

The Army's Training Program for Illiterate, Non-English Speaking, and Educationally Retarded Men

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Background of the Problem in the Army

Early in the vast mobilization program undertaken by the government, it was recognized that a manpower problem would exist in the country. It was anticipated that there would be difficulty in building the armed forces to the desired size and yet leave for important home front services those men needed in industry, shipbuilding, agriculture, and general defense work. To help meet the manpower problem, the Army found it necessary to accept for military service many illiterate, non-English speaking, and educationally retarded men. These and others, who because of mental limitation or some other handicap, were not prepared to pursue the regular course of basic instruction in the Army, were assigned initially to Special Training Units. The mission of the Special Training Unit is to provide the preliminary training for these men through which they will attain the required academic and military proficiency which is essential to proceed with regular basic training.

For security reasons, it is not practicable to indicate either the precise number of illiterate, non-English speaking, and educationally retarded men who are in the Special Training Units at the present time, or the number who, in the last two to three years,

have gone on to regular training after completion of the preliminary training program in Special Training Units. Some idea of the extent of the literacy problem, however, can be gained from the following statements: Data reveal that when the criterion of literacy is fourth grade reading ability, approximately 13.5 per cent of the adult male population, over 25 years of age, might be considered illiterate. The true percentage of functional illiteracy is undoubtedly higher, since it is safe to assume on the basis of experience that many of those who report more than a fourth grade education, are actually not able to function at that level.

The Program of Instruction in Special Training Units

The program of training in Special Training Units is organized to cover an 8- to 12-week period. Systematic instruction is provided in academic and military subjects. Eighteen hours a week are devoted to reading, language, and arithmetic, and the remainder to military subjects. The program in special training is a highly flexible one, so that it can be adapted to the particular needs of the men. As soon as trainees have reached the equivalent of a fourth grade ability in academic subjects and when, in the opinion of their academic and military instructors, they are

competent to go on with regular basic training, they are reassigned for such training to a replacement or unit training center. The majority of men attain the required proficiency in eight weeks of special training. Trainees who do not reach the necessary proficiency in academic and military subjects in twelve weeks are discharged from the Army. An individual may be separated from the service at any time before the end of the 12-week period if sufficient evidence exists to demonstrate that he will not reach an acceptable level in the stipulated period of training.

It is readily apparent that the time a man spends in a Special Training Unit serves both as a period of preparation and exploration. On the one hand, serious efforts are made to equip him for the pursuit of regular basic training and Army life generally. On the other hand, he is studied carefully to ascertain whether he has the capacity to maintain himself and perform some useful job in the Army.

The Need for Academic Skills in the Army

A soldier needs to have certain academic skills in order to serve effectively in the Army. He should possess sufficient reading ability to be able to comprehend and assimilate written directives contained in orders, bulletins, regulations, and other Army publications. His use and understanding of oral language should be such that he can follow orders and transmit to others, in turn, such directives as are entrusted to him. At times, it may be necessary for him to leave a written message for members of his squad. To effect a completely satisfactory adjustment, a soldier needs proficiency not only in language skills but also in the simple fundamental processes of arithmetic. He needs to be able to understand how to budget and spend his pay, the extent of the allotments he is having deducted for family, life insurance, and bonds, and how to

manage his financial problems in the post exchange, post theatre, service club, and so forth.

A soldier who does not possess such skills experiences direct difficulty in getting on and he suffers also a number of indirect consequences. He is unable to communicate with his family; and he feels inadequate when compared with other soldiers in situations requiring language. Generally, the morale of such men is low; they frequently display indifference to the training program. Sometimes, as a compensation, they show unusually aggressive behavior.

Through its instructional program, Special Training Units not only prepare men for more direct and effective discharge of their duties but help to make them more cheerful and better adjusted soldiers.

Some Principles of Instruction Applied in Special Training Units

Considering the urgency of the general military situation at the time America entered the struggle as an active belligerent and the extent of the mobilization program undertaken by the Army, it is surprising that effort should have been made to introduce a well-rounded system of instruction in Special Training Units. Yet, judged by usual criteria which may be set, study of the Army's program of instruction for Special Training Units reveals a broad constructive approach which incorporates many desirable educational features. Some characteristics of the program follow:

1. *Subject matter of instruction.* The material which has been prepared for the classroom is highly functional in character. It deals with episodes and experiences which are an outgrowth of the man's life in camp and the Army. It presents the issues and progress of the war in language the men can compre-

hend. Thus, it represents a fulfillment of needs and interests. The content of all publications developed for Special Training Units is analyzed by statistical and other means to make certain that it is properly graded in level of difficulty. Hence, there is demonstrated assurance that the material fits the range of the capacities of the group for whom it is devised. Finally, the material in the various fields, i.e. reading, writing, and arithmetic, is correlated so that instructors can easily integrate their instruction in one area with that of another. The use of functional, well graded, and integrated materials elicits interest and sustains effort throughout the course.

