

Tough Vehicles Require Tougher Crews

Why We Must Re-establish a 'Gunnery Culture' ... and How to Do It

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Over most of the last 15 years, gunnery training has been largely neglected in favor of other priorities within our armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs). While many "back in the day" stories continued to circulate among our senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and field-grade officers, gunnery took a backseat to other training tasks more closely associated with stability operations and counterinsurgency. Therefore an entire generation of 19-series Soldiers and junior- to mid-level NCOs grew up without gaining the high level of technical and tactical expertise on armored combat vehicles their predecessors possessed in the 1980s and 1990s.

While this new generation of individuals became very good at mounted patrolling on mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles and at conducting engagements with local tribal leaders, an alarming number know very little about the M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank or the M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle. Even more damaging is the fact that, over the years following the launch of extended campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, a culture developed within our ABCTs that to a great extent discarded the importance of gunnery. A large portion of our 19-series NCOs came to believe they did not need to master the maintenance and operation of their mechanized platforms. In the process, the technical and tactical expertise once widely resident in the Armored Force withered away to the dangerously low levels we see today.

The current global-security environment demands that our armored-vehicle crews be able to maneuver to a position of advantage and rapidly acquire, engage and destroy enemy forces at extended ranges from the turret of their armored vehicles. Therefore, the Army should return stabilized gunnery to its rightful place at the forefront of training within our ABCTs. Although much work has been done in this area, the Army still has much left to do. Army leaders, especially our NCOs, must re-establish a "gunnery culture" that values technical expertise on our armored vehicles, demands excellence in the area of maintenance and focuses on gunnery as the building block of training readiness for the ABCT. To establish such a culture, we must effectively manage our crews, incentivize high levels of performance on the gunnery range and develop leaders so our "bench" of expertise – our master gunners, in particular – is sufficient to sustain readiness into the future. Without the re-establishment of a true gunnery culture, all gains will only be temporary.

Building (and sustaining) crews

The first step in re-establishing a gunnery culture is the effective management of our most valuable asset: our people. The armored-vehicle crew is the basic unit of combat power within an ABCT. Crews must be built into cohesive, lethal teams that work together seamlessly to bring mobile, precision firepower to bear on the enemy. This cannot be done on a "plug and play" basis. As with any other organization, it is important to put the right individual at the right place at the right time. There are three key elements to building the types of armored-vehicle crews our ABCTs need: identification of talent, certification and training, and longevity.

Not every private fresh out of advanced individual training is ready to be a gunner on an Abrams or Bradley. Not every sergeant is ready to serve as a vehicle commander. While some individuals possess a unique aptitude, most need further development to build the technical and tactical knowledge that will someday manifest itself as expertise. In any case, it is up to our NCO leaders to teach the next generation everything there is to know about the maintenance and operation of our armored vehicles.

Along the way certain individuals will stand out as they demonstrate an ability to assume increased responsibility. Platoon sergeants and first sergeants should identify these Soldiers and NCOs and then place them into the pool of candidates from which they will select the next group of gunners and vehicle commanders. An order-of-merit list based on a personal assessment of the candidates is necessary so that the moment a vacancy opens for one of the key crew positions, the troop/company leadership already knows who is going to step up.

Along with identification of talent, leadership up to the squadron/battalion level should account for the normal personnel turbulence associated with the Army's permanent-change-of-station (PCS) assignment cycles. This is the great challenge of sustainable readiness. Ensuring the maximum longevity of gunners and vehicle commanders is

critical. Stabilizing a crew for 18 months or longer is ideal so the crew can stay together throughout gunnery, maneuver training and a deployment. However, this is often not possible. First sergeants, squadron/battalion command sergeants major and the unit S-1 must regularly review crew rosters to project personnel losses and gains. Those who lack an acceptable period of longevity should be replaced with an individual who will be remaining longer with the unit.

Units should follow this practice even if it means elevating a more junior Soldier into a gunner or vehicle-commander position. As long as doing so does not professionally disadvantage the individual being displaced, this approach helps posture the unit for the maximum level of readiness over a longer time period.



Figure 1. 4-10 Cavalry scouts engage in gunnery training.

Also, first sergeants and command sergeants major should look to develop their Soldiers and NCOs for the long term. Upon arrival in an ABCT, many cavalry scouts and infantrymen who come from light units and have no previous experience in an armored brigade are intimidated by the transition. Some bring with them a desire to stay in their comfort zone on the ground all the time. They often complain about the challenges and time-consuming nature of maintenance – which is, of course, the lifeblood of mechanized formations. What these attitudes show is a lack of understanding of their roles as NCOs: they are expected to be experts in their craft, including the platforms on which they are going to maneuver. These individuals, and the leaders in charge of them, should see the new assignment as an opportunity.

