

Brilliant at the Basics

During the 2023 Maneuver Warfighter Conference at Fort Moore, GA, SMA Michael R. Weimer said our Soldiers need to be, “brilliant at the basics.” This statement is not a new idea. Many Army leaders, during the last decade at least, expressed similar concerns that Soldiers’ competencies have atrophied. There are various reasons as to why this has happened, from an Army focused on the Global War on Terror to the impact of rotational deployments across the globe. Regardless of the reasons or opinions, the growing lethality and uncertainty of the modern battlefield during multi-domain operations will require noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who are experts on their platform. We are working with our U.S. Army Forces Command and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command partners to regain platform expertise, acknowledging the current processes as they exist now may not achieve all the outcomes we need as an Army to provide formations that fight effectively at echelon in multi-domain operations.

At the U.S. Army Armor School, we are looking at the military occupational specialty (MOS) 19K Advanced Leader Course (ALC) and asking the hard question – does our NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS) produce staff sergeants who understand their role and responsibility as a leader and warfighter? Bottom line, an MOS 19K staff sergeant should graduate ALC knowing how to be a tank commander and an MOS 19D staff sergeant should be ready to be a section leader/squad leader.

As the Armor proponent, the U.S. Army Armor School is responsible for the programs of instruction (POI) for our Professional Military Education to include the ALC portion of the NCOPDS. Feedback from leaders in the force, National Training Center rotations, maintenance trends, and gunnery scores all point to a decline in competency levels for our armored crewmembers. To address this feedback, during the past five months the Armor School has focused on how to rebuild the platform expertise required for armored crewmembers starting with 19K ALC. Our 19K NCOs need to go back to their respective units upon graduating ALC with a warfighting focus that hones their tactical skills and what is expected of a tank commander. Within the POI, we expect a tactical focus under the shoot-move-communicate-maintain umbrella, an increase in rigor on the things required to drive readiness and lethality, and some risk acceptance in lessons that can be removed that do not necessarily apply to a tank commander.

With that focus in mind, 19K ALC will incorporate lessons from the Tank Commander Course to include weapons training, boresight, plumb and synch, armament accuracy checks, administering the Gunnery Skills Test and Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station training. To correct a trend of decreasing readiness, 19K ALC will also re-introduce a maintenance focus. We are working with the Ordinance School to develop a POI that will highlight the tank commander’s responsibility in the maintenance process. This will include preventive maintenance checks and services, proper fault recording and hanging parts. The goal is to instill ownership of the tank and crew into the tank commander.

During the next several years, we will increase rigor in the course by progressively incorporating testing on critical tasks as we get data through internal pilots. An easy example, that is a hot topic across the force, is land navigation. We will incorporate graded individual land navigation into the POI. A tank commander needs to be able to train the crew on land navigation, especially if it is graded in the Basic Leader Course. These changes will ensure the appropriate amount of accountability is in the course by testing and measuring what matters for warfighting and leadership. Rubrics and tests will reflect the tasks our NCOs must master, and multiple failures during the course will result in ALC students going home without graduating.

To focus more on the competencies of a tank commander, we need to be willing to remove some lesson plans that are of a lesser priority. We intend to move any critical NCO core competencies from the virtual learning requirements (Phase 1 of ALC) into the resident portion of the course, while removing the rest. For example, effective counseling, preparing an evaluation report for a sergeant, and standards and discipline will become resident requirements.

Through all our piloted efforts to inform the 19-series ALC portion of NCOPDS, we will remain nested with The Army School System, especially the potential effects on our Component 2 teammates, when it comes to pay, entitlements and the total length of the course. It is still too early to tell the overall effect this investment in

platform expertise will have. However, it is possible we will determine with our partners that the course will increase in length. Despite the current aversion to growth, the trend since 1998 shows that the 19K ALC POI has lost more than 100 academic hours. As the old saying goes, we need to train to standard and not to time. If we want an Armored Force that is “brilliant at the basics,” then we need to invest the time into our NCO Corps.

Forge the Thunderbolt!

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ALC – Advance Leader Course

MOS – military occupational specialty

NCO – noncommissioned officer

NCOPDS – NCO Professional Development System

POI – program of instruction



Secretary of the Army Christine E. Wormuth, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Randy A. George (middle) and SMA Michael R. Weimer address the audience during the Army Senior Leader Press Conference at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C., Oct. 9, 2023. The event was in support of the AUSA 2023 Annual Meeting and Exposition. (U.S. Army photo by Staff. Sgt. Derek Hamilton)