

# Beefing up basic

By Erik Holmes

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**B**asic military training just got longer, and the man in charge says the next crop of recruits will be the toughest and most combat-ready the Air Force has ever produced.

These airmen will be the first of a new breed, said Col. Edward Westermann, commander of the 737th Training Group at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

They will be the first class to go through the newly revamped BMT course. They start training Nov. 3, and when they graduate 8½ weeks later, they will have defended their base against air assaults and surprise chemical attacks, navigated a trail littered with roadside bombs, and experienced the austerity of a deployed environment — all without leaving the confines of Lackland.

BMT is two weeks longer than the previous six-week course. The bulk of that extra training time will focus on expeditionary skills — handling, firing and caring for an M16, self-aid and buddy care, chemical warfare, and base defense. Before sewing on their first stripes, airmen will know what it's like to lug around a heavy rifle while wearing chemical gear, sleep on cots in tents and survive on Meals, Ready-to-Eat — experiences recruits got only a taste of before.

"This is the biggest transformation in BMT in the last 50 years," Westermann said. "It's going to be mentally challenging, psychologically challenging and physically challenging."

## Surviving the BEAST

The structure of the new BMT is meant to mirror an Air Expeditionary Force cycle, with pre-deployment, deployment and post-

## To prepare airmen for combat, tougher BMT for new recruits

deployment phases.

The pre-deployment phase is the longest, consuming the first five weeks of the course.

What has not changed is the introductory week zero and week one, in which airmen in-process, get assigned gear, meet their training instructors, get assigned to training flights and learn basic military skills such as military drill and ceremony, customs and courtesies, and dormitory setup.

The next three weeks — about a week more than before — will be spent primarily developing expeditionary skills and reinforcing the military skills training of the first week.

Week two covers weapons handling and maintenance, integrated base defense, tactical movement, firing positions and force protection. Week three focuses on self-aid and buddy care. In week

four, trainees learn to counter threats such as terrorism, biological and chemical weapons and security breaches and go through the BMT obstacle course. Week five, the final week of the pre-deployment phase, introduces trainees to

the code of conduct, combat arms training and maintenance, fighting with a pugil stick, basic leadership and mental preparation for combat.

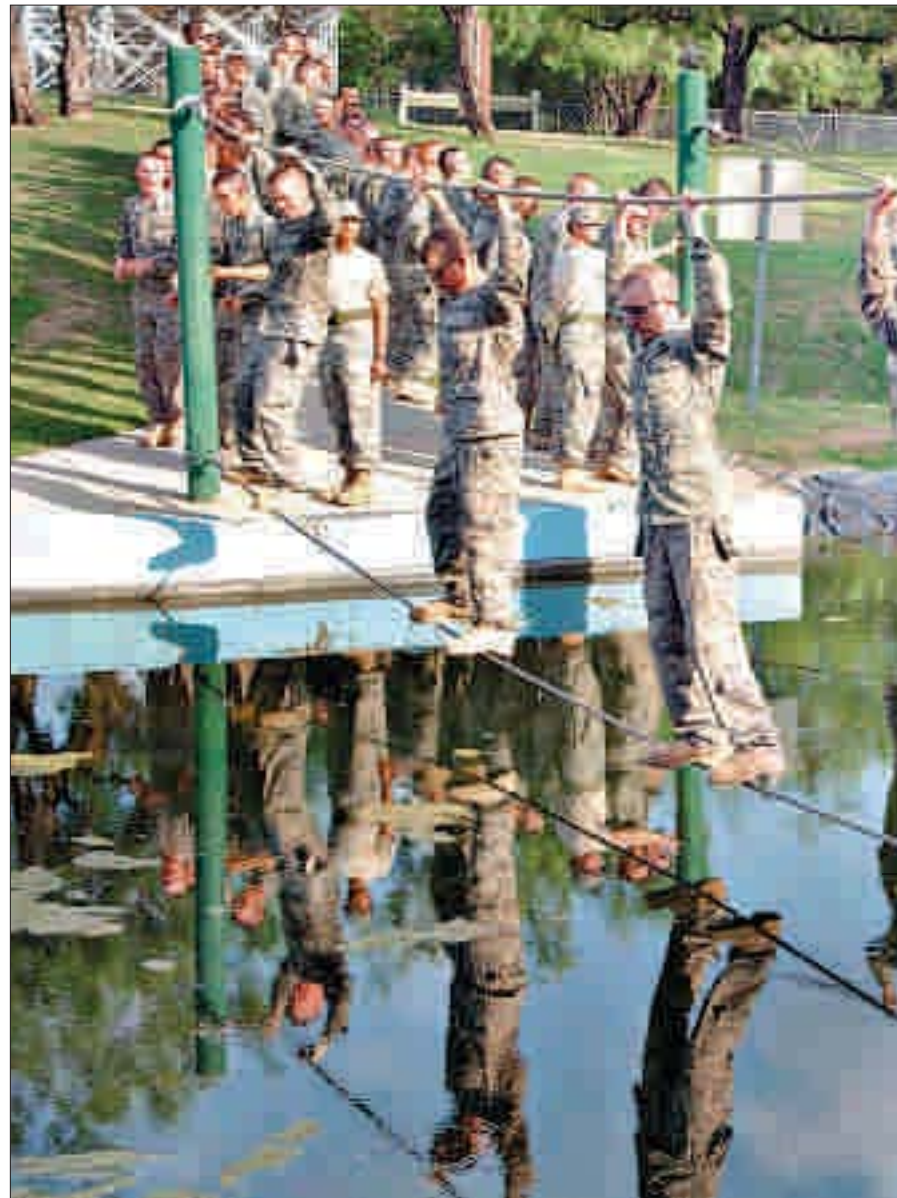
But the centerpiece of the new BMT is the BEAST, a week spent in Basic Expeditionary Airman Skills Training.

