

Gunner's Seat: Individual Crewmember Task Proficiency

by CSM Alan Hummel

Sullivan Cup is right around the corner, where our top tank crews will compete against each other as well as top crews from the U.S. Marine Corps and our North Atlantic Treaty Organization partners. The deciding factor for the overall winning crew may very well be how proficient each individual crewmember is at their assigned position. Core skills and competencies are the starting point. Mastery will set apart the winning crew.

Individual crewmember proficiency is the cornerstone to a successful gunnery, but how do we get to a high level of crew proficiency or mastery? We get there through our noncommissioned officers, starting with the battalion and company master gunners, then down to the individual tank commanders.

Master gunners need to be active in advising and assisting their commanders in developing a focused and detailed unit training plan (UTP). The commander and his master gunner must take a look at the following as a minimum when they develop their plan: upcoming operational deployments, assigned missions, crew turbulence, training days available, training dollars available, resources available, unit-specific mission-essential task list, and past strengths and weaknesses within the unit. The master gunner must advise the commander on all the resources available for training their tank crews.

Once the unit training plan is complete, the onus falls on the platoon leadership to begin the training, with oversight from the commander, first sergeant and master gunner. It is incumbent upon the platoon sergeant and platoon leader as well as each tank commander to clearly communicate the importance of each crewmember's job in the overall success of the crew. Platoon leadership should develop their training plans based on and nested with the companies and battalions, and it should be gunnery-focused. Once the platoon leadership has developed their training plans, then individual tank commanders need to identify space within the plan where they can take advantage of opportunity training to reinforce individual crewmember tasks as well as crew collective tasks. Simple hip-pocket training events such as chair drills, gun-lay exercises and dry-fire exercises will add repetition to gain mastery and can all be done on short notice and with very few resources.

Tank commanders are ultimately responsible for training each crewmember at their specific position as well as cross-training so any member of the crew can operate at another position. The tank commander must clearly state to each crewmember what the standards are for their position and use their time available to constantly and consistently train them up to and beyond that standard. Simply put, the tank crew is a highly integrated team whose ultimate success depends on cohesion and communication at the lowest level.

Competitions such as the Sullivan Cup highlight excellence and encourage a spirit of competition in the execution of training. Most importantly, though, gunneries and gunnery training conducted to standard will continue to build and retain a generation of noncommissioned officers who possess the fundamental skills required to maintain our lethality edge. Future lethal crews do not suddenly arise; they are grown through hard work by NCOs executing standard-based fundamental training and who take advantage of training-time opportunities that exist within a well-developed unit training plan.