

Defense of Harmony Church: 1-81 Armor Training in Coronavirus-19 Conditions

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The 1st Battalion, 81st Armor Regiment, as part of the 194th Armored Brigade strategy informed by the Armor School and Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE), shaped its response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic using the characteristics of the defense where applicable. The battalion planned and prepared an area defense of its key terrain to create the conditions to conduct its operational mission.

The 1-81 Armor conducts 19K Armor Crewman one-station unit training (OSUT), 91A Abrams Tank System Maintainer advanced individual training (AIT), 91M Bradley Fighting Vehicle System Maintainer AIT and the additional-skill identifier (ASI) H8 Heavy Vehicle Recovery Course. The battalion continues to execute and assess the COVID-19 area defense while generating trained tankers and mechanics for the Army.



Figure 1. Trainees thrived in the “bubble” and kept practicing crucial 19K10 tasks in the field.

Although comparing our COVID-19 response to combat operations can break down if attempted too literally, once we started thinking about the virus as an “enemy,” the battalion’s leaders responded quickly to the familiar language and concepts of the defense. We found this framework gave us a commonly understood structure on which we could arrange and analyze multiple streams of information about the pandemic.

By early March 2020, our chain of command on Fort Benning, GA, focused on working through the best information available and designing the best courses of action. One thing we knew: If COVID-19 widely infected the training base and prevented training, readiness for operational armor brigade combat teams (ABCTs) would decrease. The battalion assessed mass infections (company-sized outbreaks) as the “enemy’s” most-dangerous course of action (MDCoA).

Plan

Once we recognized those dangers, 1-81 Armor immediately planned against MDCoA. We developed a simple area defense. We knew we had to create specific conditions before our tank and wrench companies could conduct their OSUT and AIT training. We made a simple plan and published our operations order (OPORD) March 13. The plan essentially outlined social distancing, hand-washing and barracks-sanitization instructions.

Looking back on our efforts, we realized we still had a lot to learn. To highlight this point, recently we looked at the pictures from the OPORD brief where the battalion leaders were proudly standing together beside a National Training Center-grade terrain model, and all recipients stood shoulder-to-shoulder getting the order. We did pass around hand sanitizer, at least.

The battalion received confirmation and backbriefs and then conducted our rehearsal March 14, again shoulder-to-shoulder. Company commanders had several questions we could not answer, so we planned Fragmentary Order (FRAGO) 1 to follow shortly. Our U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) leadership disseminated all lessons-learned from U.S. Army leaders in Korea and Europe. We read and watched GEN Robert Abrams' press conference from March 13. We watched BG Christopher Norrie's video address from Grafenwoehr, Germany, about why we must continue training. We learned from our sister training brigades like 316th Cavalry Brigade's published guidance. We integrated those lessons and techniques into FRAGO 1, which was much more executable. FRAGO 1 contained the mission and commander's intent we used through May 2020.

Mission: 1-81 Armor defends Area of Operations (AO) Red Knight (all battalion buildings, training areas, ranges, facilities, vehicles, simulators, classrooms, break rooms, etc.) against the spread of COVID-19 from March 17 to May 31 to allow companies to transition civilians into Soldiers in OSUT and AIT.

Purpose. *The No. 1 priority is to prevent the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19 and prepare for COVID-19-infected Soldiers and Department of the Army civilians if prevention fails. These counter-COVID operations give us the cover we require as we conduct our operational mission: Generate combat power for brigade combat teams (BCTs) by transforming volunteers into ARMOR READY Soldiers.*

Key tasks.

1. Security is the first priority of work. *Before COVID-19, the gate guards established security at the gates of Fort Benning. Now, COVID-19 is our relentless and dangerous enemy. The new enemy must be engaged at every building and training area, at every workstation and vehicle, in every classroom and during every chow period. "Protect the bubble" with entry-control points (ECPs), screening and hand-washing before entry anywhere.*

2. Protect the force. *If you are not ordered to work, then stay home and stay healthy. The battalion limited training to graduation requirements with few exceptions. We must have healthy trainers to carry on the operational mission. Screening, cleaning everything, hand-washing and seclusion – if required – protects our trainers, families, communities and trainees.*