For example, if a young 19D sergeant arrives in a combined-arms battalion or cavalry squadron with his only previous experience being in a light reconnaissance unit, leaders must avoid the temptation to place him back into a position that closely resembles his last duty assignment. Since this junior NCO already has a significant amount of dismounted experience, he now requires time as a Bradley gunner to provide him with the well-rounded cavalry-scout skills necessary for promotion and professional advancement. More importantly, if the unit fails to get this NCO armored-vehicle experience, the next PCS to another ABCT could possibly find that individual being more of a liability than an asset due to his lack of knowledge.

By following a practice of developing for the long term, leaders at the troop/company level will help correct an Army-wide problem.

Once the hard work is done to get the right people into the right place within the crew roster, keeping them in place until it is the right time to make a change is critical. “Breaking” a crew must be a deliberate decision because it is not simply a matter of moving a Soldier to a new job – it directly impacts the formation’s overall readiness. Squadron or battalion commanders, advised by the command sergeant major, are the decision-makers when it comes to breaking a crew once they are qualified on Gunnery Table VI. In fact, once a crew reaches the “gate to live-fire” in the Bradley Advanced Training System (BATS) or Advanced Gunnery Training System (AGTS), it is likely advisable to make moving any personnel out of that crew at least reportable to the squadron/battalion command team (if not already reserved for approval at that level). While the normal cycle of PCS and end-term-of-service will continue, it’s important that the team does everything it can to mitigate turbulence.

Prioritizing, incentivizing performance

If the Army is going to re-establish and maintain a gunnery culture, leaders have to send a clear signal that gunnery is a priority. They must help get their subordinate leaders and Soldiers excited about shooting the “big bullets.” Friendly competition is a traditional characteristic of gunnery, but many Soldiers today see qualification on Table VI as a formality. In a previous time, gunnery inspired a healthy stress among crews, platoons and companies as each competed to earn recognition as the “Top Gun.” Providing incentives for crews who distinguish themselves as the best within the formation is a great way to nurture a healthy sense of competitiveness and bring back the right mindset.

Just handing out squadron/battalion coins, although a good start, should not be the only gesture. When a crew distinguishes itself as the best within the ranks, emblazoning their names on a plaque prominently displayed in the unit headquarters is a great way to demonstrate that accomplishment’s importance. Gunnery streamers for guidons provide another highly visible symbol to celebrate the team’s achievements. Also, commanders can award Army Achievement Medals for those who score “superior” (800 to 899 points, with eight or more engagements qualified) and Army Commendation Medals for those who score “distinguished” (900 to 1,000 points and nine or more engagements qualified) – both of which not only recognize performance but also help with promotion points for junior Soldiers. Other incentives such as four-day passes can serve as valuable tools to recognize and reward outstanding performance on the gunnery range.

Before any recognition can take place, the commander has to establish a standardized (and easy-to-understand) scoring system so every Soldier in the unit knows what must be done to prove that his crew or troop/company is the best in the formation. In determining the “Top Gun” crew, a unit should begin with the actual score on Gunnery Table VI, but if time allows, commanders can also use other metrics to add a more comprehensive focus to the gunnery competition such as average Army Physical Fitness Test scores or personal-weapons qualification. To the greatest extent possible, the system should be objective. This removes ambiguity and any room for different interpretations of standards.

Whatever scoring system one uses, it should reward the things most important to the command. These include achieving first-time qualification (Q1) and scoring distinguished or superior. In any event, the system should go beyond the calculation of an average score on the qualification table.

How the chain of command requires Soldiers and leaders to spend their time at work also sends a clear message about what is really important to the unit’s leadership. Mandating that crews spend a minimum amount of hours conducting sustainment training in the BATS/AGTS per month even after completing crew qualification communicates that the importance of gunnery does not end with the last round fired on Table VI. Also, if a commander requires that all NCOs in the unit be trained and certified as vehicle crew evaluators, the unit will be better prepared to meet the challenging standards of gunnery because the members of the team will better understand the importance of every task contained in the gunnery-training program.

