

Think We're the Best? A Look Down Under Might Change Your Mind

Comparing Tactics Training between Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course and Australia's Regimental Officer Basic Course

by LTC Terrence H. Buckeye

For the last two years I've served in an exchange billet at Australia's School of Armour (SOArmd) as the senior instructor for tactics. My primary takeaway from this assignment is that Australian mounted tactics training at the company level and below is much better than our U.S. tactics.

A comparison of tactics training for new Armor lieutenants between the Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course (ABOLC) and Australia's Regimental Officer Basic Course (ROBC) illustrates why. SOArmd produces competent, confident cavalry- and tank-platoon leaders who are prepared to lead a platoon in combat upon graduation. ABOLC does not do this. My thesis is simple: Our tactics training for new Armor lieutenants is insufficient; the Australian ROBC mounted tactics training is markedly better than our ABOLC tactics training and should become the model we emulate to reform our tactics training at the Armor School.

With a resurgent Russia and a more aggressive China, the U.S. Army needs an armored-mechanized fighting capability proficient at conducting combined-arms maneuver (CAM) warfare. We can no longer rely on mass and superior technology to compensate for tactical incompetence, especially with the Army downsizing and the number of armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) decreasing from 17 to 10. Currently, as a branch, we are failing to deliver that capability. ABOLC provides a useful case study to understand how and why our Armor Branch is not delivering.

ROBC overview

Australian armoured ROBC is 116 training days long and divided into two tracks – tank and cavalry. Tank lieutenants focus on the M1A1 platform, while cavalry lieutenants focus on the Australian Light Armored Vehicle (ASLAV) with 25mm Bushmaster stabilized turret. Both courses follow the same general progression (Figure 1).

SOArmd is a squadron-size organization subdivided into four training wings. Lieutenants spend 16 days in the Communications Wing, 15 days in the Driving and Maintenance Wing and 35 days in the Gunnery Wing. With a foundation of technical proficiencies established, they go to the Tactics Wing for 50 days of training. There are 31 assessments for cavalry and 34 for tank throughout ROBC, in addition to several physical-fitness assessments.

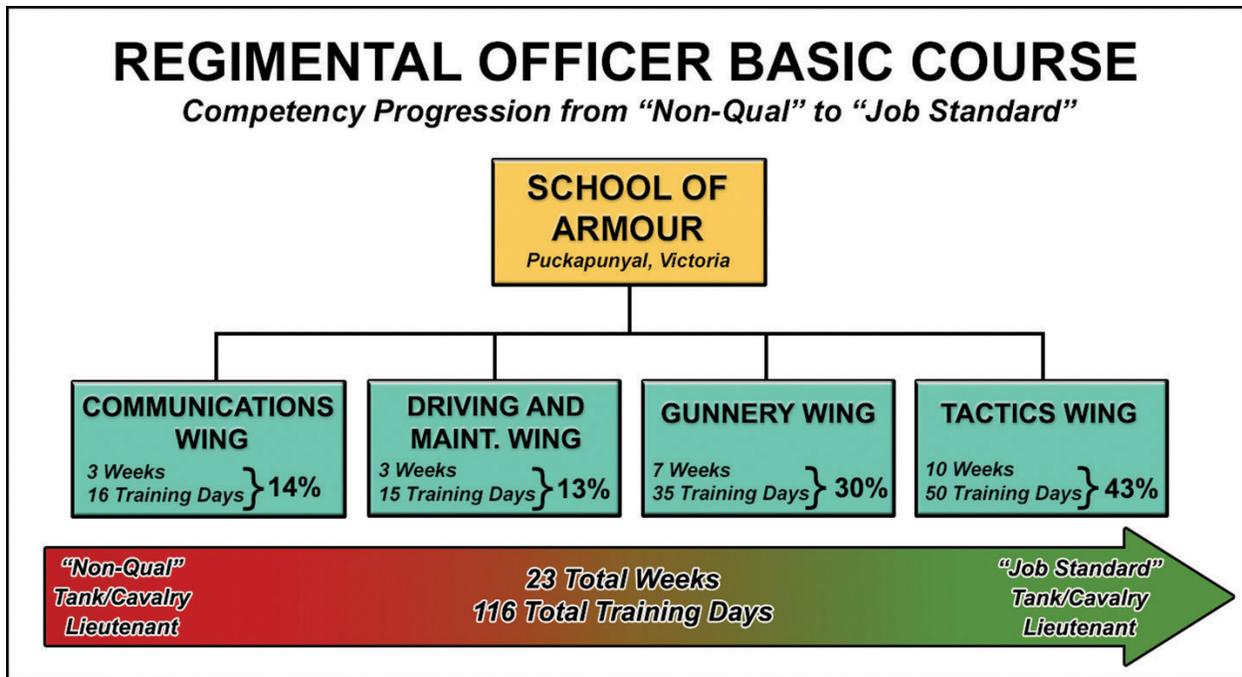


Figure 1. ROBC course progression. (Based on a chart by LTC Terrence Buckeye)

ROBC tactics synopsis

ROBC tactics training lasts 10 weeks and is divided into three phases: individual vehicle skills (three weeks), section-level skills (three weeks) and platoon-level skills (four weeks). The overarching training focus is on CAM. Each phase culminates in a live-fire maneuver assessment the lieutenants must pass to continue in the course.

