

The Foundations of Maintenance Support: Training 91As and 91Ms in Advanced Individual Training

by CPT Daniel Lichlyter

When most commanders think about the Soldiers departing the Armor School, they think about filling in their tank crews or scout sections and training them up to unit standards. Some might think about the new lieutenants and their eagerness to take charge of a platoon. Not many would think about the Abrams and Bradley mechanics that, although they may not be part of their modified table of organization and equipment, will be working with their company as a critical part of their support element. Therefore, the same question of “what will this Soldier know when I get him?” is just as applicable to the new mechanics as the scouts and tankers.

Starting as an ‘easy rider’

Training Abrams and Bradley mechanics is the responsibility of Easy Rider Company. Easy Rider Company, in coordination with the Ordnance Training Detachment, both part of 3rd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, is the only pure advanced individual training element within the Armor School, Fort Benning, GA. When we receive our Soldiers, they are basic combat training graduates with training in basic rifle marksmanship, warrior tasks and battle drills and the military traditions expected of every Soldier.

The battalion’s structure is based on a team approach and combined arms-like methodology to training. Easy Rider Company is responsible for Soldiers’ daily mentoring and movement. Their AIT platoon sergeants are much like drill sergeants in that they do a small portion of the training. However, AIT platoon sergeants also have to know the material because they are the ones available throughout the day to assist Soldiers with homework and training while continuing the development of the Soldiers’ physical fitness.

OTD provides the instructors and subject-matter experts on the program of instruction and the expertise on vehicle maintenance. They are the Soldiers’ primary trainers. The instructors are a team of seasoned noncommissioned officers and experienced civilians with decades of experience on the platforms they are training. All NCOs have recent deployment experience and provide the latest “know how” from a tactical environment. The combination of civilian continuity and long experience with NCOs’ recent real-world knowledge greatly enhances training for the newest mechanics. While they bring different perspectives to the training, the ultimate goal is teaching the AIT Soldier how to repair the equipment in accordance with doctrine and the manuals, as well as emerging techniques from the field. They do not allow the compromise of shortcuts on standards.

Maintenance and recovery training

Line commanders should expect the Soldiers coming from 3rd Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, to be competent in the basic skills required to maintain the M1A2 Systems Enhancement Program Version 2 or the M2A3 family of vehicles. Out of a 14-

week course, they spend about four to six weeks focused on turret maintenance and another seven to nine weeks learning hull maintenance. The primary focus is on the 10-level tasks, especially on how to troubleshoot the vehicle, how to fix very basic faults and the basics of recovery. Soldiers graduating also conduct a field exercise in which they have to perform the tasks in a tactical environment.

During this process, Soldiers become familiar, not experts, with several tools and systems. The primary diagnostic tool used is the Maintenance Support Device to assist them in troubleshooting. They also know how to use various towing systems, including a tow cable and tow bar, but they are most practiced on using a tow bar. They have also been familiarized, but not well trained, on the M88A2 vehicle. (In-depth training is provided through the Additional Skill Identifier H8 Track Vehicle Recovery Course, provided to a few outstanding Soldiers.) Also, Soldiers have been taught the uses of the Forward Repair Station. Again, they receive baseline training on all these systems so, although they can’t run a shop by themselves, the NCOs at their unit won’t have to start from scratch.

If commanders see that they are receiving mechanics with the H8 ASI, they have received more training as part of the Tracked Vehicle Recovery Course. AIT is open to Soldiers across the Army; the privates and specialists who go directly from AIT to the tracked vehicle recovery course are selected to attend based on their AIT academic-order-of-merit list. Priority goes to those slated to go to recovery teams. They receive an additional four weeks of training, which covers the M88A1 and M88A2 in-depth and the various tools that can be used for recovery (i.e., tow bars, winch and boom). They also spend a good amount of time on the Sandy Hook Vehicle Recovery Course on Fort Benning. Once they successfully complete the course, they receive the H8 ASI.

