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Training for Special Forces Assessment and Selection: What I Would Do the Same and What I Would Do Differently after Eight Years of Tactical Strength and Conditioning Experience

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Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Mark Christiani and do not reflect views of the United States Army, United States' military, or O2X.

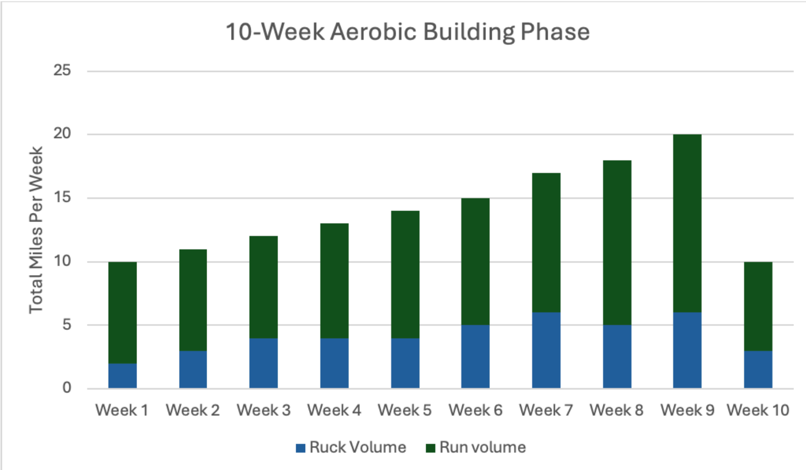
Abstract

Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) is designed to evaluate candidates for service in United States Army Special Forces by exposing individuals to prolonged physical and psychological stress under austere and unpredictable conditions. Performance at SFAS is not determined by isolated physical attributes (i.e., how many push-ups one can do), but by the interaction of multiple fitness characteristics and capacity to sustain output under cumulative fatigue. In 2013, I entered the US Army with an 18X contract, a pathway that significantly constrained the time available for targeted physical preparation prior to SFAS. My training approach during this period lacked structured progression, strategic prioritization, and alignment with the specific demands of selection. While this approach resulted in strong performance in endurance-based events, it revealed meaningful limitations during strength-dependent and task-variable phases of the course. Now, with professional experience as a strength and conditioning (S&C) coach working in tactical environments, I can more clearly evaluate both the effective and deficient aspects of S&C preparation. This article reflects on that experience and proposes an applied framework for enhanced SFAS preparation.

Introduction

Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) occupies a

Image 1—Shown above, on the far left, is the author graduating from United States Army Ranger School Class 2-16.



Graph 1—Shown above is a ten-week aerobic-building phase. Week 10 is a deload, before adding more intense training.

unique position within US military training pipelines. Unlike standardized physical fitness assessments or Military Occupational Schools (MOS) schools, SFAS is intentionally ambiguous in structure, pacing, and evaluation criteria. Its purpose is not to identify the fastest runner or strongest lifter but rather to assess whether an individual can adapt, persist, and remain effective under prolonged physical and psychological stress. Physical preparation is therefore not a standalone determinant of success—it shapes how candidates experience fatigue, uncertainty, and interpersonal strain throughout the course.

Despite this reality, preparation for SFAS is often framed in overly simplistic terms, emphasizing extreme workouts, repeated "gut checks," or simulated selection events. Such approaches frequently confuse exposure with adaptation. While suffering is unavoidable during SFAS, poorly structured preparation increases the likelihood that physical limitations become the primary driver of failure rather than an amplifier of psychological stress. Meaning, repeatedly "smoking" oneself without rest or variation can cause more harm than good.

In 2013, I enlisted in the US Army with an 18X contract, which guaranteed the opportunity to attend SFAS following basic training, airborne school, and the Special Operations Preparation Course (SOPC). The 18X pipeline presents a distinct preparation problem. Candidates transition rapidly from civilian life into a rigid institutional environment where discretionary training time is limited and inconsistent. Unlike conventional soldiers or officers who may have months or years to prepare, 18X candidates often arrive at SFAS with minimal opportunity for structured, progressive physical development outside of mandated training.

At the time, my preparation relied heavily on effort and consistency rather than deliberate structure (i.e., going hard with no real direction). With the benefit of professional experience as a tactical strength and conditioning (S&C) coach, I now recognize both the strengths and shortcomings of that approach. This article examines SFAS preparation as a constrained performance problem and outlines an applied framework informed by lived experience, coaching practice, and established physiological principles.

