The Case for Outcomes-Based Training and Education

by Major Chad R. Foster

"To be a good soldier a man must have discipline, self-respect, pride in his unit and his country, a high sense of duty and obligation to his comrades and his superiors, and self-confidence born of demonstrated ability."[1]

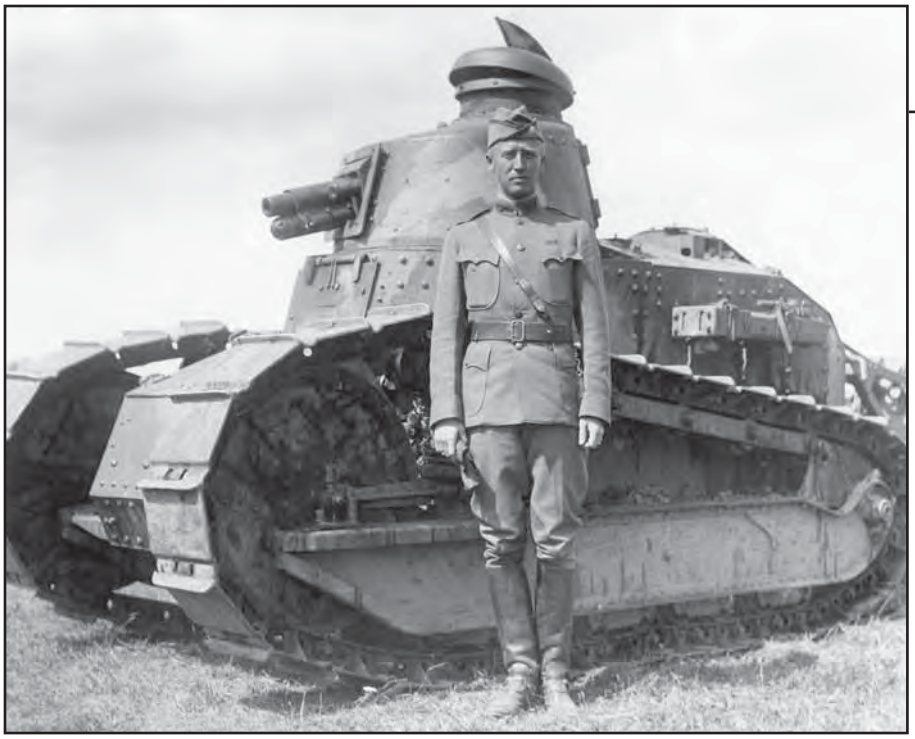
— General George S. Patton Jr.

A Warning from General Patton

As a major stationed in Hawaii during the mid-1920s, George S. Patton Jr. spent much of his time writing and discussing topics related to leadership, training, and tactics. Although not an academically distinguished cadet at West Point, Patton was a voracious reader of history throughout his life and he sought to learn all that he could to make himself a better combat leader. One of the most admirable things about Patton was that his love for history was not chained to the thinking of past generations — he understood the lessons of history in context and applied them to contemporary times. In this way, he was a forward-thinker with the wisdom to heed the warnings of the past. It is hardly surprising then that his writings from this period illustrate some key insights that are highly applicable today.

In 1919, Patton wrote the first draft of a short lecture on the history and employment of light tanks. After considering his firsthand combat experiences and observations in World War I, he updated the lecture at some point in the early 1920s to include many of his own opinions and analysis. As he advocated the concept of mobile warfare using armored forces, Patton complained that too many officers were perfectly satisfied with resting on the laurels of the past. He said, "[We are] seeking too hard for an approved solution that will avoid the odious task of thinking."[2] Patton clearly understood that a rigid devotion to set rules without considering the current situation was foolish. He went further by urging other Army leaders to "[l]et your best thought and keenest ingenuity based on principles and untrammeled by all the labored memory of past tactical details be bent to the employment of the instruments of combat … in the best way most suitable to kill the enemy."[3]

These statements were part of Patton's efforts to champion the continued development of armored forces even as many of his contemporaries were saying that the tank was a short-lived gimmick that had no place on future battlefields. The coming years would confirm Patton's foresight as the allies confronted the Nazi war