Of the 50 days, roughly 37 are in the field. A typical week involves classroom instruction Monday morning with vehicle prep and deployment to the field Monday afternoon for practical application. The students return from the field Friday afternoon, conduct maintenance and prepare their vehicles to deploy the next week. Instructors counsel the lieutenants on their performance weekly. The Puckapunyal Training Area is 25 kilometers by 20 kilometers and ideally suited for mounted-maneuver training.

WEEK	LEVEL	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
1	INDIVIDUAL VEHICLE SKILLS		Classroom Lessons	Navigation	Navigation	Navigation Assessment	Navigation Assess Recovery	
2			Lessons Ind Vehicle Man	Individual Vehicle Maneuver	Individual Vehicle Maneuver	Individual Vehicle Maneuver	Ind Vehicle Man Recovery	
3			Lessons Ind Vehicle Man	Individual Vehicle Maneuver	Individual Veh Live-Fire Assessments	Individual Veh Live-Fire Assessments	Ind Veh IF Assess Recovery	
4	SECTION LEVEL SKILLS		Lessons Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Man Recovery	
5			Lessons Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Man Recovery	
6			Lessons Section Maneuver	Section Maneuver	Section Live-Fire Assessments	Section Live-Fire Assessments	Section LF Assess Recovery	
7	PLATOON LEVEL SKILLS		Lessons Platoon Offense	Platoon Defense	Platoon Offense	Platoon Offense	Platoon Off Recovery	
8			Lessons Platoon Defense	Platoon Defense	Platoon Defense	Platoon Defense	Platoon Def Recovery	
9			Lessons/ Simulations	Battle Prep/ TLPs	Reaper's Run - Company - Team Live-Fire Maneuver Assessment			
10			Reaper's Run - Company - Team Live-Fire Maneuver Assessment			Recovery	Administration/ Student Evals/ Course Survey	Graduation/ ROBC Dining in

Field Training
Live-Fire Assessment

Figure 2. ROBC tactics training – 10-week generic model. (Based on a chart by LTC Terrence Buckeye)

For the individual vehicle skills phase, the first week focuses on mounted land navigation in both day and night conditions. No Global Positioning System (GPS) or digital aids are allowed. The lieutenants must navigate purely off their map and terrain association or celestial navigation at night. Concurrently, they are taught terrain analysis and appreciation, the basics of crew command-and-control through crew briefs, and the methods of tactical approach and occupation of a vehicle fighting position. During individual vehicle maneuver, they learn how to maneuver their vehicles tactically between two locations using terrain and vegetation to cover and conceal their movements while not exposing vulnerable flanks. They also learn how to occupy a position (hull-down/turret-down), jockey (backing out of a fighting position), report their movements up (instructors fill the role of platoon leader), brief their crew on fire-control measures while both stationary and on the move, and establish a platoon battle hide. The phase ends with a live-fire maneuver assessment where the lieutenants command-and-control their vehicle as part of a section through a four- to five-kilometer lane (Figure 3).

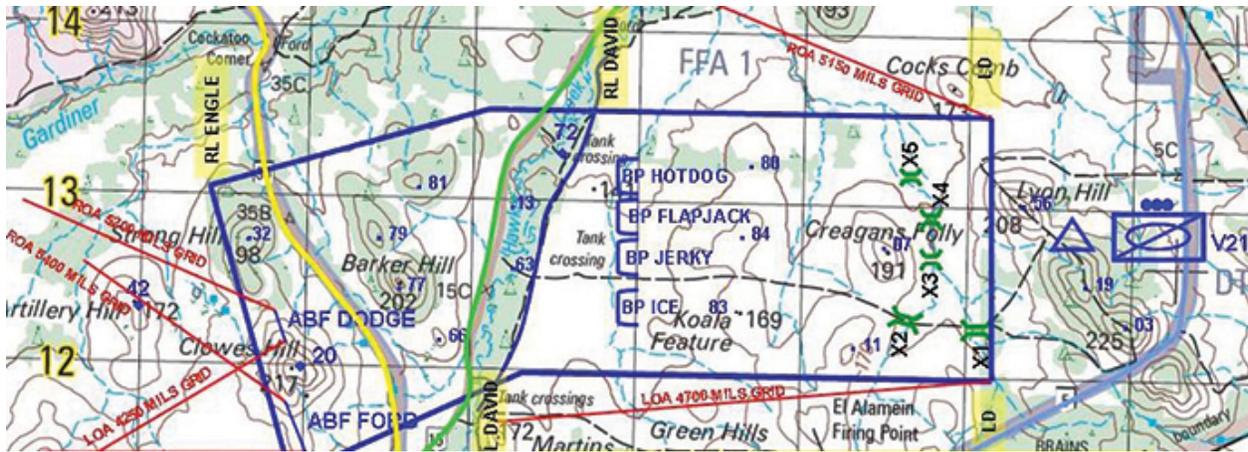


Figure 3. Individual maneuver live-fire assessment. (Map by SGT Clint Johnson)

For section-level skills, the lieutenants continue to build on their individual skills while learning how to provide effective mutual support to their maneuvering wingman. As section leaders, they must control and direct their wingman while reporting the status of both vehicles. The students are also introduced to indirect-fire planning and engagement-area development. Australian companies operate on a single net so their platoon leaders learn how to report quickly and succinctly.

