

At the Forward Edge and Beyond: Lethality and the Armored Brigade Combat Team

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Operational requirements for the past 20 years have degraded the armored brigade combat team's (ABCT) lethality. The state of armored lethality at the small-unit level is serious, and it is continuously decreasing through the loss of institutional knowledge.

Decline of lessons-learned

Before 2001, when the National Training Center (NTC) was the keystone event in every brigade training cycle, battalion and brigade commanders brought with them a sacred institutional knowledge gained through experience. Hard lessons-learned created leaders who bore the knowledge of past battles, engagements and experiences through fighting a lethal and thinking enemy. As the bridge between operational art and tactics, these lessons were the most valuable tool a battalion commander could distribute across the force.

These documented experiences, augmented with decades of experience from senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), especially master gunners (MGs), enabled our junior leaders to develop the tactics and leadership skills that made America's armored formations the most formidable and lethal in the world.

However, the shift to the counterinsurgency (COIN) environment rendered these lessons-learned about how to approach decisive-action engagements at NTC obsolete. With the return to great-power competition, today's Armor force faces the loss of institutional knowledge across the force when it comes to decisive-action engagements.

The U.S. Army's armored and mechanized formations are the arm of decision to the most capable land force in the world. However, while the United States focused on COIN-centric operations for the past 20 years, our adversaries have capitalized on our preoccupation. They adapted, modernized and professionalized, testing their weapons, tactics and doctrine in limited conflicts with devastating effects.

Regaining operational knowledge

The return of great-power competition represents a different operational environment than previously faced. The incorporation and integration of enemy elements associated with the rise of Grey Zone operations requires small U.S. military elements to disperse over great distances to rapidly converge, engage and destroy the enemy in combined-arms operations. The U.S. military must move rapidly from one point of conflict to another, repositioning and attacking the next objective to provide continuous overmatch of violence at decisive points.

Unfortunately, recent reports from the combat-training centers (CTCs) cite a 30-percent decrease in target hits during the past two decades with first-run crew-qualification rates routinely below 60 percent. Discrete adjustments to Army manning, training and structure have resulted in a multitude of unanticipated second-order effects within the armored force. For example, a myriad of global requirements dampened platform lethality despite technological advances throughout the mechanized force.

The question we now need to ask ourselves is how can we regain operational knowledge through institutionalized training, doctrine and manning to increase ABCT lethality and dominate in large-scale combat operations (LSCO).

To address this question and the current state of the armored and mechanized force, III Armored Corps initiated the ***Lethality Report on the State of the Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT)***. It collected observations, insights, data and lessons in collaboration with Headquarters Department of the Army (HQDA), Human Resources Command (HRC), U.S. Army Materiel Command, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), First Army and the Maneuver Center of Excellence.

Report authors III Corps deputy commanding general and III Corps command sergeant major presented the findings at the Army Warfighting Conference in September 2019. The report articulated a snapshot of the overall state of III Corps' formations, seeking to address the probability of winning a peer-on-peer LSCO by establishing a

baseline for discussions on the requirements of the armored and mechanized community. The report also identified and highlighted the declining lethality in the armored force despite continued weapon-system and fire-control improvements.

In response, III Corps identified three lines of effort (LoEs) encompassing 38 recommendations and operationalized by HQDA, U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), HRC and TRADOC, to correct systemic issues from the crew through Army-command level. These LoEs center on MG use and proficiency, M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) leader competency and improved operational training.

Encompassing these LoEs, III Armored Corps recently submitted the ***Commander's Guide to ABCT Gunnery Handbook*** to the Center for Army Lessons Learned for its publication. This publication connects commanders with the knowledge that MGs and senior NCOs have developed during years of executing gunneries. It also provides tips and lessons for how to prepare for successful gunneries as well as enhanced training standards intended to stress crews to their maximize training value. Its focus is how to use gunnery as the means to an end to increase crew lethality in combat.