"In 1919, Patton wrote the first draft of a short lecture on the history and employment of light tanks. After considering his firsthand combat experiences and observations in World War I, he updated the lecture at some point in the early 1920s to include many of his own opinions and analysis. As he advocated the concept of mobile warfare using armored forces, Patton complained that too many officers were perfectly satisfied with resting on the laurels of the past."

machine in Europe. However, at the heart of his message is a warning that we, as the trainers and mentors for our Army, must heed. The great temptation is to rely on what is written in a manual as if it were inflexible law or continue a practice because "we have *always* done it this way." In this approach, creative thinking and decisionmaking are absent, just as Patton warned. This great commander understood that a soldier (and especially a leader) must adjust to changing situations on the battlefield. In short, Patton was saying that good leaders apply commonsense and fundamental principles to solving problems and making decisions. They do not bind themselves mindlessly to past practices without fully understanding their underlying principles. These fundamental principles, *not the process or method*, must serve as the guide for future action.[4]

The Traditional Approach to Training and the Need for Change

"We need to shift our culture toward one where we have thinking leaders who can train and lead thinking soldiers."[5]

— Colonel Casey Haskins

In today's traditional approach to training, soldiers and units train a task until they reach a minimum standard under a specific set of conditions. Immediately on demonstrating this baseline level of proficiency, they hurry along to the next task like a worker on an assembly line. In the vast majority of cases, this approach does not require soldiers to learn the *why* behind their actions or to advance beyond the minimum standard stated in the manual. They become very adept at performing the choreographed steps of an established process, but when faced with a drastically changed set of conditions, these soldiers can do little more than revert to the "rehearsed solution," regardless of whether or not it is appropriate to the new situation. There is little or no emphasis on the development of judgment or initiative in our soldiers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), or officers. This traditional approach is a not well-suited to building fighters who can think effectively and adapt to unforeseen changes on the battlefield.

The task-conditions-standard approach to training is the product of an industrial assembly-line mentality that was born out of the necessities of the Cold War. As the West faced the threat of a massive Soviet assault, we depended on the rapid mobilization of Reserves to fight a few titanic battles on the plains of Europe. In this type of environment, an assembly-line approach was a logical solution because it was (and continues to be) fast, efficient, and simple enough for masses of newly mobilized citizen soldiers with no previous military experience to quickly grasp. With a powerful, but predictable, adversary on the other side, time and efficiency were of far more importance than the development of true professionalism.[6] The historical American distrust of a large professional standing army also played a role, and this traditional training approach was appealing because it very much resembled the "management science" applied by major corporations.

However, the contemporary operating environment bears no resemblance to the Cold War era. We are not facing the threat of a massive assault by enemy tanks in Europe. Instead, we are fighting adversaries that have no discernible doctrine and do battle with us asymmetrically, pitting their strengths against our weaknesses. In this type of combat, nothing is ever simple and our soldiers and junior leaders must rapidly adapt to unforeseen situations and unfamiliar environments. To prepare for this brand of warfare, it seems clear that a simple, assembly-line approach to training and leader development is woefully inadequate.

There exists a solution to this problem, which is starting to gain momentum throughout the Army — outcomes-based training and education (OBTE). This philosophy nurtures adaptability, initiative, and self-confidence by going beyond the minimalist mindset that today characterizes much of our Army's training. In OBTE, the tasks, conditions, and standards found in our doctrinal publications serve as a starting point or baseline, not an end state, for training events. Instead, OBTE focuses on achieving a desired outcome that more closely resembles the proclaimed goal of every commander — excellence or mastery. Exactly how the soldier or unit gets to the desired end state is irrelevant as long as the *solution* is appropriate to the current situation. Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) remain important, but they are not taught as dogmatic checklists that one must follow without question. Trainers explain the fundamental principles that underlie those TTP, which should guide future decisionmaking. Rather than merely memorizing the steps of a process or a battle drill, soldiers learn the *why* behind their actions, which gives them the ability to either choose an existing TTP that is appropriate or improvise as necessary.

