

The Indispensable Foundation: Why Physical Fitness is Paramount for Foreign Area Officers

Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) occupy a unique and critical space within the Department of Defense (DoD), serving as the U.S. military's experts on specific regions and their complex geopolitical landscape. Their responsibilities are diverse and demanding, ranging from diplomatic engagement and security cooperation to strategic advising and crisis response. Given the multifaceted nature of their responsibilities, physical fitness extends beyond personal well-being; it forms a crucial foundation for their effectiveness.¹ A strong level of physical fitness is not simply desirable. It is an indispensable element for the success and professionalism of all Foreign Area Officers.

Appearances matter. FAOs often serve as the physical representation of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the FAO's service to a host nation and as a mirror for U.S. leadership. FAOs frequently interact with senior General/Flag Officers (GO/FOs) and host nation leaders, and the initial visual impression they make can significantly shape these critical professional relationships. A FAO in good physical condition immediately conveys professionalism and competence. Conversely, neglecting fitness might inadvertently give the impression of being out of touch. The historical issue of weight gain among members of the Defense Attache Service, leading to the pejorative term "Fattache," underscores a specific challenge faced by FAOs in this regard. This stigma still exists in the minds of many senior leaders, particularly those from combat arms backgrounds who expect officers to lead by example in all aspects, including physical fitness. A FAO who neglects their fitness might inadvertently give the impression of being out of touch with their military roots or not taking their responsibilities seriously, potentially impacting their opportunities for promotion and how their strategic insights are received. Host nation leaders also hold certain expectations of U.S. military officers, and FAOs are often the most visible face of the DoD in their country. Thus, maintaining their physical condition is vital for upholding the esteemed image of the DoD and fostering trust with international partners.

A fast run does not make you a great leader, but... Whether we want it to be true or not, in the military, physical fitness is closely tied to the perception of effective leadership, representing qualities such as confidence, discipline, and the ability to inspire subordinates.² A physically fit officer often embodies the self-discipline that is fundamental to leading both oneself and others. Subordinates often expect their leaders to be physically capable and willing to share in the hardships of military life.³ A leader's fitness tangibly represents their commitment to military standards and values. This commitment, along with physical fitness itself, contributes to an officer's mental acuity, discipline, and self-confidence.⁴ By consistently demonstrating their commitment to physical fitness, officers lead by example, inspiring their subordinates to maintain high standards and fostering a culture of readiness and resilience. Further, superiors and promotion boards often view an officer's commitment to fitness as a positive indicator of their discipline, dedication, and leadership potential.⁵ Consequently, FAOs who choose not to maintain physical standards may inadvertently signal a lack of commitment to continued service to promotion boards.

Warfighting is physically demanding work, even on a staff. Maintaining physical fitness reinforces the warfighting principles of the DoD for FAOs. Even though FAOs might operate outside traditional tactical units and may not engage in direct combat roles during a tour or career, maintaining a base level of fitness reinforces the discipline, commitment, and readiness that are fundamental to military service. This connection to their foundational military training is crucial for preserving their identity and credibility within the broader military structure. It serves as a tangible reminder of the core values and expectations of a military officer, regardless of their current specialized role. Just as the Chief of Staff of the Army approves common "Warrior Tasks" that all soldiers are expected to perform, regardless of their specialty, a foundational level of fitness underpins the ability of a FAO to embody the ethos of a warfighter.⁶

Getting in a workout clears the mind. Physical exercise has been linked to improvements in memory and thinking skills.⁷ This is especially crucial for FAOs, who frequently navigate complex geopolitical situations, requiring sharp analytical abilities, effective communication, and cultural understanding. Furthermore, FAOs can utilize physical training time as an opportunity to learn, engaging with professional development materials while exercising.⁸ Research indicates that physical fitness has a significant impact on several cognitive abilities crucial for military officers, including decision-making, focus, and resilience to stress.⁹ Individuals with higher levels of physical fitness often exhibit a greater capacity to withstand and recover from stressful experiences.¹⁰ Physical activity also promotes the development of new brain cells and activates the learning process, increasing the production of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein vital for the survival and growth of brain cells involved in learning, memory, and information processing.¹¹ The ability of FAOs to maintain cognitive performance under pressure and in demanding situations is directly supported by a strong foundation of physical fitness.

