

the mma virus

by Kelly Crigger

a few good men

WARGAMES

A few good men are spreading the MMA virus through the Modern Army Combatives Program.

Every fight team has to live up to a name. But when you step into the ring representing the most formidable fighting force on the planet, the weight of over 1 million men and

women rests on your shoulders. The United States Army has a well-deserved reputation for delivering overwhelming combat power while constantly adapting to the evolving battlefield.

The next evolutionary step appears to be mixed martial arts.



AS THE GROWING FORCE OF MMA sweeps over sports fans like a contagion, the Army once again finds itself changing the way it fights to meet the demands of the future. The Global War on Terrorism, or GWOT as the troops call it, has changed the face of combat. Long-distance engagements have been replaced by door-kicking confrontations and vehicle ambushes in enclosed markets. In close situations, soldiers must be able to go toe-to-toe with a crazed jihadist raging through a Baghdad slum or a Taliban holed up in an abandoned school. To meet this new threat, Army Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker, a career Green Beret, established the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) and mandated that every soldier be trained in modern hand-to-hand combat, and each Army installation develop a competition MMA team. General Schoomaker's decision could create a quantum leap in the development of MMA.

In close situations, soldiers must be able to go toe-to-toe with a crazed jihadist raging through a Baghdad slum or a Taliban holed up in an abandoned school.

At sweltering Fort Benning, Ga., there are several instantly recognizable symbols to any soldier: The famous "Follow Me" statue, the Ranger tab emblazoned on broad shoulders, and the 250-foot airborne towers that are the official skyline of the post, and which embody a lifestyle few are cut out for, the U.S. Infantry. An abandoned warehouse tucked away behind the Provost Marshall's office could be the last place you'd expect to find the newest jewel in the Army's crown. Here, on a sea of black and yellow mats, Sergeant First Class Matt Larsen barks out commands at his students and instructors. Larsen is a former Ranger who has trained with Royce Gracie and Jacare Cavalcante and extensively studied Muay Thai, judo and boxing. He has also conducted more than 350 interviews with soldiers involved in real hand-to-hand engagements. "We're like a virus," says Larsen. "In the next 15 years, as many as 5 million people will be influenced by Army combatives, which means more Army-trained fighters

on the outside rising through the ranks of the UFC, King of the Cage or wherever." Larsen's math isn't far off. With 80,000 new recruits a year, the active force turns over 16% annually, or 96% every six years. If the Army abides by General Schoomaker's directive, over 2 million active, guard and reserve soldiers will be trained in the Army's combatives system by 2010. Many of those soldiers will leave the Army when their time is up and return to Middle America wanting to continue their training. Their dissatisfaction with traditional strip-mall dojos will lead them to seek out MMA training camps, or even start their own. Helping spread the Army virus are the MACP's instructors. "Slowly we're showing everyone that it's a safe, realistic way to train for combat," says the head NCO, SFC Dave Barron. "Boxing is much more dangerous than MMA, but you still see boxing smokers around the Army because local commanders think it's safe. So we have to show them that taking a guy down and choking him out is better than staying on the feet and pummeling him." Staff Sergeants Iako Kalili and Nate Ford fight regularly on the local circuits, and SFC Damion Stelly has been tearing up promotions in the South. Stelly is currently in Afghanistan with the 75th Ranger Regiment but plans to get his jihad on in the ring upon his return. All in all, they have a 10-2 record—not bad for a bunch of GIs.

THE MACP IS DEVELOPING MMA in a very simple way: education of the masses. Anyone who's watched a sporting event for the first time only to lose interest due to confusing rules knows how frustrating it can be; institutions such as the International Rugby League have toiled with this problem for decades. So if the Army program educates soldiers on the full guard versus the butterfly guard and the difference between a rear naked choke and a side choke, then MMA will have a slew of new fans simply because they understand the game. "We're the sport's best friend," Larsen contends. Millions of soldiers will know how to watch a fight, which can easily be converted into thousands of new pay-per-view subscribers and money in the pockets of promoters everywhere. While the UFC is experiencing record profits for its live gates and pay-per-view broadcasts, money may be the one thing that slows the progression of the Army MMA program. The roughly \$400 billion price tag of the GWOT has stretched the Army thin, which equates to cutbacks of nonessential programs. In June 2006 the bottom fell out, when the Army's budget for recreation and leisure sports was cut to nothing. "It's a devastating blow to Army athletics," says the Army's Chief of Sports, Fitness and Aquatics Karen White. "MMA was being looked at for possible program expansion by my office, but now I foresee the Army Sports Program downsizing



