



NEWS RELEASE

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BADGE TAKES TOLL

By Christie Vanover

Small and unassuming, it's amazing that a scrap of olive drab cloth can motivate a soldier to endure weeks of hard work, frustration and even failure.

It's not really the cloth they're after, they want to be associated with the idea it represents. The Expert Field Medical Badge, inspires soldiers to trudge through chest-deep mud trenches, scale walls and fight to stay awake studying in hopes they can some day wear it on their chests.

This week, 152 soldiers confronted a barrage of challenges head-on as they fought for their "symbol of excellence" and the right to wear the EFMB. They know those who have already earned it wear it with a great deal of pride.

"When someone other than a medic sees the badge, they know that soldier has some get up and go about him," said 1st Sgt. Maurice Riley, base operations noncommissioned officer in charge. "The EFMB is the true sign of a professional healthcare provider. It separates the men from the boys and the women from the girls."

Soldiers from 14 units at Fort Riley; Fort Sam Houston, Texas; Red Stone Arsenal, Ala.; Topeka and North Carolina, endured seven lane tests, an exhaustive and difficult 100-question written test and a final 12-mile foot march.

"EFMB training overall is probably the most valuable training a medic can get," said SFC Michael Mears, EFMB noncommissioned officer in charge.

Mears earned his badge in Germany in 1987 and said he believes his EFMB training helped him throughout his career.

Those skills and his desire to help even at personal risk were put to the test when Mears deployed to Desert Storm in 1991 as a combat medic. Due to the medical assistance he provided during that deployment, he also earned the Combat Medical Badge in 1991.

"My training was critical to treating soldiers in Saudi (Arabia). I wouldn't have been as good without formal training first," he said.

Before the start of the ground war, Mears found himself treating a U.S. soldier who had severe shrapnel wounds.

“Two soldiers were walking and one tripped a bomb. One soldier was fatally injured,” he said. “I was sent to the scene for medical assistance.”

Mears and a doctor assessed the soldier. “We put together two IVs because the soldier had lost a lot of blood. I tried to keep him in good spirits,” Mears said.

When the helicopter arrived, the minefield was marked and the soldiers carried the litter through the minefield to safety.

“Looking back I saw that I could have tripped a bomblet myself because when I arrived, I grabbed my aid bag and ran to the soldier,” he said.

“In a hospital environment, you have notice because ambulances radio ahead. You have time to prepare the room and you have a clean environment. On the battlefield, it’s total chaos. There’s no saying what you’ll find when you get there,” Mears said.

Riley agreed that EFMB training develops well-rounded soldiers.

“Everything we do here will be used at some point in time during these soldiers’ careers,” he said.

“In the hospital you know what’s coming, but you’ve got to be on the money there too,” he said. “However, you can’t just know hospital you have to know the field. You’ve got to be able to read a map and go pick up patients.”

Many soldiers outside the medical field were able to witness the challenges medics faced. SSgt. Anthony Velasco, 331st Signal Company, helped out during EFMB as a platoon leader.

“This gives me a new perception of the medical side of the house. They do more than provide care, they provide security for their patients,” he said.

Velasco was especially impressed with the litter obstacle course.

“It was awesome to watch their reactions. You have to be on your toes. There’s a lot of detail involved,” he said.

Sgt. Gary Ream, NCOIC of the litter obstacle course, earned his EFMB in 1991. He used his litter carrying skills while deployed to Bosnia.

“We’re trying to instill in these candidates, the fact that you never know where your casualties are going to be,” he said. “My job is to teach proper carry techniques so soldiers can negotiate any obstacle they encounter.”

While the candidates are only required to carry a 130-150 pound patient during training, Ream knows from first-hand experience, soldiers are capable of carrying more.

“If you get their confidence up, they can do it with anybody,” he said.

“You have to be an all around soldier and you have to want it to begin with. It’s probably the best thing I’ve ever done other than saving lives,” he said.

By Thursday evening, 28 soldiers were left to proceed to the 12-mile foot march this morning. After running a grueling course in three hours or less with approximately 30 pounds in their rucksacks on their backs, 26 earned this distinguished badge. Fort Riley’s pass rate was 17 percent.