With this phase behind us, we were prepared for the next foot of the rope, the battle drill phase.

During the battle drill phase, the instructors concentrated on training to standards. We performed each of 16 tasks to a set of drill standards; if we didn't perform a task properly, we would do it again. The drills ranged from neutralizing a bunker to crossing a danger area. This phase was physically challenging as we found out on the first night when we got 40 minutes of sleep in the patrol base before stand to.

The drills accomplished several things. First, they established a standard way to perform 16 combat-essential tasks so the unit increases its combat power and its ability to work comfortably with different maneuver units. Another benefit of the drills was that they helped in team building, as each member of the patrol had to count on every other man to perform his job. You could feel the bonds of loyalty and respect being formed.

An example of this is how the soldiers came together for the one-rope bridge drill. Throughout the course, the strong swimmers had been looking out for the weak swimmers; this bond gave the weak swimmers the confidence to cross the river. Even one soldier rescued by the far shore lifeguard on an earlier operation was

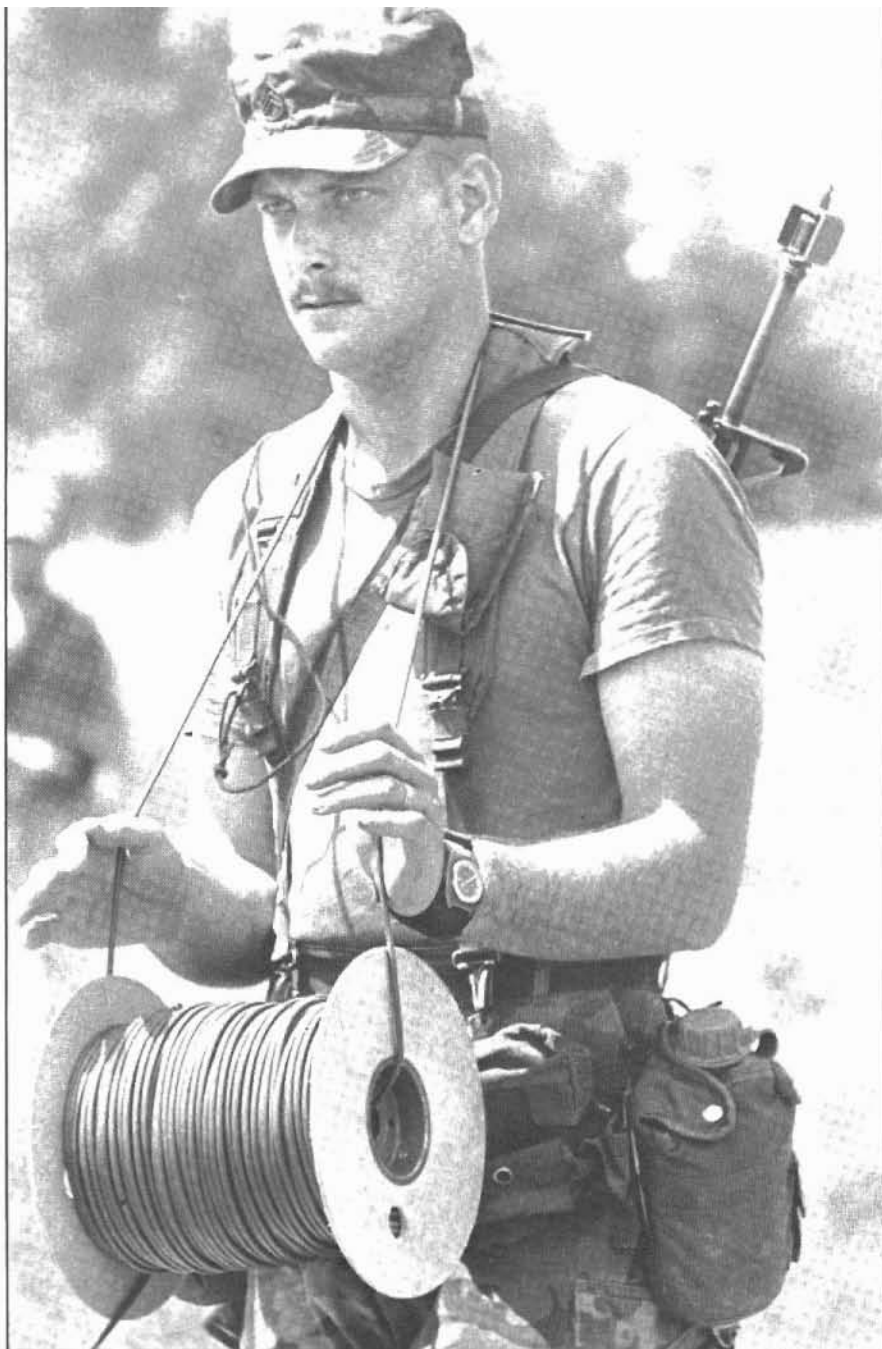
confident making the crossing because of his faith in himself and his fellow students. One more foot up the rope, and we were on to the STX phase.

According to COL Mike Malone, we took the *will* from the confidence phase, added the *skills* from the engineering phase, and combined them to *drill* during the battle drill phases. The final STX put everything together into a 72-hour exercise that served both as a review and a final exam. After three days of foot pounding, raiding supply points, and blowing abatis, we found the final truck movement was a joyous occasion. The class had reached the top of the rope and was very proud to be there. The minute we hit the barracks, the war stories came out from all corners, orders for Sapper Leader T-shirts went in, and we all felt a deep sense of accomplishment.

However trite it may sound, the course actually has something for everyone. The engineering phase had something new for almost everyone; and the patrolling instruction set the same standards for all, from the ranger-qualified to the brand new corporals. A perfect example of the team building encountered was the camaraderie formed with the noncombat engineers who went through the course. The members of the assault/barrier platoon, mostly heavy equipment operators, not only completed the course, but they performed all tasks in an outstanding manner. Although some had prior experience in 12B tasks, their main attributes were physical fitness and a desire to succeed.

The seeds of the Sapper Leader Course have taken root. Members of the assault/barrier platoon are teaching the HHC hand-to-hand combat. Several NCOs are teaching the infantry demolition techniques. Sapper Leader cadence rings out during company runs.

The Sapper Leader Course was Army training at its finest. The Army generated a special training requirement for light engineers and developed a program that gave worthwhile training to fulfill the requirement. For many of the NCOs, the course was the opportunity for a chain of command to refine small unit leadership techniques in a physically demanding environment. It is a challenge for engineers of



The Sapper Leader Course teaches the use of explosives, equipment, and other materials available to engineers operating on foot (photo by Steve Gaynor).

all backgrounds that should not be missed. The Army gave the light engineers a rope to climb; and the Sapper Leader Course gave them the strength, technical knowledge, and desire to get to the top. Sappers... lead the way!

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mander of C Company, 13th Engineer Battalion at Fort Ord, CA. He was the student OIC of the first certified class of the Sapper Leader Course at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. CPT Grove is a graduate of the U.S. Army airborne and ranger courses and has a degree in engineering from the U.S. Military Academy.

Units wishing to attend the Sapper Leader Course must submit requests through their appropriate MACOM to TRADOC for approval. For more information, the POC at Fort Leonard Wood is CPT Matthew Bogart, AV 581-3195. At Fort Belvoir, call CPT David Depastina or Donita McGeary, AV 354-2684.