3. Nothing is "business as usual." *Use all your experience, discipline, intelligence and initiative to fight COVID-19 while conducting our operational mission. Our ABCTs will not get a second chance at being ready when and if our nation calls. We cannot stop training; we cannot afford to.*

4. Don't ignore yourself. *We are fighting a state-of-mind hard-earned in combat – it is hard to change. However, if you are experiencing the symptoms, seclude yourself until we get a medical opinion. All of you are tough or you would not be here.*

Endstate: *AO Red Knight remains clear of COVID-19 or is deliberately cleared of COVID-19. BCTs and Army National Guard units continue to receive trained 19Ks, 91As, 91Ms and ASI H8-awarded Soldiers. COVID-19 is unable to influence Red Knight Soldiers, Department of the Army civilians, families and trainees or our critical operational mission.*

Prepare

Logistics. The battalion S-4's expert running estimates were key to our logistics fight, especially for hand sanitizer, hand soap, bleach wipes, bulk bleach and other cleaning supplies. Our plan required emergency quarantine tents for each company, so the S-4 quickly added general-purpose medium tents, cots, light sets and company-level power-generation capabilities to the estimate. Finally, masks emerged as a technique to fight transmission of the virus, so we meticulously tracked masks as they moved from vendors across the world to the battalion. Critical to maintaining our screening was early ordering of "no-touch" infrared thermometers, which helped us monitor body temperatures quickly.

Risk assessment by task and event. Each OSUT company, the three divisions of the Ordnance Training Department (Abrams Training Division, Bradley Training Division and Ground Mobility Division), the Common Driver Trainer (tank-driver simulator in Wood Simulations Center) and the battalion headquarters conducted very deliberate, task-by-task assessments of the risks of infection transmission in our programs of instruction. Each unit's leader detailed when and where we had to train with Soldiers inside six feet, for instance, for every task or event. The leadership examined all those risks, and we made some great adjustments. From the thousands of discreet training tasks or events, we cancelled combatives and pugil training. That's it. Leaders created conditions and the "bubble" for us to conduct everything else. It took time and bridging techniques to implement all the control measures (we used gaiter necks until we got better masks, for instance), but we did not miss any graduation requirements.



Figure 2. Tank instructors mitigated risk with screening, masks and sanitation of all surfaces to continue training in the tank turrets.

Rehearsals. Fort Benning activated its Emergency Operations Center (EOC), among many steps, to prepare to respond to coronavirus. All units received COVID-19 screening questions and detailed flow charts that described how to react to various screening-question responses. Company leadership practiced permutations of screening results and rehearsed company actions according to the medical directions.

Messaging. The 1-81 Armor and other training battalions emphasized communicating with family and friends of our trainees. By the second week of March 2020, our MCoE leadership learned enough to cancel graduations and family days on Fort Benning. Understandably this caused inconvenience and some angst among our trainees' loved ones. Along with all the training units, we disseminated information as quickly and clearly as possible. We used battalion and company Facebook pages and leveraged Twitter at the battalion level. "Ask the battalion commander and command sergeant major" was a question-and-answer series on Twitter that allowed family and friends to directly access the battalion leadership. Constant communication disrupted some rumors and brought some tranquility to the information environment.

Execution

Create conditions and positions of advantage. "Setting conditions" is often glossed over, briefed without substance or is ill-defined. Therefore we defined conditions that create and sustain the safe "bubble" to facilitate training. The battalion leadership had to either create or recognize safety conditions every day before we started training:

