



MTT COURSE PINS 29 NEW PATHFINDERS

By Marisa Petrich &
Sgt. Cesar Padilla
Joint Base Lewis-McChord

It's satisfying to know that you're one of the best. Getting a cool new badge doesn't hurt, either.

The most recent graduates at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., of the Army's Pathfinder School know about both. After a three-week course run by a mobile training team from Fort Benning, Ga., 29 out of the 80 JBLM Soldiers who began the training can now call themselves pathfinders.

Army pathfinders have been used since World War II to establish and operate landing and drop zones. They were the first American Soldiers on the ground on D-Day in 1944 and, despite evolutions in doctrine and tactics, continue to lead the way in operations today.

"Pathfinders are more relevant than ever on today's battlefield," explained Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph Dallas of 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, who is a 2001 graduate of the Pathfinder School.

"The pathfinder gives our country a significant advantage over our enemies. It gives a unit a unique capability to perform airborne and air assault operations. Their skills are critical to our nation's success. A unit would be hard-pressed in Afghanistan



without helicopter resupply or air-assault capabilities, all of which are managed by pathfinders."

Though JBLM's most recent Pathfinder MTT course was organized by Troop C, 38th Long-Range Surveillance Company, 201st Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, some slots were filled by the best Soldiers other units had to send.

Students learned to navigate cross-country on foot to establish and operate day and night helicopter landing zones and

parachute drop zones; conduct medical evacuation procedures; rig and inspect sling loads; and provide air traffic control and navigational assistance to aircraft.

It's a course that demands 100 percent from students. Students go through multiple exams, hands-on tasks and one final field training exercise — not to mention the hours of off-duty time spent studying. All told, prospective pathfinders must memorize and retain a huge amount of information in a short amount of time.



Opposite page, top: A student in the Mobile Training Team Pathfinder course descends under an open canopy from a CH-47 Chinook helicopter to Rogers Drop Zone on March 18 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

Photo by Ingrid Barrentine

Opposite page, bottom: A Soldier sports his just-awarded Pathfinder badge. The wing suggests flight and airborne capabilities, while the torch symbolizes leadership and guidance — all pathfinder combat skills.

Photo by Ingrid Barrentine

Left: Soldiers conduct airborne operations out of a C-130 aircraft March 23. The jump was the beginning of the course's culminating two-day field training exercise.

Photo by Sgt. Cesar Padilla

most college courses just because of that,” said Sgt. 1st Class Bill Long, one of the MTT instructors.

Typically, Pathfinder School has a graduation rate of 50 to 60 percent. The March JBLM class lost more than half its students by the end of the first week. Most of them dropped after the first sling-load exercise, traditionally the toughest part of the course.

“You really don’t realize how much work and how much detail go into it [until you do it],” said Spc. Scott Angell of the 38th LRS Company. “If you’re going to put 10,000 pounds in the air over somebody’s head, you want to make sure it’s secured properly.”

“I had no idea what to expect when I started the course,” said Spc. Jonathan Peace of the 38th LRS Company. “Knowing that I’m coming up on promotion, I wanted to be able to lead my future squad or team from the front.”

After being pinned with their shiny new badges, the graduates were glad to have completed the course and looked forward to the chance to sleep again. But, they also understand the responsibility they now have to their fellow Soldiers.

“Today we’re going to issue you the cool-looking Pathfinder badge, which you earned,” Dallas told them.

“The badge represents more than you having the skill set of a pathfinder. You have the responsibility to retain the pathfinder knowledge that has been crammed into your brain the last few weeks,” he said.

“You also have an obligation to pass the torch.”

“I never had to remember so much in two days, turn around and take a test on that knowledge, and then learn something else,” said Sgt. Jonathan Everett, a team leader in the 38th LRS Company.

A graduate of the Airborne School and Ranger School, Everett considered the pathfinder course more mentally challenging and believes it is rewarding for those who think outside their comfort zones.

“We catered the FTX to more thinking outside the box, to think outside of

doctrine, because the manuals have not been updated to fit the new mission the Army has,” said Staff Sgt. Mike Patraw, an MTT instructor from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning.

“We catered our training [for] the students to think like that and to show them a different way that would benefit the mission, the pilots and themselves.”

“This course is more challenging than