Training Under Constraint in the 18X Pipeline

The 18X pipeline restricts both training choices and recovery. Following basic combat training and airborne school, candidates navigate a fragmented schedule dominated by formal instruction, administrative demands, and short periods between formal schools. SOPC provides structured physical preparation, but outside of that environment candidates are largely responsible for managing readiness with limited guidance and limited time.

During this period, my training followed a repetitive but loosely defined pattern. Most mornings were devoted to sustained running efforts, typically ranging from three to six miles at a moderate pace. Evening sessions consisted of improvised S&C work, pairing resistance exercises in supersets ,followed by low-impact cardiovascular work on a bike, rower, or elliptical machine. This sequence was repeated multiple times per session. Ruck marching occurred approximately once per week, usually for four miles, with inconsistent load, pace, and intent.

This structure was maintained three to five days per week through airborne school (at the United States Army Airborne School) and the two weeks preceding SFAS. There was no long-term plan, no deliberate progression of volume or intensity, and no systematic evaluation of adaptation. Training decisions were driven primarily by availability and perceived effort rather than by an explicit model of performance development. While intensity was often high, volume fluctuated unpredictably, and exercise selection was largely based on what I liked to do.

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Performance Outcomes at SFAS

Despite its lack of structure, this approach produced meaningful performance outcomes. I performed well in endurance-based events, including timed

Component	Example Movements	Intensity	Volume Per Session	Purpose
Primary Lower Body Lift	Trap Bar Deadlift, Back Squat, Front Squat	75–85% 1RM	4–5 sets × 3–6 reps	Increase maximal force production and posterior chain strength
Secondary Lower Body Lift	Rear-Foot Elevated Split Squat, Romanian Deadlift, Step-Up	65–75% 1RM	3–4 sets × 6–12 reps	Improve stability and load tolerance
Primary Upper Body Lift	Weighted Pull-Up, Bench Press, Overhead Press, Barbell Row	75–85% 1RM	4–5 sets × 3–6 reps	Develop upper-body force reserve
Upper Body Accessory	Dumbbell Row, Dips, Incline Press, Face Pull, Pull-Up	Moderate load	3–4 sets × 8–15 reps	Reinforce structural balance and shoulder durability
Loaded Carries	Farmer Carry, Sandbag Carry, Suitcase Carry, Front Rack Carry	Heavy but submaximal	4–8 × 50–100 m (200m–800 m total)	Develop grip, trunk stiffness, and real-world load tolerance
Trunk Stability	Pallof Press, Ab Wheel, Side Plank, Heavy Isometric Holds	Moderate	3–4 sets × 20–45 sec	Maintain spinal integrity under fatigue

Table 1—Resistance Training Overview. Legend—m: meters; reps: repetitions; RM: repetition maximum; sec: seconds.

runs and ruck marches. Long movements felt manageable, recovery between bouts of work was relatively rapid, and fatigue from endurance events rarely became a limiting factor. This result is additionally meaningful as my SFAS occurred in the summer, where at Camp Mackall, North Carolina, both the temperatures and humidity are high. These outcomes are consistent with the central role of aerobic capacity in prolonged military tasks and load carriage performance.[1,2]

Equally important was the psychological familiarity with fatigue. Frequent exposure to sustained effort reduced the novelty of discomfort. By the time that I arrived at SFAS, being tired was not disruptive but expected. This familiarity likely supported emotional regulation and persistence during prolonged events, consistent with research demonstrating that aerobic fitness (i.e., endurance capacity) moderates perceived exertion and stress responses under load.[3]

However, these positive attributes were accompanied by clear limitations. Tasks requiring force production under load, particularly during team week, exposed deficits in absolute strength and musculoskeletal reserve. Heavy carries, awkward object manipulation, and prolonged lifting tasks revealed an inability to sustain force output when demands deviated from linear locomotion. While aerobic capacity remained intact, strength became a limiting factor.

This outcome highlights a critical distinction: aerobic capacity determines how long a candidate can continue moving, but strength determines whether the candidate can meet the upper boundary of task demands. Furthermore, when one possesses less strength, it takes greater endurance to perform a task, as it is more taxing on the body's systems. In this context, strength functions as reserve capacity rather than as a primary performance driver. For example, a marathon runner would have the endurance to perform tasks associated with SFAS, but as they lack the optimal strength, it would require greater effort to perform each task, thus draining their energy, causing unaccustomed fatigue, and reducing durability.