In platoon-level skills, the lieutenants learn how to maneuver a platoon tactically through platoon battle drills, movement formations, movement techniques and rapid troop-leading procedures. This phase culminates with a week-long exercise called Reaper's Run. The exercise integrates the ROBC cavalry platoons and the ROBC tank platoon into a company-team, conducting a guard mission against an attacking enemy battalion. The lieutenants must work through the added pressure of reporting to a company commander, conducting platoon cross-talk and coordination, and employing fire support and engineers. Moreover, Reaper's Run alternates between live-fire events and force-on-force with live opposing forces. Each lieutenant is assessed as the platoon leader for a 20- to 30-hour period in a combination of both force-on-force and live-fire tactical tasks (Figure 4).

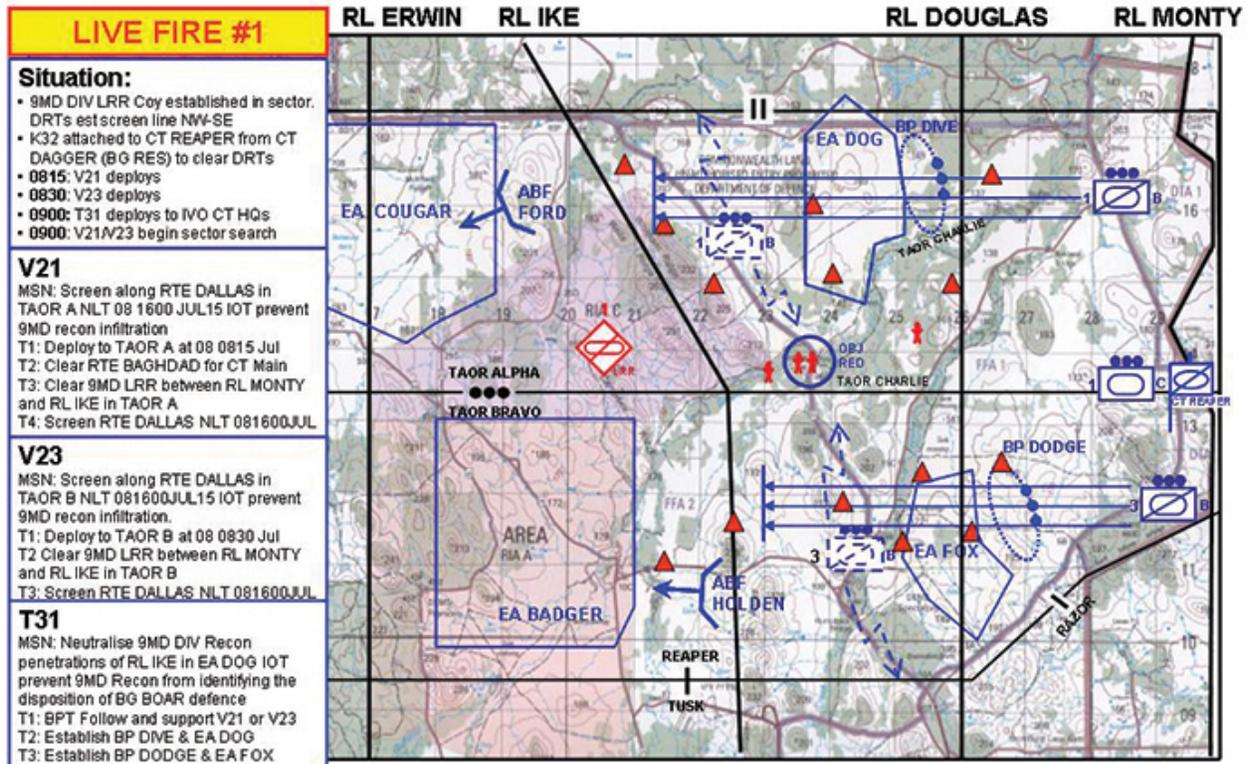


Figure 4. Exercise Reaper's Run on the morning of Day 1 during the ROBC culminating platoon assessment. (Map by LTC Terrence Buckeye)

ABOLC overview

ABOLC is run by 2nd Battalion, 16th Cavalry Regiment. Although 2-16 Cavalry falls under 199th Infantry Brigade, the Armor School remains the course's proponent. ABOLC is a 95-day course subdivided into three phases: individual phase (27 days), crew phase (26 days) and platoon phase/tactics instruction (33 days). Students receive gunnery and tactics training for both the M1A2 tank and the M3A3 Cavalry Fighting Vehicle (CFV) during the course.