1. **Control of the AO.** Companies and ordnance divisions changed behavior quickly. Entrances/exits used for years were placed off-limits. They established ECPs to control exactly who entered each building in battalion. This screening force cost the companies combat power, but the protection from vectors was worth it. Early on, especially in our large maintenance buildings and motorpools, first sergeants went on patrol, challenged anyone they did not know and asked if they had been screened for COVID-19 before entry. It took time to build the defense, and we fought complacency throughout.
2. **COVID-19 screening.** Battalion teams screened each officer, noncommissioned officer (NCO), Soldier, Department of the Army civilian and trainee in 1-81 Armor for COVID-19 daily. Battalion teams screened every human at the entrance of every building, regardless of how many previous screenings. Fort Benning continued to update the questions and flow charts with the latest symptoms and techniques. The battalion equipped each screening table with infrared thermometers to measure temperatures. We screened privates to three-star generals during our defense.
3. **Cleaning and sanitizing.** First Battalion, 81st Armor, increased its workspace cleaning to no less than twice daily. Before and after work, we cleaned our areas. Barracks cleaning became maniacal. Drill sergeants managed bleach drills and wipe-down drills constantly. We paid heavy attention to common areas, doors, desks, chairs, bunks, wall lockers, latrines, showers, floors and sinks. If the virus penetrated the defense, we destroyed the conditions required to live outside the human body. We cleaned combat-vehicle controls and switches in the tanks. We cleaned tools and toolboxes in the maintenance bays. We cleaned our tank-driver simulators incessantly.
4. **Hand-washing.** We required hand-washing with warm water and soap for 20 seconds every three hours or at least hand sanitizer if in the field. We trained and constantly reminded ourselves not to touch our faces.
5. **No massing.** We quickly adopting social distancing, then renamed it tactical dispersion following TRADOC leadership. We stopped conducting company formations. We deemed platoon formations “suspect.” Squad-size, double-arm interval “formations” were the rule. Physical training (PT) became squad PT, and it was better. Army Combat Fitness Tests (ACFTs) (we did not stop ACFTs for the trainees) took longer, but we achieved the standards. Leaders cleaned equipment after each use and spread out physically. We closed the dining facility’s dining rooms and conducted field feeding from mermites for breakfast and dinner. We ate Meals-Ready-to-Eat for lunch, and all on-duty Soldiers ate meals outside and dispersed.
6. **Masks.** The battalion initially wore neck gaiters as our face covering but migrated to manufactured facemasks as they became available. Cadre and trainees wore masks almost all the time. Whenever physically possible, we prevented droplets from spreading by wearing good masks.

Every day our leaders had to assess whether these conditions existed in their AOs. If yes, we could begin training. If no, we had to rectify the deficiencies before proceeding. Nothing was more important than protecting the force. The defense allowed us to train safely.



Figure 3. 1-81 Armor M1 tank instructors never paused motorpool or field training.

Assess

Constant assessment of our operations process and leader engagements at every level held the line against COVID-19. When the enemy did penetrate, our leaders were ready.

On April 17, a full month after our counter-COVID-19 operations order, a cadre member became sick at home overnight. By this time all personnel were well-trained in recognizing the symptoms of COVID-19; the cadre member called an ambulance, and the medical staff at the hospital tested him for COVID-19. The instructor contacted the chain of command, who took immediate, rehearsed action.

Battalion leaders identified all of that instructor's recent students, and the leadership secluded them in a prepared company seclusion area. The EOC activated Fort Benning's preventive-medicine team, who conducted contact tracing with the cadre member and inspected the workspace. The company commander closed the workspace while awaiting test results to let the situation develop.

We received notification that the instructor's COVID-19 test results were positive three days after the test. As planned and out of an abundance of caution, the leadership moved the instructor's four students into quarantine elsewhere on Fort Benning. The students spent several days there, and battalion leadership released those without symptoms back to the unit in a few days. The precautionary steps the company took likely prevented a larger outbreak. All those trainees and the instructor wore masks. They observed correct distancing, never making close contact with each other. They washed their hands often and cleaned all the training aids before and after use. The instructor recovered, and battalion leadership cleared him to return to work.

In conclusion, during early March 2020, 1-81 Armor struggled to understand what the ramifications of the emerging pandemic would have on the battalion and its mission. We stumbled through the early days, finally settling on familiar and common language of defensive operations to organize our response. We knew we had to defend our key terrain to establish conditions for us to create world-class tankers and mechanics. Eventually, we made contact with the COVID-19 enemy and successfully stopped its penetration due to detailed planning, preparation, execution and assessment by engaged leaders.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armor brigade combat team

ACFT – Army Combat Fitness Test

AIT – advanced individual training

AO – area of operations

ASI – additional-skill identifier

BCT – brigade combat team

COVID – coronavirus

ECP – entry-control point

EOC – Emergency Operations Center

FRAGO – fragmentary order

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team
MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence
MDCoA – most-dangerous course of action
NCO – noncommissioned officer
OPORD – operations order
OSUT – one-station unit training
PT – physical training
TRADOC – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command