

Achieving Platform Proficiency within a Heavy Cavalry Squadron

by SFC Larry D. Finefield Jr.

Following Sept. 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Army adopted the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) model¹ to provide fully manned, equipped and trained forces for both theaters. This three-stage cycle – *reset, train/ready* and *available* – became the doctrinal process within the Army community, tapping into the total force to allow the development and readiness of organizations while meeting combat demands and restoring balance within the force.

Years later, with forces drawing down in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout 2014, the Army began developing the Sustainment Readiness Model (SRM) while focusing more on threats from Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. Introduced in 2017, SRM² provides sustainable readiness tailored to regionally aligned forces. With the introduction of missions such as Atlantic Resolve and Pacific Pathways, developing units with the ability to deter/defeat near-peer adversaries became the Army's paramount focus.

In keeping with the SRM process, 2nd Squadron, 13th Cavalry Regiment, from Fort Bliss TX, participated in five sustainment gunneries to meet manning and operations requirements prior to its Fort Irwin, CA, National Training Center (NTC) rotation before deploying to the Republic of Korea (RoK). Limited resources, inexperienced armored leadership and a history of no-school-trained master gunners within the organization resulted in a less-than-standard training plan and low overall scores throughout both the squadron's and brigade's gunneries. Low Q1 qualification (65 percent) and high crewman changeover compelled 2-13 Cav to change its training plan to improve the organization's overall performance and capabilities. The leadership of 2-13 Cav relied on doctrine, experience and the expertise of their master gunners to develop a deliberate doctrinal training plan aimed specifically at the fundamentals of leader certification, in-depth skills testing and focused rehearsals to ultimately improve the squadron's Q1 rate to 100 percent.

The plan

With a rotation to the RoK fast approaching, identification of the squadron's operational and training priorities was a key topic of concern and discussion. The assessment by the unit's leaders of continuous rotations among field-training exercises, sustainment gunneries and NTC identified vehicle maintenance as the squadron's top priority. Next was the need to develop a legitimate squadron-led gunnery training plan and execute it with a goal of attaining a 100-percent Q1 qualification rating. Additional areas of emphasis included the training of tasks specific to crewmen positions, weapons systems and gunnery. The squadron also certified leaders and trainers to ensure that standards and goals would be met.

A quarterly training conference brought together all leaders to develop a plan capable of meeting the squadron commander's priorities. Relying heavily on the experience of the squadron's two Bradley master gunners, a training plan was developed. Heavy attention went to simulations training. Instructor-operators capable of properly mentoring and training crews increased proficiency and overall throughput for the Gunnery Table II (GTII) requirement. Platform weapon-specific training was designed to minimize crew-induced malfunctions while increasing overall knowledge of the system and its capabilities. Vehicle-crew-evaluator (VCE) training was planned for early execution to properly train all vehicle commanders on proper fire commands, timing, scoring and the overall gunnery process. Lastly, blocking off the required time within the squadron's training cycle enabled each troop to execute training accordingly.

Establishing a plan and following through with its execution can be two completely different concepts when it comes to a forward-deployed unit. It required substantial support from the 2-13 Cav commander and command sergeant major to eliminate unnecessary tasks to ensure the execution of the troop training plans.

Attacking problem

The 2-13 Cavalry Squadron arrived at Camp Hovey, RoK, in September 2018. With their Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFVs) and Abrams tanks just beginning to arrive, the key task of bringing a fleet of battered vehicles to 100-

percent operational readiness began. Every Abrams tank and BFV brought to Korea received both its annual and semi-annual services during the course of the rotation. Backordered and short parts, new track, trackpads for every vehicle and countless other fleet-refurbishment parts were all ordered to support the squadron's vehicle rehabilitation program.

There's an old saying: "Having a horse to ride into a battle does nothing when your swords are bent, dull or broken." The current version of the old saying means units must ensure all weapons are razor-sharp and all equipment is in top working order. To reach this objective, 2-13 Cav established a dedicated service schedule for all personal and crew-served weapons, and radios and optics were scheduled for ancillary services. In addition, all M242 Bushmaster chain guns, mortar tubes and Abrams main-gun barrels were inspected and received the appropriate level of attention.

Tackling the maintenance and services of all vehicles and equipment in this manner ensured 2-13 Cav's equipment was up to the task. With maintenance under control, the conditions were set to train the operators.

Operator training

The first step was VCE training, with all vehicle commanders as the target audience. This developed a doctrinal baseline standard of crew fire commands and engagement procedures. Without this fundamental step, crews could potentially practice chair drills and fire commands the wrong way. That could develop a habit that would be hard to break prior to live-fire execution. Therefore, this training was immediately followed with instructor-operator training for the Conduct of Fire Trainer and Advanced Gunnery Training System.