Objectives, Outcomes, and the Exercise of Mission Command in Training

It is important to understand the difference between an objective and an outcome. According to U.S. Army Training

and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 350-70, *A Systems Approach to Training, Management, Processes, and Products*, a learning objective is a familiar, three-part statement that describes what a soldier is supposed to be able to do "under specific conditions to accepted standards."[7] It consists of the task to be trained, the conditions under which it will be trained, and the standard to which it will be trained. As explained earlier, the standard articulated in most objectives is a *minimum* standard for performance. Ultimately, training objectives are concerned with competencies (a soldier or unit can do "task A" when provided with specific assets under specific circumstances). However, a desired competency does not get to the point of building the ability of individuals and units to do new things with different assets under *any* set of conditions. Competencies also do not account for those intangible attributes that are often critical in combat such as initiative, judgment, confidence, and personal accountability.

An outcome, on the other hand, provides a broader purpose for the training event. Conceptually, it fills the same role as training as a commander's intent statement in a tactical operation. By articulating a desired outcome(s) for a training event, the commander can provide guidance on results he expects the training to achieve, regardless of any constraints that might emerge. For example, consider a situation where a commander wants to train his subordinate leaders to become effective in preparing and issuing a warning order. Figure 1 shows a training objective for this task taken directly out of Soldier Training Publication (STP) 21-24, Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks (SMCT), *Warrior Leader Skills Level 2, 3, and 4*.[8] At best, this objective establishes a "training floor" for the task. At worst, it restricts the soldier by reinforcing the notion that the process or method that he employs is the most important consideration in determining success or failure in the training event. The obvious question is two-fold: does referencing the warning order at the beginning of the brief have any bearing on how effective the order really is; and does using standard terminology or a specific format ensure that subordinates get any value from the warning order?

In contrast, if a commander articulates his desired outcomes, such as those listed on the right side of Figure 1, it becomes clear what truly defines success in this training. The outcomes do not address the inputs by the soldier; they focus only on the results of the warning order as observed through the lens of the audience. The exact format and terminology used by the soldier are not important. All that matters is that the audience gets some value out of the warning order that allows them to effectively prepare for the upcoming operation. Of course, this does not mean that a trainer would never address possible techniques such as the use of the five-paragraph format or correct doctrinal terminology. With an outcomes-based approach, these techniques are viewed only as possible methods that one might employ within the context of the current situation.

This approach illustrates how OBTE encourages the exercise of mission command in training. Simply put, mission command, sometimes referred to as "mission tactics," is the practice of clearly articulating an intent to subordinates and then charging them with the responsibility of figuring out exactly how to meet that intent.[9] For a soldier or leader to be effective in this type of command atmosphere, he must be able to think and solve problems. He must have the initiative and courage to act without being told exactly what to do. For this approach to work, the commander must clearly communicate his intent, just as he must during a tactical operation. Outcomes allow him to do so while leaving room for his subordinates to exercise their own judgment and creativity. In fact, an outcomes-based approach not only allows thinking and initiative, it forces them to become requirements.

