

Self-Development Test

—do we need it?

By CPT Racheau D. Lipscomb, Jr.

"... **R**enewed emphasis on the NCO as the trainer of our soldiers and the inauguration of the SDT will help ensure that our quality soldiers develop into noncommissioned officers of unparalleled professionalism and that our NCOs sustain the level of performance that has made the Army of today the finest peacetime force this nation has ever fielded."

These words, spoken by former chief of Staff of the Army General Vuono, summarize the Army's expectations of the new NCO. They show the need for more versatile NCOs with the initiative to always self-improve. The Army would then need a new method of determining progression among its NCOs in three basic areas: leadership, training management, and job-related knowledge.

In his quote, General Vuono shows that he feels the Self-Development Test provides that needed method. Is the US Army's new SDT a practical and efficient means of measuring an NCO's master of leadership skills, training management, and MOS-related tasks? Does it provide a standard by which the US Army could control professional development of all SGTs through SFCs? Consider the following information.

The SDT's History

The SDT's roots reach further back in history than its conception in the late eighties. When the senior Army leadership decided in the early seventies that

it needed to improve the way it measured a soldier's level of job knowledge, it introduced the Skills Qualification Test (SQT). The SQT provided a standard objective measure for gauging a soldier's mastery of his job-related skills. It also provided a means of comparing soldiers of the same rank who were within a specific career area, and the SQT served its purpose well. However, advancing technology and a changing world altered the Army's mission. This new mission meant the Army needed a more versatile NCO who knew more than how to "just do his job." With that need came the requirement for ensuring this new NCO kept pace with the Army's expectations not only in job knowledge but also in training his subordinates and leadership.

The SDT Concept

Leadership, one of the Army's six imperatives, nearly tops the Army's list of priorities. Three pillars support the Army Leader Development System: the institutional training pillar, the operational assignments pillar, and the self-development pillar. The SDT falls under the self-development pillar. It consists of three sections: leadership, training and MOS knowledge. Of the 100 questions in the SDT, 20 questions cover leadership topics, written by the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; 20 questions cover training, developed by the US Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) at Fort Bliss, Texas; 60 questions cover MOS-

specific skills, written at proponent schools. The test requires an average of 2 hours to complete. Soldiers prepare for the leadership and training sections through study of FM 22-100, Military Leadership; FM 22-101, Leadership Counseling; FM 22-102, Soldier Team Development; and FM 25-101, Battle Focused Training. Because one primary purpose of the SDT is to encourage a versatility within the NCO Corps, questions in the MOS portion will test broad-based knowledge rather than duty-specific knowledge. It forces the NCO to keep current on all systems, and it measures the NCO's self-development program. NCOs must, therefore, study all soldier's manuals and applicable references listed in the SDT notice. TRADOC Regulation 351-2, scheduled for fielding in FY93, governs all areas of the SDT.

Both active duty and Reserve Component (RC) NCOs take the same versions of the SDT. However, active duty NCOs take the SDT annually while the RC NCOs take it once every two years. Active duty test windows remain open for three months while RC NCOs take it once every two years. Active duty test windows remain open for three months while RC windows remain open for an entire year under present guidance. Presently only the NCO receives results of his progress. However, in FY94 the NCO, his unit commander, and personnel management will receive copies of his progress. Also beginning in FY94, personnel management will use the SDT results within the Enlisted Personnel Management System (EPMS).

In FY89 the Sergeant Major of the Army proposed that the SDT have a "passing score," and in August 1990 the Chief of Staff of the Army approved an SDT-EPMS link, including this "passing score." This score had to provide an easily recognizable pass/fail status, but it should also allow a large majority of NCOs to "pass." This should provide a standard against

Initial Individual Soldier's Report (ISR)

TO: SGT DEAN RICHARDS
338 GEN HOSP 9400 PORTER ROAD
NIAGARA FALLS, NY 14304
SSN: 111-22-3333 TSO: 535
MOSC: 91H2 ORTHOPEDIC SP

SDT: 91H2093-00
TESTED: 28 Apr 93
SCORED: 16 May 93
UIC: WXXXXX

	# Correct/Total
LEADERSHIP	17/20
TRAINING	16/20
MOS KNOWLEDGE	42/54
Vital Signs	5/5
Emerg Med Treat	7/8
Traction	3/7
Plaster Casts	5/10
Body Casts	6/7
Surgical Proc	8/9
Plaster Splints	8/8

YOU WILL RECEIVE A FINAL ISR WITH YOUR OFFICIAL SDT SCORE AND PERCENTILE RANKING AFTER THE TEST PERIOD CLOSES.

THESE SDT RESULTS WILL NOT BE USED FOR PERSONNEL DECISIONS IN FY92 OR FY93.

Final Individual Soldier's Report (ISR)

TO: SGT DEAN RICHARDS
338 GEN HOSP 9400 PORTER ROAD
NIAGARA FALLS, NY 14304
SSN: 111-22-3333 TSO: 535
MOSC: 91H2 ORTHOPEDIC SP

SDT SCORE: 93*
PERCENTILE: 078*
SDT: 91H2093-00
TESTED: 28 Apr 93
SCORED: 16 May 93
UIC: WXXXXX

	# Correct/Total
LEADERSHIP	17/20
TRAINING	16/20
MOS KNOWLEDGE	42/54
Vital Signs	5/5
Emerg Med Treat	7/8
Traction	3/7
Plaster Casts	5/10
Body Casts	6/7
Surgical Proc	8/9
Plaster Splints	8/8

* YOUR SCORE OF **93** WAS AS GOOD OR AS BETTER THAN **78** % OF THE NCO'S IN YOUR MOS AND GRADE. YOUR SDT SCORE IS A WEIGHTED COMPOSITE.