2. *Classification of Students.* The men assigned to Special Training Units are studied individually before they are assigned to an instructional group. These studies are generally made by classification officers or personnel consultants who have had training in psychology. At times they are made by assistants to the instructional staff who are considered competent. Information pertaining to the soldiers' past school attendance, occupational history, avocational interests, and intellectual abilities is available on their soldier's qualification card which is completed by the time they reach the Special Training Unit. At the Special Training Unit, they receive a literacy test, a unit test in reading, and an examination in arithmetic. These tests are intended for placement purposes, and provide the basis for determining to which of four possible groups the man will be sent. The levels of these groups are roughly equivalent to the first four years of elementary school instruction.

Analysis of the performance of the men on these examinations provides a diagnostic inventory of their difficulties and needs. It is then possible to vary their program within

the group, when necessary. Since classes are very small, their average size being between 15 and 18, it is possible to individualize instruction to a high degree.

Four unit reading tests, each built around one of the four different sections of the *Army Reader*, which is the basic text used in Special Training Units, can be administered to help decide when a man is ready to go on to a new section. A majority of the Special Training Units keep progress charts for each man in training. These cumulative records reveal the status of the man at any particular time and show the rate of his progress.

Classification of students in Special Training Units is a dynamic process in which every effort is made to place a student correctly, analyze his needs, record his accomplishments and advance him in accord with his ability to assimilate newer material.

3. *Methods of Instruction.* A particular method of instruction is not prescribed for use in Special Training Units. For example, in the field of reading, teachers are provided with instructional guides which utilize several different approaches. They are then permitted to select those methods which will best meet their needs. The material furnished is highly diversified and is richly illustrated. Many film strips and other visual aids have been prepared to facilitate learning of difficult subject matter.

In the classroom, material is introduced in a meaningful way and is presented so that it will evoke as many sensory responses as possible. Through this multiple sensory teaching, learning is facilitated and retention insured. Opportunities are provided for the student to use the skills he has acquired in a variety of situations.

To illustrate the eclectic approach which characterizes instruction in Special Training

Units, a brief description will be given of some of the methods employed in teaching reading:

a. A basic stock of sight words is taught first. This is presented through the medium of a film strip, in which 46 basic words are associated with their pictorial representations. In the filmstrip, *The Story of Private Pete*, which is projected on a screen, opportunity exists for necessary repetition of the words and for their use in simple sentences and paragraphs.

b. The acquisition of a basic stock of sight words is facilitated in other ways. In the *Illustrated Instructor's Reference* which accompanies *The Story of Private Pete*, the instructor is advised of other methods which can be employed to teach the meaning, appearance, and composition of the words. All efforts are directed toward building up rich associated meanings for each word, and toward developing the ability to recognize words at sight from their general configurations. A simple recognition test, built around these basic words, is provided in the *Illustrated Instructor's Reference*. Through the administration of this test, the teacher is able to select those men who are ready to proceed with the *Army Reader* and those who require additional help in acquiring a stock of sight words.

c. Section 1 of the *Army Reader* presents a day spent with Private Pete and provides for the acquisition of skills needed in the reading of words, phrases, and short sentences. In Section 2, Private Pete writes a letter describing his experiences in military training. From this material, the student acquires greater skill in discriminating between words and develops increased ability to comprehend phrases and related sentences. In the third section of the *Army Reader*, Private Pete gets

paid, and from situations related thereto the student learns to deal with language pertaining to computation, budgets, pay, and so forth. In the fourth section, the student develops higher reading skills by examining incidents in the life of Private Pete Smith of the Army of the United States. This section contains complete reading episodes which treat the backgrounds and issues of the war. Throughout the *Army Reader* there are different types of exercises for the student to complete. Thus, direct application is given for the student's developing skills and opportunity is provided for checking his progress.

d. A *Guide to Instructional Materials* has been prepared for the teacher and contains, among other items, recommended procedures for teaching the material in the *Army Reader*. Instructors are encouraged to analyze difficult words into their constituent parts and to find common elements in various words. Exercises in analysis and synthesis are recommended only for those words whose meaning is already known to the students.

e. Through various types of materials, such as a weekly paper and a monthly magazine, students are taught to read for details, to follow directions, and to acquire the central thought of a passage. Instructional aids are now being prepared to orient students in the technical vocabulary and concepts of geography and military subjects to help them in their comprehension of such material.

f. A recent publication, *Teaching Devices for Special Training Units*, describes many aids and games which instructors can employ in the teaching of reading, language, spelling, handwriting, and arithmetic. Diagnostic and remedial procedures and methods for each of the subjects are presented.