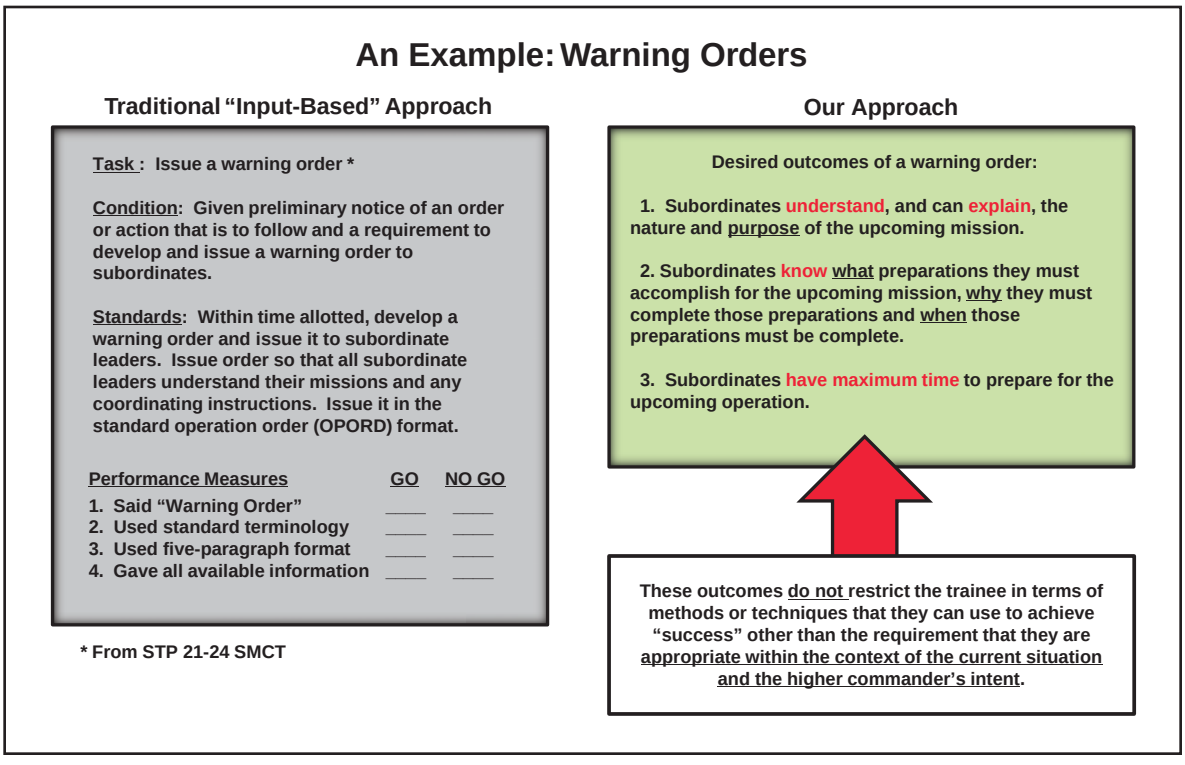


Figure 1

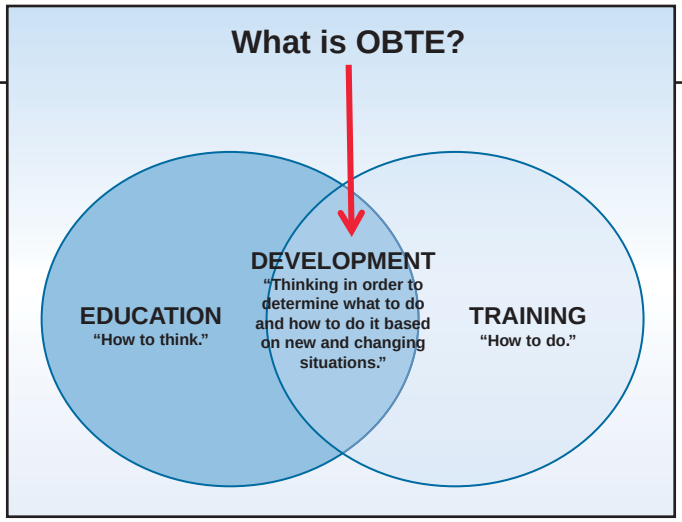


Figure 2

OBTE: The Intersection of Education and Training

The fact that both training and education are included in this approach makes OBTE a source of anxiety and a target of criticism. The critics are always quick to point out that there is a difference between training and education, and they are absolutely correct. However, they are wrong in the notion that training and education cannot occur simultaneously within the execution of a single developmental event. "The ability to think logically, to approach problemsolving methodically, but without a predetermined set of solutions," is inherent in education.[10] In short, education is focused on how to think, not what to think. Training, on the other hand, is the application of education in the real world. It deals primarily with *what to do* and *how to do it*. The relationship between education and training is much like the relationship between the classroom and the lab.[11] They are, therefore, mutually supporting efforts that one must view in close connection to each other. Attempts to frame these two things in isolation result in missed opportunities to develop soldiers, units, and leaders to their full potential.