Increasing lethality

To increase lethality, it is necessary for all units to fill all authorized MG positions to train our mechanized forces. MG use and proficiency addresses the mechanized force's lack of MGs and the correlating general decline in lethality and safety. MGs are the lifeblood to developing unit and crew lethality. They are the subject-matter experts, institutionally trained in direct-fire weapon systems, planning, gunnery, training programs and combat-vehicle weapons maintenance. They enable us to defeat the enemy by optimally employing our most lethal weapon systems and increasing training focus on effective direct fires; they are a force multiplier.

Engaging the enemy effectively at the tactical horizon while dominating the operational foreground takes direct-fire precision that can only be taught by our MGs. However, MGs are manned at below 50 percent across the force, and they often have less live-fire experience than a senior lieutenant of the 1980s. This lack of experience and an inadequate quantity of MGs can be attributed to poor identification, development and performance of the candidate at the MG course. III Corps is actively working to change this trend; it is building, managing and fielding MGs within the force.

To decrease delinquencies and build effective MGs, III Armored Corps is working with Army divisions to create standardized sabot academies; increase access to the Abrams Training Assessment Course and the Bradley Training Assessment Course; and create a Department of the Army selection process to discover potential candidates. III Corps is also working with FORSCOM and HQDA to designate coded MG skill-identifier positions in Armor platoons while adding requirements for Armor, Bradley and Stryker MGs at division and corps headquarters levels.

Upon completion of these initiatives, each tank company will have three more MGs, with an increase of 18 within each ABCT. Upon identification and graduation from the course, commanders are ensuring MG stabilization through proper personnel coding to maintain unit stability following the completion of key development positions – a historical delinquency depriving units of trained personnel.

Units are able to maintain technical and tactically proficient NCOs up to 18 more months to increase institutional knowledge and stability within the force. Therefore active solicitation of MGs, along with committed management and support from HRC for remaining shortages within each branch, is facilitating increased experience and lethality within ABCTs.

Looking at our maneuver brethren in the XVIII Airborne Corps, we can see they have embraced the idea of institutional training as the keystone to realizing operational lethality. Ranger School, Airborne School and Air-Assault School are all key components of their leader development. M2 Bradley IFV leader competency must address the lack of leader proficiency within the M2 Bradley force.

The M2 Bradley is the preeminent fighting platform deliberately developed by the Army to be part of the lethality coefficient and a key component of combined-arms teams on the battlefield. As such, the vehicle commander must be able to both effectively destroy the enemy with direct fire and transport infantry into close combat. They are responsible to not only "shoot, move, communicate," but also to integrate direct and indirect fires; maneuver

infantry while supporting vehicle maneuvers; and communicate a clear and concise view of the engagement area through the incorporation of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

A single ABCT holds 233 Bradley crewman positions or about 3,700 infantry-trained M2 crewmen across the Army enterprise. Of the approximately 1,800 officers and NCOs on assignment instructions to mechanized forces in 2020, less than 1,100 have prior ABCT experience. With that in mind, leader competency must be addressed across the force as nearly 700 leaders lack M2 experience upon arriving at an ABCT. Without proficient crews, troop and company commanders, units cannot effectively, nor safely, bring to bear the full lethality of the M2 platform.

In response, III Armored Corps is changing the instructional method for leaders unfamiliar with mechanized platforms. It is supporting re-institutionalization training and an associated B9 additional skill identifier for Infantry Branch M2 trained crewmen. It is also enlarging and re-allocating prioritization of NCOs for the Bradley Leader's Course through the unit modified table of organization and equipment, while requiring attendance of institutional schooling prior to arrival at ABCTs to create the competency and lethality.

Starting in 2021, HRC will annually increase total Bradley Leader's Course slots for NCOs, increasing training opportunities because of operational needs. Mechanized-infantry Soldiers must understand how to maneuver their platform at the tactical level; it is the key to robbing the enemy of the initiative. By combining maneuver and surprise, leaders at the lowest levels create opportunities to deny the enemy the initiative.