Reframing SFAS Preparation through a Tactical Strength and Conditioning Lens

With eight years of professional experience coaching tactical populations, my belief is that SFAS preparation can be more accurately framed as a problem in constraint (e.g., time, equipment, nutrition) management rather than fitness maximization. Selection does not reward peak outputs; it rewards robustness.

Physiologically, SFAS is dominated by prolonged submaximal work performed under load, compounded by sleep deprivation and minor caloric restriction. Aerobic capacity underpins nearly every task, influencing movement efficiency, fuel utilization (i.e., carbohydrates, protein, fat), and recovery between efforts.[4] Strength—while necessary—is rarely expressed maximally. Instead, it determines how close a given task comes to an individual's maximal capacity. Simply stated, being stronger makes tasks easier!

Number of Repetitions	Percent of Repetition Maximum
1	100%
2	95%
3	93%
4	90%
5	87%
6	85%
7	83%
8	80%
9	77%
10	75%
11	70%
12	67%

Table 2—Percent of One-Repetition Maximum and Repetitions Able to Be Conducted.

When strength is not optimal, otherwise manageable tasks become disproportionately fatiguing. This accelerates physical breakdown and amplifies cognitive and emotional stress. Conversely, when strength reserve is sufficient, tasks are easier (submaximal), allowing candidates to allocate their cognition toward navigation, communication, and decision-making. This reframing shifts the

Exercise	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
Back Squat	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)
Romanian Deadlift	10 reps at 65% (2 Reps in Reserve)	10 reps at 65% (2 Reps in Reserve)	10 reps at 65% (2 Reps in Reserve)	
Bench Press	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)	6 reps at 80% (2 Reps in Reserve)
Pull-Ups	8–10 reps	8–10 reps	8–10 reps	
Farmer Carry	50–75m at 40+lbs	50–75m at 40+lbs	50–75m at 40+lbs	50–75m at 40+lbs
Side Plank	30 seconds per side	30 seconds per side	30 seconds per side	

Table 3—Resistance Training Session Example.

goal of preparation away from maximizing isolated physical qualities and toward ensuring that no single demand becomes disproportionately limiting under fatigue; in other words, one needs to be well-rounded in their preparation.

Aerobic Development as the Primary Driver of Performance

Aerobic capacity (endurance capability) is the most consistent physical determinant of performance during SFAS. Prolonged movement under load, repeated work bouts, and incomplete recovery all rely heavily on oxidative metabolism (i.e., endurance). Research across military populations consistently demonstrates strong relationships between aerobic fitness, ruck marching performance, and task sustainability.[5,6]

If preparing today without extreme time constraints, I would prioritize the development of a large aerobic base before introducing significant intensity. Initial training would begin with a combined weekly running and rucking volume of approximately eight to ten miles, progressing gradually by five to ten percent per week. This conservative progression aligns with established endurance training principles and reduces injury risk during load carriage adaptation.[7]

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Until reaching a weekly volume of approximately twenty miles, nearly all aerobic work would be conducted at low to moderate intensity. A simple method to determine if one is exercising at a low to moderate intensity is to use the "talk test." In a talk test, if one can have a conversation while exercising, then they are exercising at a low to moderate intensity. This approach is supported by evidence demonstrating that low-intensity, high-volume training improves mitochondrial density, capillarization, and movement economy while preserving recovery capacity.[8] Only after establishing a stable aerobic base would higher-intensity interval work be introduced, serving to enhance speed and efficiency rather than compensate for inadequate volume.

Ruck training would follow a similar progression. Rather than treating ruck marches as weekly stress tests, they would be approached as a technical and physiological skill requiring gradual exposure to load, duration, and terrain. Abrupt increases in ruck load or distance are associated with elevated injury risk without proportional performance benefit.[9]

Strength Training as Reserve Capacity

Strength training represents one of the most misunderstood components of SFAS preparation. In my original approach, strength work was largely metabolic in nature (i.e., maximum number of push-ups, sit-ups, and squats compared to becoming stronger in those exercises), blurring the distinction between conditioning and strength development. While this approach increased general fatigue tolerance, it did little to improve force production or load tolerance.