As can be seen, the approach to reading in Special Training Units represents an in-

corporation of the best features of different methods which have been recommended over a period of years by competent educators.

4. *Method of Dealing with Individuals Who Experience Difficulty in Learning.* Students who experience great difficulty in learning are carefully studied. The teacher consults with the personnel consultant. The personnel consultant, through the use of appropriate tests and interviews, evaluates the factors in the situation. After the study is completed, a decision is reached with regard to the disposition of the individual. If it is felt that he can be helped to make progress to an acceptable level, an appropriate plan of therapy is adopted and carried out. If it is decided that the man is inept and uneducable, arrangements are then made for a Board of Officers to meet to consider the feasibility of his discharge from the Army. The approach to the individual is positive and constructive.

5. *Teacher Selection, Preparation and Supervision.* Individuals chosen as teachers are carefully selected. A considerable number of the soldiers serving as instructors in Special Training Units have had college training and previous teaching experience. Many of the teachers have the Master's degree and some have received the Doctor of Philosophy degree. Instructors are selected not only on the basis of their academic qualifications but also in consideration of their interest in and ability to handle slow-learning individuals.

Once selected, teachers in many units are prepared for their work through local training conferences. The local training conferences are modeled after the two national training conferences which were conducted by the Development and Special Training Section, Training Branch, A.G.O. Representatives from each of the major units attend the national conferences and then returned to their own units to initiate improved

teacher training. Many Special Training Units have periodic staff meetings in which new teaching aids and materials are considered.

A program of teacher supervision is in operation. Teachers are observed regularly by the Educational Director of many units. Periodically, a supervisory "inspection" is made by representatives of the Development and Special Training Section under the supervision of the Training Branch, A.G.O. and the Director of Military Training, A.S.F. Recommendations for the improvement of a unit are contained in the report of the "inspecting" officer.

Materials

1. *For the Teacher.* Materials available for the teacher's use include:

a. *The Guide to Instructional Materials.* This contains a description of placement and evaluation procedures for Special Training Units. There are suggestions in it on the use of *Army Reader* and *Army Arithmetic*. Brief recommendations on the teaching of spelling and handwriting are also included.

b. *Illustrated Instructor's References.* For each film strip produced by the Development and Special Training Section, a teacher's guide is provided. It describes the purposes and use of the material in the film strip. Specific recommendations for each frame of the strip are found in the reference.

c. *Monthly Guide to Our War.* This monthly publication contains suggestions on the use of material which appears in *Our War*, a monthly publication. This guide also serves as a medium for keeping the men in the field aware of new developments.

d. *Teaching Devices for Special Training Units.* This publication, alluded to previously, is in process.

2. *For the Student.* Materials for the student include:

a. *Army Reader*. The contents of this text have already been described briefly.

b. *Army Arithmetic*. This text teaches half of the fundamental combinations in the different processes.

c. *Newsmap Supplement*. This publication is issued weekly. It is a simplified version of the material which appears in *Newsmap*, produced by the Special Service Division; it contains news items on the progress of the war on different fronts.

d. *Our War*. This is an eight-page monthly publication which contains stories, feature articles on newsworthy items, a map game, a two-page cartoon strip, and other interesting material.

e. *Your Job in the Army*. This publication describes a number of Army jobs for which Special Training Unit men can qualify.

f. *Film Strips*. Five recent film strips deal with the following subjects: *A Soldier's General Orders*, *Military Courtesy and Discipline*,

How to Wear Your Uniform, *The Story of Private Pete*, and *Introduction to Numbers*.

No attempt is made here to describe the various tests and accompanying manuals which are used in Special Training Units, since these are restricted by the War Department.

Success of the Special Training Unit Program

The program of special training has proved highly successful in the Army. Most of the men in these units have acquired sufficient skill in language, arithmetic, and preliminary military training to be able to proceed with regular training. Thus, the Army is doing its share in helping to meet the manpower problem. However, it is doing more. It is demonstrating the possibilities inherent in a sound program of adult education. Application of a comparable program in post-war America should help to remove illiteracy as a national problem.