Everybody hurts sometimes. FAOs are no different than any other military officer. Years of abuse and neglect have led to aches, pains, and degenerative muscle and joint issues. A strong foundation of physical fitness helps mitigate the physical degradation associated with aging and contributes to a higher readiness rate of the FAO's unit.¹² Maintaining their physical condition supports longevity and ensures FAOs can continue to perform effectively throughout their careers. This is crucial given that many FAOs make the transition to this career field in their early thirties and need to sustain a high level of performance for many years. Physical activity is a determinant of successful aging, helping to preserve function and independence in later life.¹³ Regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight are also crucial for preventing and managing osteoarthritis (OA), a common concern due to the physical demands inherent in military service. Exercise helps maintain joint health by strengthening surrounding muscles and improving flexibility.¹⁴

It's on you, buddy. The military often forces fitness regimes on its officers, but FAOs often operate outside the structure of traditional commands. The duties of a FAO often differ significantly from the more physically demanding roles of their previous military experience, lacking the scheduled, mandatory physical training that is the norm in those units. This new lifestyle can be accompanied by more time sitting at a desk, big lunches, late dinners, cocktail parties with fried food and alcohol, and increased travel, all of which can have detrimental consequences on physical fitness over time, leading to weight gain and decreased overall health.

The absence of a built-in fitness routine and competing interests make it particularly important for FAOs to be self-disciplined and proactive in maintaining their physical condition. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each FAO to prioritize and integrate fitness into their daily routine, and the longer one strays from the normalized fitness routine, the harder it is to return.

All of this is not to say that DoD leadership expects its FAOs to compete for World Class Athlete Program positions or be ready to cross the Andes mountains with a 60-pound ruck and full combat load at a moment's notice. Leadership does not expect FAOs to score any differently than the average officer at their age and grade. Nor does leadership expect FAOs to maintain body compositions different than the norm. However, the expectation of compliance and representation exists, as does the need for FAOs to act decisively at the highest cognitive levels when the situation calls for it. Physical fitness is not simply a peripheral advantage; it is an enduring and fundamental requirement for Foreign Area Officers. It strengthens their professional image, reinforces their military ethos, sharpens their cognitive abilities, supports their long-term readiness, and equips them to navigate the unique challenges and lifestyle factors inherent in their demanding profession. By prioritizing and maintaining a high level of physical fitness, FAOs not only enhance their individual effectiveness but also contribute to the overall strength, credibility, and readiness of the United States military in its global engagements.

¹ <https://www.thayerleadership.com/blog/2017/fit-to-fightfit-to-lead-are-you-the-best-leader-you-can-be>

² Jeff Jagr and Aaron Kennedy, "Is physical fitness overvalued in the Army?" *NCO Journal*, October 2016, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2016/October/Physical-Fitness-Overvalued/>

³ Jagr et al

⁴ <https://mntactical.com/knowledge/survey-results-hard-respect-tactical-leader-isnt-physically-fit/>

⁵ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4139720/secretary-of-defense-directed-review-of-physical-fitness-standards-for-combat-a/>

⁶ LoRusso, Nick, "Maintain the Standards: Why Physical Fitness Will Always Matter in War," *Moder War Institute*, February 14, 2017.

⁷ A Flood and RJ Keegan, "Cognitive Resilience to Psychological Stress in Military Personnel," *Front Psychol*, 2022 Mar 16;13:809003. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.809003. PMID: 35369170; PMCID: PMC8966027.

⁸ Maren Schmidt-Kassow, Anna Kulka, Thomas C. Gunter, Kathrin Rothermich, Sonja A. Kotz, "Exercising during learning improves vocabulary acquisition: Behavioral and ERP evidence, *Neuroscience Letters*, Volume 482, Issue 1, 2010, Pages 40-44, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S030439401000875X>.

⁹ Misty Posey, "Physical Fitness Fuels Cognitive Power," *Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute*, Vol. 146/11/1,413, November 2020.

¹⁰ Robert M. Bray, Carol S. Camlin, John A. Fairbank, George H. Dunteman, and Sara C. Wheeless, "The Effects of Stress on Job Functioning of Military Men and Women," *Armed Forces and Society* 27, no. 3 (2001): 397–417, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0102700304>.

¹¹ Posey

¹² Joseph M. Molloy and Timothy L Pendergrass, Ian E Lee, Keith G Hauret, Michelle C Chervak, Daniel I Rhon, Musculoskeletal Injuries and United States Army Readiness. Part II: Management Challenges and Risk Mitigation Initiatives, *Military Medicine*, Volume 185, Issue 9-10, September-October 2020, Pages e1472–e1480, <https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaa028>

¹³ "Maintain joint health and prevent arthritis during military service," *Uniformed Services University*, <https://www.hprc-online.org/total-force-fitness/pain-management/maintain-joint-health-and-prevent-arthritis-during-military>

¹⁴ *Uniformed Services University*