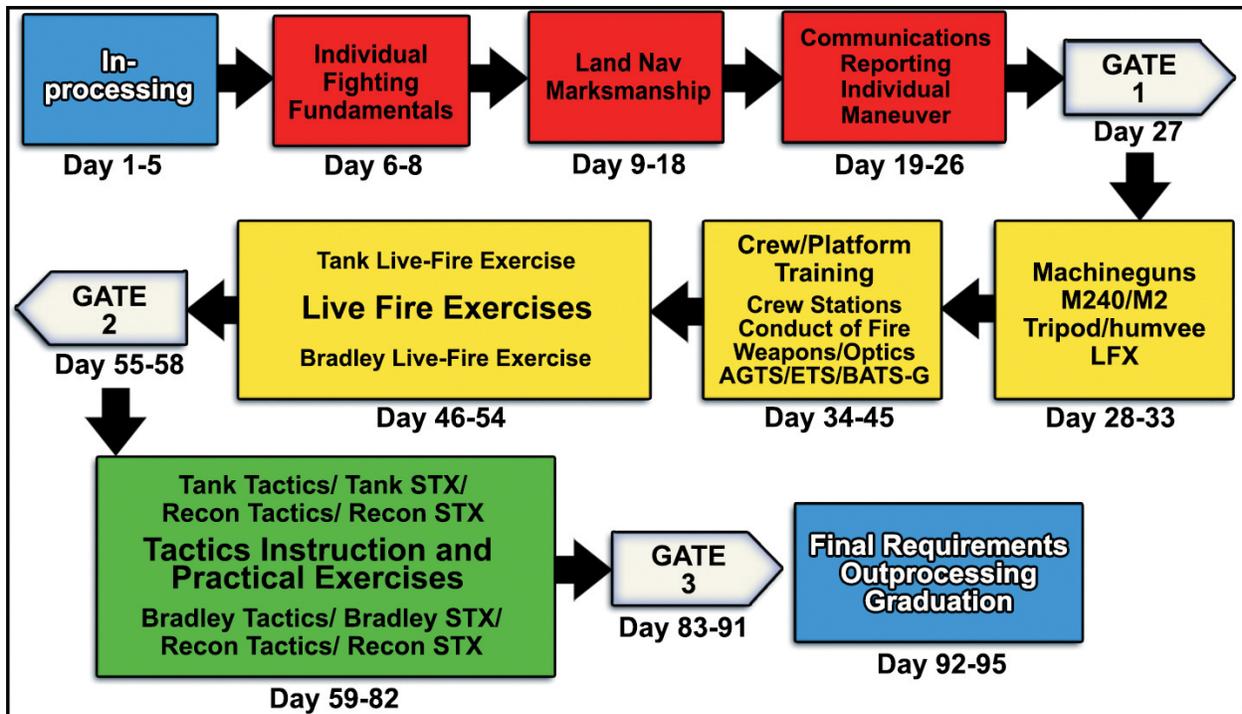


Figure 5. ABOLC progression. (Based on a chart in the ABOLC briefing on the Website

http://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/199th/216/abolc/content/PDF/ABOLC%20o%20Brief_ck_04MAY15.pdf).

During Phase I (individual phase), lieutenants are trained on individual tactical movement (dismounted), combatives, M4 weapons qualification, dismounted land navigation and radio communication. They are evaluated on the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), M4 qualification, a five-mile run, an obstacle course and a writing requirement. The phase ends with the Phase I gate event, a one-day test of Phase I skills.

During Phase II (crew phase), lieutenants are trained on vehicle preventative maintenance checks and services, advanced gunnery training system (AGTS) gunnery simulations, gunnery-skills training and live-fire engagements from an M1A2 tank and an M3A3 CFV. They are objectively evaluated on AGTS, Bradley Advanced Training System (BATS), Gunnery Skills Test (M1A2 and M3A3), Gunnery Table I (M1A2 and M3A3), and tank and Bradley live-fire. The phase ends with the Phase II gate event, a three-day event in which students, serving in both vehicle commander and gunner positions for both M1A2 and M3A3, must demonstrate their ability to engage targets effectively.

During Phase III (platoon phase), lieutenants are trained on commanding and controlling a platoon, with 13 days devoted to the situational-training exercise (STX). The students are objectively evaluated on an armor/recon tactics written assessment, a 24-kilometer foot march, a writing requirement, an APFT and briefing a platoon operations order (opord). The phase ends with the Phase III gate event, a six-day test of the students' ability to execute mission command in a training environment through offensive, defensive, reconnaissance and security missions in a force-on-force, decisive-action training environment scenario.