call to duty

When you're one of a very small population of men who have the honor of a BJJ black belt from Royce Gracie, there are a lot of other things you can do to earn money than train soldiers. But that's what civilian Greg Thompson does with Special Forces soldiers at Fort Bragg, N.C. "I do it for the gratification," says Thompson. "A lot of civilians I teach think they can just do the move once or twice and they'll automatically know it, but soldiers come in here ready to learn and hustle to get the job done. You only have to tell them something once and they will do it until they are asked to stop." Thompson also works with several Army units to solve tricky problems soldiers face in combat. "I could just teach in the MMA world and make good money, but I like trying to figure out where jiu-jitsu meets Close-Quarters Combat. In an enclosed space, like a small room with enemy combatants, you have to know how to use jiu-jitsu to transition to your weapon. If a sol-

dier is on the ground with an insurgent on top of him, he has to figure out quickly how to get to his pistol and blow the guy's head off." So how does he think the MACP will affect the larger MMA world? "The MACP will mean the death of the average dojo," says Thompson. "We're educating soldiers on how to fight and what to look for when they finally go back home and choose a training gym. I think we'll help end the bogus '10th-degree-black-belt-in-eight-animal-fu-you' guys. My guys certainly don't want to learn katas after training in MMA." Although Thompson is on the cutting-edge of combat, he is still excited by the old-fashioned thrill of competition that will come with the MACP. "If it wasn't for the war and losing my guys to long deployments, I'd field an awesome team, but even with that I think we'll kick some butt this time around." For more information, check out "H2H Combat: Modern Army Combative" (Invisible Cities Press, 2006) by Greg Thompson and Kid Peligro.



The MACP grappling rules are unique to the Army. While they are based on BJJ, more points are given for takedowns that result in advantageous positions.



KELLY GRIGGER. PREVIOUS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

KELLY GRIGGER



Top and above: The semifinals of the All-Army Tournament are contested under the old Pancrase rules, with no closed-fist strikes.

Right: SFC Matt Larsen (second from right) is the father of the Modern Army Combatives Program.

long before it ever expands.”

War demands sacrifices, and without being able to accept sponsorship money or donations due to the Department of Defense Joint Ethics Regulation, the Army MMA team has to rely on what they call OPM, or “other people’s money,” says Larsen. “It’s become the core of the program. We get support from local commanders who send their best troops down here and pay for it out of their own budget because they want to win.”

Fortunately, commanding officers are willing to dig deep into their budgets for the young MMA program. Their motivation is the highly anticipated annual Army-wide tournament that attracts the best fighters from around the force. “The competition motivates local commanders to participate fully in MMA, because they all want the honor of having the best fighter in the Army,” says Larsen. “Lieutenants, captains and colonels are all motivating their guys to train. So the grassroots support is there and building momentum every day.” Fort Bragg, N.C., team coach Greg Thompson agrees. “All the generals here are pumped up for it.”

THE DEFINING FACTOR OF ARMY MMA training is also the core value that will ensure the development of

highly skilled fighters. In other words, the Army doesn’t have to cave in to fan pressure. They’re under no ultimatum to entertain anyone, and therefore retain the freedom to simply build great fighters. “Every rule change in the UFC,” says Larsen, “was instituted to either please fans or increase safety standards. We’re already as safe as we can be and don’t have to entertain anyone, so we’re able to concentrate on building a better fighter.”

“We’re the sport’s best friend,” Larsen contends. Millions of soldiers will know how to watch a fight, which can easily be converted into thousands of new pay-per-view subscribers...everywhere.

Only the most well-rounded fighter can claim the title of All-Army Champion. The tournament’s preliminary fights are grappling contests with rules that are derived yet modified from Brazilian Jiu-jitsu, while the semifinals are Pancrase-style with open-hand strikes. The finals are full-contact MMA.