As part of preparation for the gunnery-skills test (GST), the squadron-level master gunners should identify and certify specific leaders within the formation to evaluate during GST. This will ensure that the standards and expectations for this vital testing gate in the gunnery-training progression are uniform across the formation. With a cadre highly proficient and certified evaluators in place, the master gunners can focus on spot-checking stations to ensure testing is being done properly. Because they will then be able to take a step back and observe GST rather than being decisively engaged in the actual testing itself, master gunners will be better able to identify those who

excel and show the type of aptitude and proficiency that mark future gunners, vehicle commanders and master-gunner candidates. Ideally, being selected to serve as a member of the GST cadre should become a sought-after recognition of a Soldier's skill.



Figure 2. A tank from 4-10 Cavalry fires during training.

These techniques also apply to the selection and certification instructor-operators (IOs) for BATS and AGTS. These individuals have to fully understand the gunnery standards and be disciplined enough to refrain from taking shortcuts when no one of higher rank is watching. The right NCOs acting as IOs will be able to coach struggling crews through their problems. Identifying these crews ahead of time helps decrease even greater difficulties later in the gunnery-training cycle. Perhaps most importantly, if these leaders enforce high standards in BATS and AGTS, those same high standards will be evident on the gunnery range later. Good habits are built early!

Building 'bench'

While cohesive and lethal armored vehicle crews are the building blocks of readiness in an ABCT, almost everything related to building those teams starts with the unit master gunner. These school-trained subject-matter experts should be involved in the daily training and development of crews. A master gunner should not just be the person crews go to when things break – which is often what happens in some units – but he should be an expert trainer, pulling crewmembers aside at every opportunity to provide that additional level of technical insight only he can provide.

A unit can never have too many master gunners, but availability of resources and qualified personnel constrain the number of NCOs who can attend the school. Therefore, when an opportunity arises, units should be ready to take advantage of it. This requires early identification of young NCOs who possess the talent, work ethic and desire to become a master gunner. Since there is no one better suited to identify a promising candidate than one who has already completed the school, the unit master gunner should constantly be on the lookout for suitable individuals. This can be done during daily gunnery-skills training, command maintenance or in the BATS/AGTS.

Once the master gunner identifies a list of candidates, he should work closely with the troop/company first sergeant and the command sergeant major to establish an order-of-merit list based on a holistic assessment of individuals that includes physical fitness, attitude, leadership ability, discipline and aptitude for the job. The unit should be looking for leaders who are willing and able to perform above their pay grade, put in the effort to understand their combat platform in the finest detail, and then teach others what they learn.

Identification of candidates is only the first step. Following that, the unit must do everything it can to prepare individuals for the rigors of master-gunner school. The course is one of the most challenging the Army has to offer. Since opportunities to attend the school are usually limited, it is vital to ensure that those who attend are postured to meet the high standards and graduate.

Once students for the master-gunner school are identified, master gunners should establish a Master Gunner Candidacy Course (MGCC) to further train them to succeed in school. The program of instruction can include practice evaluations and, if there is opportunity, follow the actual master gunner through some key aspects of his duties at the troop and squadron levels. To maximize resources across the formation and ensure visibility from the commander and command sergeant major, the MGCC should be run at the squadron/battalion, but the troop/company master gunners should be intimately involved in the instruction and mentorship of candidates. Passing the course will allow the commander to have confidence that these leaders will pass the actual master-gunner course, bringing credit, expertise and lethality to the unit as a whole.

Conclusion

A gunnery culture starts at the top with commanders prioritizing these vital combat skills in their training plans, but it will not take root without our NCOs' personal investment. Success depends on mutually supporting efforts up and down the chain of command.

Few of the recommendations outlined previously are new. In fact, many of these were fairly common among mechanized units before the beginning of our campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, years of neglect have left our Army with a deficit in the tactical and technical skills necessary for highly lethal ABCTs. Lots of work has been done already to correct this, but much more work is needed to bring back a gunnery culture.

The ever-changing security challenges throughout the world now demand a return to combined-arms maneuver. Getting back to decisive-action training will ensure our ability to assure our allies and deter possible adversaries. Gunnery skills are the key to building lethal crews and effective, combat-ready units.

Restoring a gunnery culture is not about merely returning to the "good old days." On the contrary, this effort is a matter of the gravest strategic importance to our national security. The culture is beginning to shift, but it is up to us to keep the momentum!

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
AGTS – Advanced Gunnery Training System
BATS – Bradley Advanced Training System
GST – gunnery-skills training
IO – instructor-operator
MGCC – Master Gunner Candidacy Course
NCO – noncommissioned officer
PCS – permanent change of station
Q1 – first-time qualification