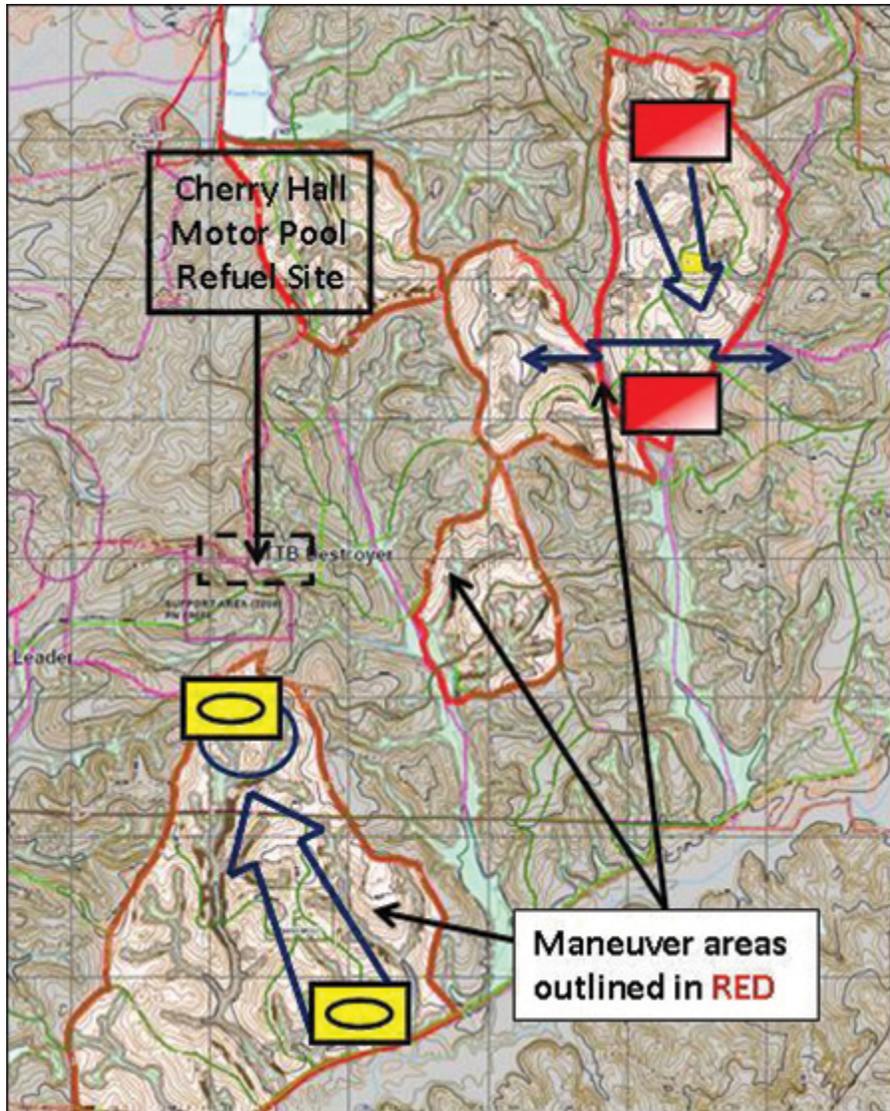


Figure 6. ABOLC STX during Phase III (platoon phase) in the Good Hope Training Area, Fort Benning, GA. (Map by CPT Daniel Schmidt)

Comparing ABOLC and ROBC

[Table 1](#) shows the major differences in tactics training between ROBC and ABOLC.