In the traditional approach, there is no evident link between training and education. In keeping with the assembly-line mentality, trainers are encouraged to look at actions (tasks) discretely without regards to any larger context. The message is clear: get your soldiers to the standard (the minimum level of proficiency) and then move on to the next task. There is no focus on understanding the *why* behind each action. For example, an initial entry soldier might be taught individual movement techniques (low crawl, high crawl, and rush), but how much emphasis would be placed on understanding why he might chose to use each of these techniques? The soldier would leave basic training knowing how to execute a low crawl, high crawl, and a rush, but he would not necessarily be equipped to make rapid and sound decisions about when to use each under fire. This problem is largely due to the fact that the practical application of these techniques in training is often done on scripted lanes and ranges; for example, "you will low crawl from position 1 to position 2, throw your grenade at the enemy bunker, and then you will conduct a 3-5 second rush up to position 3." This method does not require any thought on the part of the soldier. Instead, the soldier is merely following instructions shouted by a drill sergeant. This might make the soldier very proficient at executing the techniques, but he will not necessarily be able to adapt to a new situation where he does not have a rehearsed script.

In an outcomes-based approach, the trainer would teach the soldier not only the various movement techniques, but *why* he might chose to execute each one. The soldier would steadily progress to a "lane," just as in the traditional approach. However, instead of a scripted scenario, the soldier would be instructed only to get into position to destroy the enemy bunker without being killed by hostile fire. In attempting to achieve this outcome, the soldier would be required to determine which movement technique is appropriate to the terrain and threat. This seemingly simple shift in approach does not allow thinking — it *requires* thinking! Because of this blend of thinking and action, OBTE sits squarely at the intersection of education and training, not just in one sphere or the other (see Figure 2 as an illustration). Therefore, it is more appropriate to think of the outcomes-based approach as *development*, a combination of thinking and action within the execution of an individual or collective task.

"We are not facing the threat of a massive assault by enemy tanks in Europe. Instead, we are fighting adversaries that have no discernible doctrine and do battle with us asymmetrically, pitting their strengths against our weaknesses. In this type of combat, nothing is ever simple and our soldiers and junior leaders must rapidly adapt to unforeseen situations and unfamiliar environments. To prepare for this brand of warfare, it seems clear that a simple, assembly-line approach to training and leader development is woefully inadequate."

Patton's Warning Revisited

General Patton rightly believed that "[n]o army is better than its soldiers."[12] Because he understood this truth, it seems clear that he would have embraced OBTE. Just as Patton grasped the potential of the tank as it emerged on the scene in the late stages of World War I, our Army's leaders must now see that OBTE offers a far better alternative for soldier development than the traditional input-based approach. Unfortunately, advocates of OBTE encounter resistance just as Patton did as he advocated the development of Ameri-

can armored forces in the years following World War I. Luckily, men like General Patton did not give up on what they knew to be right and their efforts contributed greatly to the allied victory over the Nazi war machine in the 1940s. Those of us who understand the advantages of the outcomes-based approach today must follow the same example.

The contemporary operating environment offers us new challenges and dangers. Modern battlefields require adaptive, thinking soldiers and leaders. The days of training for "rehearsable solutions" in response to a well-known and predictable enemy are over. If our Army is going to improve how it prepares soldiers, leaders, and units to fight in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan (and all others that might emerge), we cannot afford to shy away from the "odious task of thinking." OBTE is the best way to ensure that we nurture adaptability, initiative, and sound judgment in everything we do. In this way, we will get beyond the minimalist approach that currently characterizes much of our training and start to maximize the full potential of the American soldier.

Notes

[1]George S. Patton Jr., *War as I Knew It*, Bantam Books, New York, 1947, p. 317.

[2]Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers Vol. 1: 1885-1940*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1972, p. 792.

[3]Ibid., p. 793.

[4]Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, Appendix D, clearly states that our doctrine consists of three components: fundamental principles; tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP); and terminology and symbols. In the past, we have done a fairly good job of emphasizing the latter two. Exercises at our training centers always focus on TTP and our schoolhouses, especially those that educate officers, are obsessed with the exact usage of our "professional language." However, the first component usually has been, at best, an afterthought. This is mostly due to the fact that memorizing drills out of a manual and the doctrinal definitions of terms is far easier than the thoughtful application of fundamental principles in decisionmaking within the context of new and unrehearsed situations.

