Fort Drum’s Maj. Gen. Piatt: using mindfulness to ‘reduce conflict by better understanding’

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As commander of the coalition forces in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Walter Piatt, who was director of operations for the Army and now commands its 10th Mountain Division, juggled ruthless pursuit of enemies and delicate diplomacy with tribal leaders, using a trove of modern weaponry and streams of tech-generated data.

But his best decisions, he said, relied on a tool as ancient as it is powerful. Piatt often began daily operations by breathing deliberately, slack-jawed, staring steadily at a palm tree.
Mindfulness — the practice of using breathing techniques, similar to those in meditation, to gain focus and reduce distraction — is inching into the military in the United States and those of a handful of other nations.

This winter, Army infantry soldiers at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii began using mindfulness to improve shooting skills — for instance, focusing on when to pull the trigger amid chaos to avoid unnecessary civilian harm.

The British Royal Navy has given mindfulness training to officers, and military leaders are rolling it out in the army and Royal Air Force for some officers and enlisted soldiers. The New Zealand Defence Force recently adopted the technique, and military forces of the Netherlands are considering the idea, too.

This week, NATO plans to hold a two-day symposium in Berlin to discuss the evidence behind the use of mindfulness in the military.

A small but growing group of military officials support the techniques to heal trauma-stressed veterans, make command decisions and help soldiers in chaotic battles.

“I was asked recently if my soldiers call me General Moonbeam,” said Piatt. “There’s a stereotype this makes you soft. No, it brings you on point.”

The approach, he said, is based on the work of Amishi Jha, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami. She is the senior author of a paper published in December about the training’s effectiveness among members of a special operations unit.

The paper, in the journal Progress in Brain Research, reported that the troops who went through a monthlong training regimen that included daily practice in mindful breathing and focus techniques were better able to discern key information under chaotic circumstances and experienced increases in working memory function. The soldiers also reported making fewer cognitive errors than service members who did not use mindfulness.

The findings, which build on previous research showing improvements among soldiers and professional football players trained in mindfulness, are significant in part because members of the special forces are already selected for their ability to focus. The fact that even they saw improvement speaks to the power of the training, Jha said.

“They’re the best, and what they’re trying to do is the hardest,” she said.

Jha has spoken to the U.S. Army War College and the British Parliament, and she has been a consultant to New Zealand’s Defence Force and military officials in the Netherlands. “When the special forces do something,” she said, “not only does the rest of the U.S. military pay attention, but the rest of the world’s militaries pay attention.”

The science shows that techniques that focus and calm the mind allow people to perform better and make them less likely to overreact to incoming stimulation — whether a flash of movement, sound or an onslaught of information on a device.

The neuroscience of mindfulness involves, in part, strengthening a part of mental capacity known as “working memory” — a short-term, moment-to-moment catalog of tasks understood by scientists to effectively hold only a few pieces of information at one time.

As working memory clouds through overload, decisions become jumbled and reactions more impulsive. Breathing-induced focus lets people home in on the task at hand. But it does take practice.

The recent study found that service members who train for four weeks experience significant improvement, but those who train for only two weeks do not.

The mindfulness training comes as the military is exploring other options to intensify soldier focus, even the possibility of implanting computer chips into soldiers’ brains. But those potential solutions are expensive and years off.

Widespread adoption of mindfulness has challenges, including creating a staff of trainers, said Cmdr. William MacNulty, a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service. He helped train a special forces unit in mindfulness (the precise military branch and location are
The program entailed the soldiers spending about 15 minutes each day performing recorded, guided breathing exercises.

MacNulty said that about a third of the soldiers readily embraced the idea, a third engaged with curiosity, and a third seemed skeptical.

MacNulty likened the benefits of practicing mindfulness to those of, say, doing push-ups. “You might not drop and do push-ups when you’re in a gunfight, but you have increased capacity,” he said. That’s true of mindfulness, he added: Mental focus “becomes a transferable skill.”

In the newsmagazine of the Royal New Zealand Air Force, known as the All Blacks, the military explained the rationale behind adopting mindfulness. Referring to its value, the magazine said: “The All Blacks talk about ‘red head/blue head’ — red head means being in a flustered state and blue head means being calm, centered and able to make clearheaded decisions.”

Research also has shown that use of mindfulness can help soldiers overcome post-traumatic stress disorder.

That has been the experience of Britain’s chief evangelist for use of mindfulness in the military, Cmdr. Tim Boughton.

Boughton, decorated for service in many combat zones, discovered when he retired from active duty in 2008 that he’d grown withdrawn and angered by the horrors he’d seen: mangled civilian bodies fused together in combat zones; deaths of 48 compatriots in battle in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falklands, Northern Ireland; “ethnic cleansing, hand-to-hand stuff.”

When he went to a psychiatrist in 2008, she broke down in tears after he described his experiences. Boughton discovered mindfulness after his own bout with PTSD, eventually becoming a trustee of the Oxford University Mindfulness Center.

He now starts and ends his day with five minutes of breathing exercises. He uses the technique each time he is gripped by anxiety or panic. The traumas haven’t disappeared, he said, but he isn’t haunted by them daily. Now he can more calmly examine each terrible incident, address it and have some control over it — rather than merely reacting.

“The amount of brain power it frees by not being trapped in the past or the future is incredible,” Boughton said. “The military is seeing the mass benefits of this.”

Boughton has thought about whether mindfulness is anathema to conflict. “The purists would say that mindfulness was never developed for war purpose,” he said.

What he means is that mindfulness is often associated with peacefulness. But, he added, the idea is to be as faithful to compassionate and humane ideals as possible given the realities of the job.

Piatt underscored that point, describing one delicate diplomatic mission in Iraq that involved meeting with a local tribal leader. Before the session, he said, he meditated in front of a palm tree, and found himself extremely focused when the delicate conversation took place shortly thereafter.

“I was not taking notes. I remember every word she was saying. I wasn’t forming a response, just listening,” he said. When the tribal leader finished, he said, “I talked back to her about every single point, had to concede on some. I remember the expression on her face: This is someone we can work with.”

In the end, he said, mindfulness allowed him to “reduce conflict by better understanding.”

“I’m not saying, be soft,” he added. “I’m saying, understand how compassion and empathy can be used for real advantages.”

“Peace takes a lot of hard work.”