From a modern tactical S&C perspective, strength should be treated as reserve capacity. The objective is not to maximize lifting performance but rather to ensure that common SFAS tasks fall well below maximal effort. This approach aligns with research demonstrating that relative strength, rather than maximal strength alone, contributes meaningfully to occupational task performance and injury resilience in military populations.[10]

Two to three full-body workout strength sessions per week would be sufficient (i.e., not body building style workouts). These workouts should emphasize compound movements that develop posterior chain strength, trunk stiffness, and grip endurance (as seen in Table 1). Such training increases the margin between task demands and maximal capacity, reducing the likelihood that strength becomes a limiting factor during prolonged or unpredictable events. Most sets should also stop with two to four repetitions left in reserve, rather than training to complete failure. Leaving a small amount in the tank allows strength to build while limiting unnecessary fatigue, which is important when strength training must be balanced with high volumes of running and rucking during SFAS preparation.[11] Table 2 depicts the estimated relationship between the percent of an individual's one repetition maximum and the repetitions able to be conducted using a certain percentage of the repetition maximum.[12]

Load Tolerance, Tissue Capacity, and Task Variability

One of the most significant deficiencies in my original preparation was limited exposure to irregular, non-cyclical tasks (such as carrying unbalanced objects on uneven terrain in uncomfortable positions). SFAS does not assess movement quality in controlled environments. Rather, SFAS assesses adaptability under fatigue.

Load tolerance and tissue capacity are critical determinants of durability during selection. Research in military populations demonstrates that gradual exposure to load and task variability improves connective tissue resilience while reducing overuse injury risk associated with abrupt increases in marching distance, load, or frequency.[13] Recent international work examining soldier load carriage further emphasizes that effective conditioning strategies

Farmer Carry | Sandbag Carry | Suitcase Carry | Pallof Press (Start) | Pallof Press (Finish) must integrate progressive exposure to load with concurrent aerobic and strength development rather than relying on isolated or episodic ruck training.[14] Simply stated, strength training done properly makes you better, more resilient, and less prone to injuries from carrying heavy external loads.

Intentional inclusion of asymmetrical loading, odd-object carries, and prolonged low-intensity work under load develops coordination, grip endurance, and trunk stability in ways that traditional gym-based training does not. Examples include odd-object loaded carries—like sandbags, farmer, or suitcase carries. Importantly, these exposures should remain progressive and submaximal. The goal is not to replicate SFAS events but to prepare the musculoskeletal system to tolerate them without excessive fatigue accumulation or injury risk.

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Broader Implications for SFAS Candidates

While the 18X pipeline magnifies time constraints, the principles discussed here apply broadly. Most candidates who fail SFAS do not fail due to lack of effort but because their preparation does not align with the demands of selection. Overemphasis on high-intensity conditioning, maximal strength development, or repeated simulated selection events often displaces more valuable aerobic and durability-focused work. Consistency, progression, and strategic prioritization remain the most influential variables. Well-structured training over time will outperform improvised intensity, particularly in environments where robustness and adaptability are paramount.

Lastly, the need for the body to recover should never be underestimated. In fact, positive adaptations from exercise only come from recovery. Rest, easy-to-moderate training sessions, hydration, sleep, and recovery days are needed to optimally adapt from training. Table 3 provides a basic, month-long program that displays how I would approach SFAS differently after my experiences as a tactical S&C coach.

Conclusion

SFAS does not reward perfect programming. It rewards candidates who arrive durable, aerobically developed, and capable of adapting under sustained stress. Reflecting on my own preparation, the success that I experienced was driven by consistency and aerobic development, while the limitations that I encountered stemmed from insufficient structure, progression, and reserve capacity.

If preparing today, I would train with clearer priorities, deliberate progression, and a more precise understanding of how physical qualities interact under fatigue. This approach would not eliminate suffering at SFAS, but it would change what fails first. In an environment designed to expose weakness, that distinction is decisive.

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Author Biography

Mark A. Christiani is a O2X Contracted Strength and Conditioning Coach, and Special Operations Army Veteran. He has human performance experience in the worksite wellness, collegiate, and tactical settings. Mark holds a master of science in Sports Medicine from Georgia Southern University and several certifications, including the National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA's) Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist certification and the NSCA's Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach Certification. Currently, he serves as the O2X contracted on-site

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