[5]Colonel Haskins is the former commander of 198th Brigade Combat Team, Fort Benning, GA. In that position, he implemented an outcomes-based approach at every level within his command from basic training of enlisted soldiers to the development of captains at the Infantry captain career course. He is currently the director of the Department of Military Instruction at West Point.

[6]The 'professionalism' that I refer to involves a never-ending dedication to the study of the profession of arms with the intent to improve one's ability to lead in combat. I am not talking about the 'professionalism' that many today characterize as polite conduct or polished appearance. Many of the most effective military leaders in history were rough in appearance and speech, but they knew how to achieve victory. This is what we should be striving to instill in our soldiers, NCOs, and officers. 'Spit and polish' does not win in combat and a soldier with shiny boots is not necessarily the one that will be the best under fire.

[7]Headquarters, Department of the Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Regulation 350-70, *A Systems Approach to Training, Management, Processes, and Products*, U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), Washington, DC, 9 March 1999.

[8]Headquarters, Department of Army, Soldier Training Publication (STP) 21-24, Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks (SMCT), *Warrior Leader Skills Level 2, 3, and 4*, GPO, Washington, DC, September 2008.

[9]William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1985, pp. 91-97.

[10]Ibid., p. 41.

[11]Ibid., p. 44.

[12]Patton, p. 317.

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United States Postal Service Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

Publication Title: *ARMOR.* Publication Number: 0000-2420. Filing Date: 23 September 2009. Issue Frequency: Bimonthly. Number of Issues Published Annually: 6. Annual Subscription Price: $27.00.

Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: U.S. Army Armor Center, ATTN: ATZK-DAS-A, 201 6th Avenue, Suite 378, Fort Knox, Hardin County, Kentucky 40121-5721. *Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher:* U.S. Army Armor Center, ATTN: ATZK-DAS-A, 201 6th Avenue, Suite 378, Fort Knox, Hardin County, Kentucky 40121-5721. *Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor:* Publisher, U.S. Army Armor Center, ATTN: ATZK-DAS-A, 201 6th Avenue, Suite 378, Fort Knox, KY 40121-5721; Editor/Managing Editor, Christy Bourgeois, U.S. Army Armor Center, ATTN: ATZK-DAS-A, 201 6th Avenue, Suite 378, Fort Knox, KY 40121-5271. *Owner:* Department of the Army. *Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities:* None. *Tax Status:* The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes: Has not changed during preceding 12 months.

Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: September-October 2009.

Extent and Nature of Circulation:

Legitimate Paid and/or Requested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail). *Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months:* Total Number of Copies (Net press run), 5,017; (1) Outside-County Paid/Requested Mail Subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 – 4,028; (2) In-County Paid/Requested Mail Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 – 4; (3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid or Requested Distribution Outside USPS – 340; (4) Requested Copies Distributed by Other Mail Classes Through the USPS – 50; Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 4,422. Nonrequested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail): (1) Outside-County Nonrequested Copies, as Stated on PS Form 3541 – 0; (2) In-County Nonrequested Copies Stated on PS Form 3541 – 0; (3) Nonrequested Copies Distributed Through the USPS by Other Classes of Mail – 78. Nonrequested Copies Distributed Outside the Mail – 357. Total Nonrequested Distribution: 435. Total Distribution: 4,857. Copies not Distributed: 160. Total: 5,017.

Legitimate Paid and/or Requested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail). *No. Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date:* Total Number of Copies (Net press run), 5,000; (1) Outside-County Paid/Requested Mail Subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541 – 4,091; (2) In-County Paid/Requested Mail Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 – 5; (3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid or Requested Distribution Outside USPS – 340; (4) Requested Copies Distributed by Other Mail Classes Through the USPS – 76; Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 4,512. Nonrequested Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail): (1) Outside-County Nonrequested Copies, as Stated on PS Form 3541 – 0; (2) In-County Nonrequested Copies Stated on PS Form 3541 – 0; (3) Nonrequested Copies Distributed Through the USPS by Other Classes of Mail – 64; (4) Nonrequested Copies Distributed Outside the Mail – 158. Total Nonrequested Distribution: 222. Total Distribution: 4,734. Copies not Distributed: 266. Total: 5,000.