One of the recurring themes the unit instills in its Soldiers is the ability to find an answer. They are trained to ask senior NCOs and civilian mechanics for help and guidance. They know how to research using the -10 technical manuals and higher-level maintenance manuals and schematics. They know how to use both digital manuals and resources in addition to the hard-copy technical manuals. They are capable of doing research on their own to solve problems they may face.

While we attempt to provide as much hands-on experience as possible to Soldiers, we simply do not have the time to make them experts on their systems, the maintenance process and recovery. The battalion’s goal is to produce mechanics that can easily make good team members. It will take unit level leadership, experience and time to turn them into leaders of maintenance teams.

Training initiatives

In addition to maintenance tasks, Easy Rider Company ensures that Soldiers remain trained on Skill Level I warrior tasks to keep



Class 05M Soldiers show what they learned in a field environment. (Photo by SFC Dennis M. Dutton)

them fresh. They spend one to two weeks refreshing several of the key tasks they learned in BCT. They conduct training on land navigation, perform three Army physical-fitness tests and conduct M4 training with the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 system. Commanders can expect Soldiers to retain these skills during the 3½-month course.

While the focus will always remain on basic maintenance skills, the battalion has identified several other topics in which Soldiers need to be skillful. Since mechanics control a large amount of property, the Soldiers coming out of the course will have an increased understanding of property accountability and responsibility. Also, 3-81 Armor trains its Soldiers in discipline and leadership beyond their grade, capable of making the right basic decisions in the absence of guidance. This applies to both the maintenance bay and in basic military leadership. Finally, 3-81 Armor is preparing to transition from training on the M1A2 SEP V2 to the SEP V3 to be able to keep up with state-of-the-art technology.

The battalion is very excited to be piloting several Army Learning Model 2015 initiatives, including use of the newly developed mobile-classroom trainer and a barracks learning center. The BLC is military computer network that provides the mechanic access to the latest technical manuals and to resources on-line that will support their continued learning and troubleshooting.

The MCT, which is still under development by OTD, is a camera mounted to a head harness and linked to a computer that projects the image on a screen. An instructor or Soldier wears the camera while conducting a task, which is under observation by the rest of the class observing in seats.

Each Soldier gets an opportunity to work with the vehicle and the instructor, and this system ensures that those not doing the physical labor are still effectively learning when they are not the ones on the vehicle. This video also can be shown later as part of the BLC by Soldiers studying – and ideally, months down the

road as they are performing these tasks for real for the first time in their unit motorpools. It also enhances training for the individual Soldier who is no longer attempting to look over the shoulder of the demonstrator turning the wrench. While not intended to replace the instructor, this tool improves the learning of the individual mechanic by keeping him more engaged in the training and able to see multiple demonstrations of a solution.

The end goal is to establish a capability for units downrange, with a camera and video system, to be able to use real-time video feed (Skype-like) to the Ordnance School or to OTD, and work through a problem with us from anywhere in the world. In the event that a field service representative is not available, this capability will become critical for maintaining a unit's equipment. This system is still being developed, but the Soldiers graduating from 3-81 will have a basic understanding of the system and will be trained individuals as the system is fielded.

Commanders should expect 91As and 91Ms to come to their unit with a basic understanding of their specific vehicle. They will be able to use most of the specialized tools of their trade while retaining their proficiency in the basic common tasks of Soldiers. However, most importantly, they are willing and capable of working through the problems presented to them to ensure the

mission gets accomplished. They will ensure their 19-series brothers are not waiting for them when it comes time for the mission.



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ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

- AIT** – advanced individual training
- ASI** – additional skill identifier
- BCT** – basic combat training
- BLC** – barracks learning center
- MCT** – mobile-classroom trainer
- NCO** – noncommissioned officer
- OTD** – Ordnance Training Detachment
- SBCT** – Stryker brigade combat team
- SEP** – Systems Enhancement Program