* THESE SDT RESULTS WILL NOT BE USED FOR PERSONNEL DECISIONS IN FY92 OR FY93.

which the Army could rank reach NCO of a grade within his MOS, and subsequently provide a test group percentile cutoff.

One major difference between the SQT and the SDT concerns who takes responsibility for preparing the NCO to take the SDT. Responsibility for preparing a soldier to take the SQT

rested with the soldier's unit. Upon notice from HQDA, the unit provided time and training during the duty day for the soldier to study for the SQT. The SDT, in contrast, places the responsibility for preparation on the individual. He must take the initiative to ensure he uses the applicable references for study. Furthermore, he

should not wait for notification of the upcoming test window; he should continually maintain his knowledge through constant study and application of leadership, training, and skills specific to his MOS.

Feedback on an NCO's SDT progress comes in two forms: the Initial Individual Soldier's Report (ISR) and the Final ISR. The Initial ISR (left, top) comes approximately one month after the NCO completes the exam. The Final ISR (left, bottom) comes three to four months following the close of the test window. Notice that the only difference between the reports is that the final ISR has the final SDT score and ranks the NCO's score among those of other NCOs in his MOS at his rank.

Advantages

According to a survey conducted by the USASMA of 469 senior NCOs, the Army needs testing to evaluate NCO self-development. The survey further shows that those senior NCOs surveyed believed that the SDT score should be used as a prerequisite for the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES), and it helps in determining selection to higher positions. If the SDT fulfills the needs recognized by the senior Army leadership, then it obviously should be worth the effort of implementation.

The SDT not only intends to provide a measure of the NCO's leadership, training management, and MOS knowledge, it also gives an indication of maturity through showing the amount of initiative each NCO takes to ensure he thoroughly prepares himself for the SDT. Because the majority of responsibility now falls on his shoulders, the NCO's efforts clearly demonstrate his desire to excel. The SDT then provides two methods for gauging the NCO's self-development.

Because the SDT's score encompasses material covered in existing references (FM 22-100, soldier's manuals, etc.), it requires no extra cost for printing requirements. Also, the

SDT theoretically would not require additional personnel since those personnel now needed in administering the SQT would only shift their efforts toward working on the SDT. This shift would include both civilian and military personnel. Overall, the obvious substantial cost would be the actual creation and printing of the SDT questions (including man-hours), which the SQT also required to a certain extent.

Disadvantages

Early trends resulting from initial testing provide some indications of expected performance. Early testing covered representative NCOs from combat arms, combat support, combat service support, and the health services. Trends showed that an average of 92 percent of all NCOs tested scored 60 percent or higher with a mean of 73 percent questions answered correctly. Compare this to a 95 percent pass rate with a mean score of 80 percent in FY 91 on the SQT. However, since more than half of the population tested consisted of health services personnel, these results could not clearly predict future Army-wide performance on the SDT. These results also do not clearly conclude whether performance is a function of the soldier's background, or if the questions were markedly more difficult than those on the SQT.

Because the SDT only covers a selected portion of the Army population (SGT-SFC), it excludes a larger, and important, part of the Army enlisted population: privates to specialists and master sergeants to command sergeants major. Unless we modify the scope of personnel the SDT tests, there is no comparable method of measuring this excluded portion of the enlisted ranks.

Although the SDT intends to test an NCO's leadership ability, training management, and MOS knowledge, it has no hands-on portion to test actual performance in any of the areas. Because both leadership and training require feedback to inform the leader or trainer of his success, 40 multiple-choice questions cannot possibly substitute for daily situations NCOs face as leaders and trainers. The hands-on concept applies also in performance of MOS-related skills. Studies prove that the average person learns and maintains proficiency in most tasks through actual performance. Studies also show that although multiple-choice questions measure somewhat a person's knowledge and application of the knowledge within a certain subject area, they more accurately measure a person's ability to recall and recognize correct answers concerning that subject area.

Wrapping It All Up

Presently the Army marches forward with its implementation of the SDT. Proponents from both sides of the issue still debate, and in these times of a downsizing Army, the SDT may become one of the many casualties. We'll leave the issue of the SDT's survival to those most qualified to decide its fate: our senior Army leadership. Before ending, however, consider this: Every profession provides a means of ensuring its members constantly meet those standards which keep the members up to par. Could the SDT, with some modifications, provide the standard for the NCO Corps of the new Army? The officer Corps recently fielded its version of this standard: Military Qualification Skills (MQS) System. Could these systems be vehicles to enhance the professionalism of the future Army, or what are the alternatives? You decide.

At the time this article was written, CPT Racheau D. Lipscomb, Jr. was attending the Chemical Officer Advanced Course at the U.S. Army Chemical School. CPT Lipscomb graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1986 and was commissioned into the Chemical Corps. His past assignments have included battalion chemical officer, decontamination platoon leader, battalion S1, and aide-de-camp.