So when will the Army take on the United States Marine Corps? Will we see a U.S. team face a foreign military with an established MMA program? Probably not for a few years. Although the USMC has a robust combatives program, it has not yet embraced the sport aspect of MMA. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Shusko, the director of the Marine Corps’ Martial Arts Center for Excellence at Quantico, Va. explains: “Eventually, we’ll field an All-Marine MMA team and take on the Army, but that day is probably five years or so down the road. Our focus now is fighting the GWOT and training Marines to kill or be killed.”



hand-to-hand history

The Army of the 20th Century has always taught some form of combatives as a supplement to armed combat. But soldiers don't have the luxury of going to a martial arts class four nights a week. Techniques must consist of one or two movements, be quick to assimilate into a human being's natural response to aggressive encounters, and be easily recalled under stress. Here's a recent history of U.S. Army combatives:

1852 Captain (and later General of the Army) George B. McClellan publishes the first book on combatives: *Manual of Bayonet Exercise*.

1910 Captain John J. O'Brien, a former Shanghai cop, teaches jiu-jitsu during the WWI era.

1913 The Army updates *Manual of Bayonet Exercise*, but few units use it.

1920 Captain Allen Smith, a pioneer of judo instruction, writes the first hand-to-hand manual at Camp Benning, Ga., where he teaches his techniques.

1940s Elite units, who had a greater likelihood of close-quarters fighting, train heavily in various forms of hand-to-hand. W.E. Fairbairn, co-designer of the Fairbairn-Sykes Fighting Knife, trains the Rangers and the OSS (precursor to the CIA). A knife remains a part of the Special Forces crest today.

1942 *Field Manual 21-150a* is published. This manual sought to develop a system of self-defense devoid of the sport aspects of judo and jiu-jitsu. This same year, Colonel Rex Applegate publishes his own manual of close combat.

1950s-1960s Although individual experts teach isolated programs of Southeast Asian martial arts, the old ways of *FM 21-150a* remain popular.

1970s The Cold War and fear of nuclear attack relegate hand-to-hand to small pockets of dedicated students, mostly among the Special Forces.

1980s Basic combatives are instituted in infantry training, consisting of mostly strangleholds and throws.

1992 *Field Manual 21-150* is updated, but critics feel it misses the mark on realistic hand-to-hand engagements.

1995 The Gracie's teach BJJ to the Rangers. Wrestling Hall-of-Famer J. Robinson also instructs the Rangers at this time.

1996 LTC Stan McChrystal appoints a committee headed by SFC Matt Larsen to determine an effective hand-to-hand system for modern combat.

2002 The Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP) is born, headed by SFC Larsen, who authors *Field Manual 3-25.150* using MMA as its basis.

2005 The U.S. Army Combatives School officially opens at Ft. Benning.

Establishing interservice and intermilitary contests as annual events may be a necessary step for MMA to achieve the Holy Grail of competition, the Olympic Games. Currently, there are four combat sports at the Olympic level that have U.S. military representation: judo, tae kwon do, boxing and wrestling. If MMA is ever to join them, its best chance is to gain popularity and momentum among international militaries. Tae kwon do tournaments have long been a part of the Korean military, which paved the way for its acceptance by the International Olympic Committee.

THE ARMY MMA PROGRAM could become the single largest entity for MMA education, propagation and recruitment. "The Ultimate Fighter, Season 3" finalist and former Army sergeant Josh Haynes agrees. "I would have given anything for a realistic combatives program when I was in the Army," he says. "I only got trained on hand-to-hand that was just enough to get your ass kicked in a bar."

Indeed, a program to cultivate and develop fighters from soldiers would have been a significant event in the life of another former Army sergeant, Randy Couture. With such a vast pool to draw talent from, there's sure to be a future champion among the ranks today. If the MACP continues to spread the MMA virus among the troops, the day when a champion such as Matt Hughes or Fedor Emelianenko is armbarred by a man with "ARMY" emblazoned across his shorts may be closer than you think. 🥊



By the Modern Army Combatives Program rules, the finals of the All-Army Tournament are full MMA fights. Only the most well-rounded of fighters will make it that far.