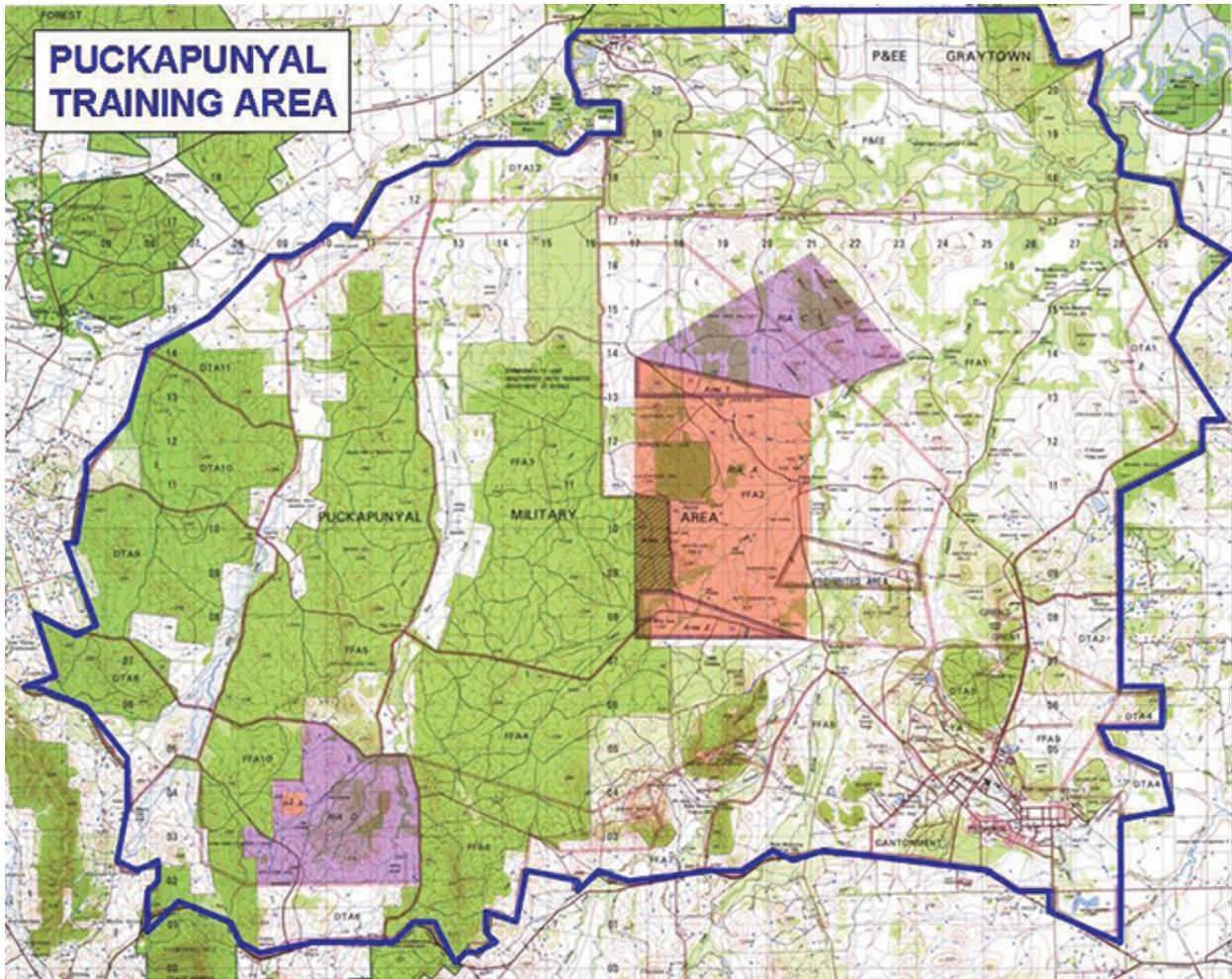


Figure 7. Puckapunyal Training Area, Victoria, Australia. (Map by LTC Terrence Buckeye; picture of map produced by Geoscience Australia under direction of Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation, Commonwealth of Australia)

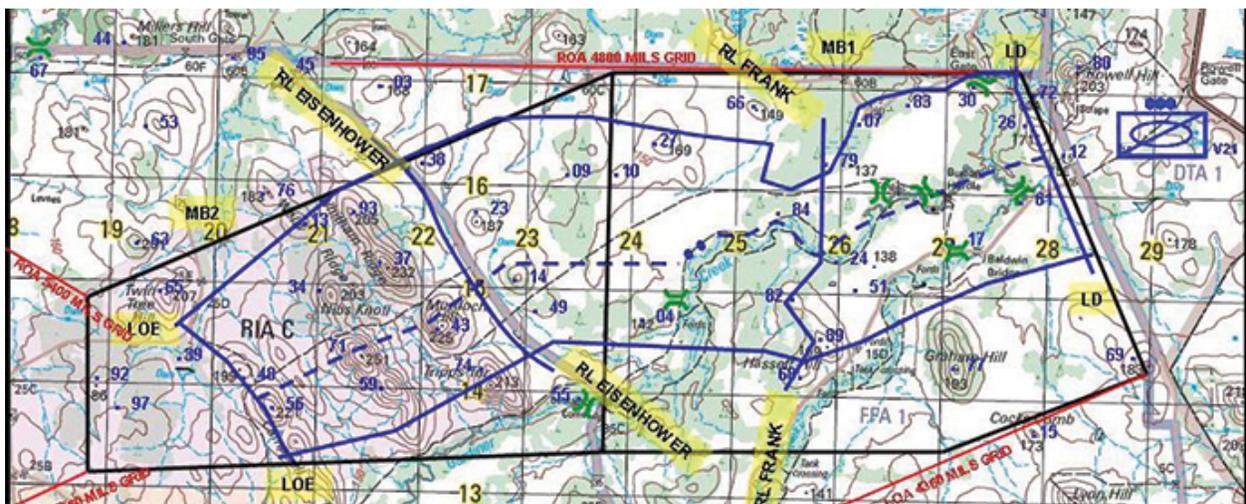


Figure 8. ROBC AFV section live-fire maneuver lane (Hassetts Battle Run). (Map by SGT Paul Williams)

ROBC lieutenants must pass the following assessments during the tactics phase:

- Employ basic military symbology;
- Navigate from an armored fighting vehicle (AFV) (day and night);
- Command an AFV during an individual battle practice;
- Command an AFV section during a battle practice;
- Command an AFV platoon during a battle practice (20 to 30 hours); and
- Tactics phase field assessment.

