

Ditch the CFT

And replace it with a better test that already exists

by 1stLt James W. England

The Combat Fitness Test (CFT) was created “to assess a Marine’s physical capacity in a broad spectrum of ‘combat related tasks’ and measure ‘the functional elements of combat fitness’ through execution of a series of events that represent every Marine’s combat experience.”¹ The CFT does not do this and needs to be replaced.

Overall, the intent of the CFT is good because we absolutely need a way to measure our fitness for combat. Combat-related tasks vary greatly by MOS, and the CFT does not test any of them. Every Marine may be a rifleman, but not every Marine is an assaultman, machine gunner, mortarman, artilleryman, tanker, tracker, or combat engineer. Each combat arms MOS has a different set of physical tasks associated with it, and while there is obviously some overlap along with that variation, none of them include sprinting 880 yards in boots and utes with no rifle or kit.

Physiologically, the CFT tests largely the same things as the PFT. An 880m run is a primarily aerobic event, just like the three-mile PFT run.² Lifting a 30lb ammo can 100-plus times is a test of upper body endurance, not upper body strength and power, and is anything but realistic. The “maneuver under fire” portion is a good test of agility over ground, but that kind of Medal of Honor run with no weapon or kit is not realistic for any combat arms MOS or specific to those Marines’ jobs. Given that the Marine Corps recently had to revise the original CFT scoring chart to make it harder, the test clearly is not sufficiently evaluating those events it does include. I have never seen an 0811 drop his kit, leave his weapon, and sprint 880m down the gunline for any reason or toss 100 cans of 7.62 into the

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back of a 7-ton. I have seen plenty of 155 rounds loaded, unloaded from trucks, and moved between guns—being good at one does not guarantee being good at the other. We need a test that guarantees job-specific physical performance.

This disparity between what the CFT tests and what combat arms jobs require physically was partially addressed by the introduction of MOS-specific physical standards (MSPS) in 2016. The MSPS, with events broken down by MOS, evaluates would-be combat arms Marines across a set of tasks that they can and will be expected

to do in the fleet or in combat. Realistic tasks like scaling a wall while wearing PPE, a 100m sprint with breaching equipment, lifting a tank towbar, or moving and loading 103lb 155mm dummy rounds while wearing a flak and kevlar are all tested depending on the Marine’s MOS. The very existence of the MSPS is proof positive that the Marine Corps acknowledges the issue on some level that the CFT is not an accurate test of actual, specific combat fitness. If passing the CFT—even in its newly toughened form—guaranteed success on the MSPS, there would be no need for trainees to take the MSPS or for it to even exist at all.

Currently, the MSPS is only conducted in MOS schoolhouses and is not applied stringently enough. At Fort Sill, while conducting the artillery version of the MSPS, my classmates who failed portions of the test were only required to re-take those portions—not



The CFT may not be the best measure of fitness for MOS-specific physical tasks. (Photo by SSgt Ezekiel Kitandwe.)

the entire test. How many combat arms Marines currently in the fleet would fail the MSPS if they took it today? The events tested in the MSPS are just as important after a year in the fleet as they are at MOS school and need to be treated like it; nobody cares about a 300 CFT if the Marine physically cannot do their job in the field or in combat.

Administering the MSPS in the schoolhouse is a step in the right direction, but we fall short by not testing these tasks annually. The MOS Specific Physical Standards tests the Marine Corps has already developed and implemented are the ideal replacement for the CFT. Each combat arms MOS already has their own specific version of the MSPS that is tailor made to evaluate the “combat tasks” the Marine Corps expects a Marine in that MOS to perform. Taking the MSPS every year in lieu of the CFT will ensure that we are maintaining specific combat fitness within our MOS beyond the school-

house and throughout our time in the Corps.

For Marines outside of the combat arms, the CFT can still be replaced with the more general events the MSPS includes. While there is no realistic need

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for a logistician to run artillery rounds, they could still be expected to drag a casualty, lift a MK-19 for convoy operations, or lift a casualty from a vehicle. These more general events could replace any portion of the CFT for non-combat arms Marines and be a more effective test of their fitness for combat.

Despite the good intentions behind its introduction, the CFT is inaccurate and insufficient for evaluating the physical fitness of Marines in a combat arms MOS. Replacing the CFT with an annual MSPS will enhance the lethality of our Corps by ensuring Marines are combat fit not only when they graduate MOS school but throughout their service.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCO 6100.13*, (Washington, DC: January 2020).
2. Matt R. Spencer and Paul B. Gastin, “Energy System Contribution During 200- To 1500-M Running in Highly Trained Athletes,” *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, January 2001).



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