Strenuous training needed

Finally, to increase lethality, forces must reintegrate strenuous and comprehensive training scenarios. The lack of sufficient technically competent NCOs who are skilled on the M2 has stagnated current training proficiency within armored and mechanized forces. Correlations stemming from inefficient training and standards are further impacted by current operational tempo, inefficient "Leader's Time Training," lack of Advanced Gunnery Training System (AGTS) / Bradley Advanced Training System (BATS), and/or poor preparatory training prior to certifications. As such, negligence of technical proficiency and the tactical capability among platform commanders remains limited, which prevents the ability to train and develop lethal Soldiers.

These critical issues affect our combat capabilities and Soldier safety. CTC injuries demonstrate that inexperience is the lead contributing factor for injury and loss of life on both the M2 Bradley and the Stryker. A long-term solution for this problem will have to include exponential increases in the Bradley Commander's and Gunner's Course capacity and the creation of a Bradley Crewmen Course to incorporate junior leaders. The investment in institutional introduction and recurring training will reduce injuries, increase proficiency and ensure units are ready and lethal in case of LSCO.

A lack of MGs and their limited experience amplifies poor training. As a result, training and live-fire standards across heavy formations vary significantly from the requirements established in the ***Gunnery Training Circular***. These deviations result in a wide lethality variance across the force as units differed on the types of engagements and distances they chose.

The future battlefield demands a culture where units raise proficiency by achieving the standard against increasingly difficult conditions; however, the ***Lethality Report*** discovered that only one of the four brigade combat teams' (BCT) Abrams gunneries that were analyzed fired 72.7 percent (eight engagements) of their main-gun targetry at a long-range distance. Three other BCTs averaged below 27.3 percent (three engagements). The preponderance of BCTs surveyed failed to challenge the capabilities of the vehicle or the crews; they engaged short- and medium-range targets that do not represent the standard and did not operate under the conditions units expect to operate in during combat.

In response, III Armored Corps is initiating multiple efforts to correct these issues and limit the difference. To improve operational training and maintain proficiency, it published new policies to change the mindset of gunnery from a training event to a means toward lethality. It now requires unit-level training emphasizing gunnery tasks and AGTS/BATS systems leveraging to increase lethality. III Armored Corps also forward-positioned digital training systems to support continuous training during operational deployments.

Recommended changes to Training Circular (TC) 3-20.31, ***Training and Qualification, Crew***, also limits allowed variances within gunnery; these limits restrict deviation approval levels and quantities. All planned deviations from

standards prescribed in the TC require approval by the first general officer in the chain of command at the G-60 brief.

Similarly, division G-3s must now approve all primary and alternate gunnery scenarios and shot sheets for crew qualification tables. These actions will change the mindset of gunnery, returning its focus to crew lethality instead of gunnery completion.

Conclusion: increase lethality

The U.S. Army must be able to execute simultaneous offensive, defensive and stability operations to prevail in large-scale ground combat while distributed, but Armor lethality at small-unit level remains in a serious state. The problem is complicated, but the corrections required are feasible when they are recognized as an interconnected system. Returning to a great-power training focus requires ABCT emphasis on MG use and proficiency, M2 leader competency and improved operational training to increase lethality and ensure the mechanized force is prepared to win the next first battle.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AGTS – Advanced Gunnery Training System

BATS – Bradley Advanced Training System

BCT – brigade combat team

COIN – counterinsurgency

CTC – combat-training center

FORSCOM – (U.S. Army) Forces Command

HRC – Human Resources Command

HQDA – Headquarters Department of the Army

IFV – Infantry Fighting Vehicle

LoE – line of effort

LSCO – large-scale combat operations

MG – master gunner

NCO – noncommissioned officer

NTC – National Training Center

TC – training circular

TRADOC – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command