ABOLC lieutenants must pass the following assessments during Phase III-platoon phase:

- Armor/recon tactics assessment – written test, 100 points;
- 24-kilometer foot march;
- Writing requirement: three- to four-page history paper, group project;
- Prepare and brief an opord;
- APFT; and
- Phase III gate event: command-and-control a platoon.

Of note, out of the eight objective assessments for the entire ABOLC, four are physical-fitness based – APFT, obstacle course, five-mile run and 24-kilometer foot march. As a result, the course appears to focus less on preparing lieutenants to lead AFV platoons and more on preparing them for Ranger School.



Figure 9. LT Gareth Gardner delivers a platoon opord for his final live-fire assessment during Exercise Reaper’s Run. (Photo by CPT Anthony Bamford)

U.S. training issues

Following are general issues or beliefs that are pervasive throughout the Armor Branch and the ABCTs:

- **“We’re the best” mindset.** Heavy brigade combat teams (BCTs) performed very well during the CAM battles against the hapless Iraqi army in 1991 and 2003. Our senior leaders relentlessly tell us we are the best Army in the world. These considerations certainly do not prompt us to question the efficacy of our training. However, we might benefit from questioning our assumption of superiority and consider that our measures of comparison have been poor. The Australian Armoured Corps would be a good place to start.
- **Armor Branch identity and core competency.** Armor Branch has suffered an identity crisis in the last 15 years as we have evolved from CAM experts into a jack-of-all-trades branch. Iraq and Afghanistan were both infantry-centric operational environments that prompted us to focus on wide-area security (WAS) over CAM. Modularity further disaggregated tank battalions, division cavalry squadrons and armored cavalry regiments (ACRs). This diluted the resident CAM expertise once found in those units. The Armor School’s move to Fort Benning to join the Maneuver Center of Excellence was part of a larger Army-wide trend that favored generalizing over specializing. This identity crisis is apparent in ABOLC now. Armor lieutenants are assigned to infantry BCTs, Stryker BCTs and armored BCTs. While this presents more opportunities for Armor officers, it also makes it difficult for courses like ABOLC to focus training.
- **Gunnery Table VI (GTVI) qualification equals tactically competent crew.** Throughout the Armor community, we operate on the core belief that an AFV crew’s training culminates with qualification on GTVI. We confuse the technical proficiency that comes from GTVI qualification with tactical competence. Driving down a range road, executing predefined engagements in a flat and open area and using perfect vehicle fighting positions constructed from concrete is hardly tactical. We see the same issue in the structure of ABOLC. Once the crew phase is complete with the gunnery live-fire, the lieutenants skip over individual AFV tactics and jump straight into collective training at the platoon level. We are missing a fundamental building block in tactical competence by equating GTVI qualification with a tactically competent crew.
- **Loss of experience in AFV tactical maneuver.** The focus for the Army and Armor Branch during the last 14 years has understandably been stability operations and counterinsurgency (COIN). Not surprisingly, this produced a generation of officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who have little to no experience in executing CAM tasks. We find ourselves in a blind-leading-the-blind cycle where neither our schoolhouses nor our company/battalion leaders know how to train tactics. With companies and battalions unable to competently run quality tactics training, the Armor School must assert itself as the standard bearer for mounted-maneuver tactics training. Conversely, Australian schools and training centers have remained focused on CAM during the last 14 years, despite deploying as frequently as we do.
- **Risk aversion to AFV maneuver live-fire training.** Nothing tests a student’s ability to maneuver an AFV, a section or a platoon better than the stress of maneuvering while live-firing. In the U.S. Army, we like to conduct our live-fire training on built-up ranges and our maneuver training with Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System equipment in dry training areas. When we do conduct a platoon or company live-fire, the exercise is so heavily choreographed and controlled that it loses almost any value as tactical training. This separation between live-fire gunnery and maneuver training stems from a debilitating focus on risk aversion. Australians view live-fire training as part of the natural training continuum for maneuver training. They build their live-fire battle runs on the same land they use for dry training. The routine manner in which Australians conduct maneuver live-fire training is impressive; it begs the question, “Why can’t we do the same thing?”
- **Substituting field training with simulations.** Simulators are an inadequate replacement for field training. If we want to train our lieutenants to think and lead effectively, they need to be regularly confronted with the environmental impediments to effective thinking and leading. Simulators fail to adequately replicate environmental factors (extreme heat/cold, precipitation, dust, mud and wind), physiological factors (fatigue, hunger, dehydration, pain, discomfort, live-fire fratricide stress) and mechanical factors (weapons malfunction, communications problems, thrown tracks, mired vehicles).
- **Overreliance on technology.** We implicitly assume our technological overmatch will compensate for any tactical shortcomings in future conflicts. Many assume that technologies like Blue Force Tracker (BFT) and Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) negate the need to be able to navigate off a map,

and, by extension, maneuver. The proliferation of GPS and weapons technology in the last 20 years among our potential adversaries should disabuse us of this assumption.