For six weeks, the entire class of more than 800 airmen heads to a new field training site on the Medina Annex at the west end of Lackland.

The BEAST site consists of four camps, each with 10 green canvas tents. Each camp is a self-contained unit responsible for operating and defending itself.

**'It's going to be mentally challenging, psychologically challenging and physically challenging.'**

COL. EDWARD WESTERMANN



"It's a simulated deployed environment," Westermann said.

"We'll be sending these young men and women out to what is essentially a Camp Victory, [Iraq], Camp Phoenix, [Afghanistan, and] they'll be applying things like their chem warfare training [and] their self-aid and buddy care.

"It's going to actually place them in a five-day deployment environment."

On the first day of BEAST, a Monday, recruits will refresh the expeditionary skills they already learned. On Tuesday through Friday, they will be in an expeditionary exercise in which they live and work as if they were at a forward operating base in the Middle East. Until now, recruits spent two hours in an expeditionary exercise.

The airmen will sleep in their tents and eat MREs, except for

one hot meal a day served at a dining facility.

They'll rise each morning at 4:45 a.m., receive an intelligence briefing on the threat environment, and spend the rest of the day responding to threats and contingencies.

"For example, an air attack has just taken place," Westermann explained. "These are your rules of engagement. This person has been injured, showing these symptoms. What do you do as a group? What do we need to do to take care of our wingman here? What do we need to do to take care of our camp, the integrated defense aspect of it?"

"Then the threat might change to a ground attack four hours later or a different kind of threat. What they're expected to do is ... respond appropriately to that threat."

BMT instructors and airmen



ALAN BOEDEKER/AIR FORCE

**Trainees from basic military training negotiate a water obstacle at the basic military training obstacle course last summer. While changes were made to the basic military training curriculum in November 2005 to instill war skills and strengthen the warrior ethos, recruits will have two more weeks, and more warrior-intensive BMT beginning Nov. 3.**

from the 3E9 emergency management career field will serve as an aggressor force, and attacks can take place any time, day or night. Trainees will stand two-hour watches to guard the camp.

The BEAST site includes a 1.5-mile improvised explosive device trail littered with simulated roadside bombs and a mock airstrip. Airmen will learn to spot IEDs and then use the trail in training scenarios.

For instance, under one scenario, Westermann said, the airmen will have to safely navigate the IED trail to reach and secure the airstrip so they can establish resupply and evacuate

their wounded.

"This is as realistic training as we can get here at BMT," he said. "This mirrors, in real terms, the kinds of threats and challenges that our folks face downrange."

Week seven will focus on post-deployment training — classroom instruction about the difficulties service members might face when they get home, such as financial management, family issues and alcohol abuse. Trainees also learn about Air Force history and heritage.

"The hope is they leave here sensitized to those issues," Westermann said. "It's ... establishing positive habits that they're going to take from BMT to tech training

## THE BEAST

Week 6 of the new basic training will be spent in Basic Expeditionary Airman Skills Training, or the BEAST. The simulated deployment site consists of four camps, each with 10 green canvas tents. Each camp is a self-contained unit responsible for operating and defending itself.



Source: 37th Training Wing

BRYAN SMITH/STAFF

and then on into the combatant commands."

The eighth and final week of training is graduation week. The newly minted airmen will be issued their dress blues, take a final written test, practice for the graduation parade and find out what career fields they'll be entering.

### Preparing for the war zones

Westermann said the new course, two years in the making, acknowledges airmen are on the front lines and must be prepared to fight.

There have been incremental changes during the past several years to better prepare airmen for duty in the war zones, such as issuing all airmen a training M16 on their first day. But this is the first wholesale redesign of the course since the wars began.

"We have an expeditionary

force in which we have over 6,000 airmen ... downrange doing missions outside the wire," Westermann said. "We need to continue this idea of seeing ourselves ... as warrior airmen."

The longer training and greater focus on expeditionary skills also put the Air Force more in line with the other services. Army basic training is nine weeks, with a weeklong field training exercise. The Navy course is eight weeks, with a weeklong exercise called "battle stations." Marines have the longest basic, at a little more than 12 weeks with a week of field training.

Westermann said he and his team designed the new BMT to be rigorous, but they do not expect it will lead to a high wash-out rate. The attrition rate for BMT stands at 8.2 percent.

Field and combat skills training have always been the most

popular parts of the course among students, he said.

"This is exactly why many of them want to be in the Air Force, why they want to be in the military," he said. "My expectation is that when we send them out to the BEAST site, ... this is going to be a motivational experience for them."

Westermann said he and his instructors will monitor the course to make sure the training is having the desired effect. But the verdict will be out on the new BMT until the new airmen graduate into the operational Air Force and begin to deploy to the war zones.

"The real acid test for the success of this program will be when we get reports back from combatant commanders saying the folks you're sending us ... are more capable and better trained to face those challenges that they have downrange," he said. □