Recommendations to improve

Following are some recommendations to improve U.S. Army Armor training:

- **ABOLC status.** Armoured Corps ROBC is widely recognized as the most difficult and demanding ROBC in the Australian army. Graduation from Armoured Corps ROBC carries a degree of prestige that is noticeably missing when lieutenants graduate from ABOLC. The Armor School must transform ABOLC into a demanding, selective course that creates platoon leaders who can lead an AFV platoon in CAM combat upon graduation. Failure rates of 15 to 20 percent should be acceptable and expected.
- **New curriculum focused on CAM.** ABOLC's curriculum needs to be redesigned with a singular focus on competently leading an AFV platoon during live-fire maneuver. Phase III, in particular, should be remodeled on the Australian ROBC tactics phase. The only physical-fitness assessment should be the APFT. ABOLC should also make the changes shown in [Table 2](#).

When considering improvements to ABOLC Phase III tactics, it's important to acknowledge that Fort Benning does not have adequate AFV maneuver training areas. Therefore, ABOLC needs to mitigate this by conducting its Phase III tactics training at a remote location. Adequate armor maneuver training areas are available at Fort Hood, TX; Fort Bliss, TX; Fort Riley, KS; and National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. Another possible location could be the Pinyon Canyon Maneuver Site, an enormous training area (955 square kilometers) three hours south of Fort Carson, CO. Pinyon Canyon is extremely underutilized and would be an ideal location for AFV tactics training. Phase III could evolve into a 30-day combat training center-like rotation and would not have to be too expensive.

- **One platform focus.** The attempt to service both the M1A2 and M3A3 in Phase II of ABOLC takes away time that could be better used to make the Phase II live-fire more demanding and prepare students for live-fire assessments in Phase III. The M3A3 Bradley would be the logical choice for one platform due to its cheaper ammunition, lower fuel and maintenance costs and more complicated turret. The Armor School could establish a two-week M1A2 leader's course for students going to combined-arms battalions.
- **Instructor quality and experience.** To bridge the gap between now and when the Armor Branch regains a depth of CAM-experienced officers and NCOs, ABOLC should consider the following options:
 - First, the Armor School should broaden the exchange program with the Australian School of Armour. Officers and NCOs slated to be ABOLC tactics instructors could either attend a SOArmd tactics course or serve as a guest instructor at the SOArmd for three to four months. Conversely, the same opportunity to instruct at ABOLC should be offered to Australian NCO instructors.
 - Second, ABOLC should recruit its instructors from 11th ACR. With substantially more time conducting AFV CAM in the field than any other unit, 11th ACR is the best place to find tactically competent Armor NCOs and officers.
 - Lastly, the Armor Branch should develop a selective policy to send its best officers and NCOs to instruct at the ABOLC with appropriate career incentives. This policy would have a positive and pervasive effect across the branch and ABCTs.

Recommendations for Armor Branch

- **Recognize the problem.** The most difficult step to remedy this situation described above is recognizing that our tactics training is insufficient. For those who doubt how poor our tactics training is now, a visit to an Australian ROBC or Crew Commander's Course (six-week tactics course for corporal and sergeant vehicle commanders) will likely change your view.
- **Embrace CAM as core of the branch.** Attaining proficiency and competence in mounted CAM tactics is harder and takes longer than attaining a commensurate level of competence in WAS tactics. WAS tactical tasks at the company level and below are fairly simple and easy to train within a unit during a pre-deployment train-up. To say that we should focus on CAM is not to say we need to ignore WAS and forfeit future deployment opportunities. It is simply saying that we should prioritize the more difficult, dangerous and risky mission over the easier, less risky mission. After a two- or three-month home-station

train-up, ABCTs could just as easily perform a WAS mission in a deployed environment as an infantry BCT or Stryker BCT.

- **Embrace live-fire maneuver exercise.** We must overcome our debilitating risk aversion to live-fire training and stop relegating it to fabricated ranges. Wherever we conduct maneuver training, we should also conduct live-fire training. The Australians do this quite effortlessly and safely; there's no reason it should be too hard or too dangerous for U.S. units.



Figure 10. A Cavalry ROBC screening during Reaper's Run. (Photo by CPT Tom Johnson)

Conclusion

Critics of the changes recommended in this article will shake their heads and say, "No, can't do it – too hard, too expensive, too much work." While these measures would be hard, would require some expense and would entail significant work, they are all very feasible. The Army needs a lethal, mechanized force capable of aggressively executing CAM. The Armor Branch and the Armor School are not adequately providing the Army with that capability. Our most immediate challenge is realizing we are not providing that capability and then generating the will to fix it. ABOLC is a great place to start, and our Australian allies have a ready-made solution for us in ROBC.

The U.S. Army's historical tendency is to fail to implement necessary changes during peacetime, enter a war unprepared, suffer enormous casualties and then adapt and overcome. Perhaps we can avoid this costly cycle and become the learning organization we claim to be.

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