The rationale was that anyone can turn on a computer and push buttons. However, the ability to communicate what a crew is doing wrong when they become frustrated takes skill and experience, and it cannot be taken lightly. Close attention was needed to ensure the right Soldiers were selected as instructor-operators because these individuals would be the ones to develop the crews within 2-13 Cav. They would ensure the standards were followed during all simulations training prior to gunnery. Therefore, these operators were selected based on rank, previous gunnery experience, VCE certification and their ability to communicate effectively.

Training within a simulator can seem mundane and repetitive to some, but establishing and achieving a standard can help curb this perception fast. Realizing the standard requirement for GTII qualification is sometimes rather lax, the squadron's master gunners suggested increasing simulator-hour requirements as well as the gate-to-live-fire qualification standards. They proposed all crews be required to maintain a continuous presence within the simulator to help develop muscle memory when dealing with system switches. It greatly improved crew fire commands. The new gate-to-live-fire standard also required crews to score a +900 and nine-out-of-10 distinguished ratings, not just once but twice, while being evaluated by a master gunner and a troop commander.

Keeping continuous tabs on everything, the master gunners included progress reports during weekly training meetings. This allowed the troop command teams to place more emphasis on their crews as needed.

A factor common to Bradley gunnery-range training is dealing with loading and misfire issues, specifically with the M242 25mm Bushmaster chain gun. This is largely due to a lack of proficiency and familiarization with the weapon system. The squadron's master gunners tackled this issue by developing an M242 academy. The academy was comprised of a 16-hour class (eight hours of hands-on classroom instruction and eight hours of in-vehicle practical exercise).

The M242 academy introduced specific knowledge of the 25mm weapon to all gunners and vehicle commanders. The subjects taught included:

- Common parts list;
- General operation;
- Functionality;
- 10-level pre-inspections;
- Boresighting procedures and ammo upload procedures;
- Misfire identification procedures;
- Common crew-induced malfunctions; and
- Basic troubleshooting.

Upon completion of the M242 academy, Soldiers were able to properly upload and download the M242; identify misfires and malfunctions; perform proper troubleshooting steps; and communicate effectively to a master gunner what was happening in the event basic troubleshooting could not resolve the issue. This greatly increased the crews' knowledge and proficiency both in the BFV and on the gunnery range.

Every gunnery event has certain requirements that must be executed before any live rounds can be fired downrange. The gunnery-skills test (GTI)³ is no exception. Identifying the need to determine the squadron's trouble areas for this event, guidance was given to execute a GTI practice test two months before the squadron conducted the GTI. All events were tested, and the evaluators for each event were certified by the master gunners to ensure proper evaluation procedures were followed. From the practice test, troops were able to identify strengths and weaknesses and develop another training plan to help ensure first-time "GOs" when conducting the squadron GTI event.

The additional testing and practice paid off; crews and individuals were able to achieve the standards, greatly minimizing the normally drawn-out evaluation process.

Many crews within 2-13 Cav had never been part of gunnery operations before, so the squadron master gunner developed a gunnery operation brief and presented it to all vehicle crew members. In the same way each training event executed in the Army has a *task, conditions* and *standards* brief, this brief was designed to explain the whole gunnery process. Crews learned to install cameras, draw ammo, move down a lane, engage targets and exit the range. Crews received detailed information about the gunnery process and what they could expect before executing the range.

This brief was reinforced two days before execution when the master gunners executed a range walk with all crew personnel on the range itself. The range walk discussed the install and checks of cameras, ammunition draw, pre-fire checklist execution, staging areas, range flow, execution and clearing procedures. Also, specific range details and responsibilities were covered as well. This helped minimize questions on the day of execution.

Plan comes together

The U.S. Army operates based on a crawl, walk and run methodology when it comes to the execution of any training event. The training and preparation can seem endless; crews often feel unprepared due to the tough training standards. However, once the execution day came for 2-13 Cav, all crews were prepared, as their focus on doctrinal fundamentals gave them the keys to success. Despite four weeks of continuous operations, 2-13 Cav closed the chapter on one of the most successful unit improvement stories within its history.

Growing from a hodgepodge group of Soldiers – more than 50 percent of them having never fired at a gunnery – to watching crews become more comfortable and lethal with their platforms, 2-13 Cav met its 100-percent Q1 qualification goal. Taking things one step further, the squadron's combined average of 931 with distinguished rating set an unprecedented bar that will Soldiers in the unit will forever be hard-pressed to beat. The squadron also qualified 39 crews with a distinguished rating between both BFV and Abrams platforms.

Throughout the 2-13 Cav Bradley gunnery, there were only five M242 weapons malfunctions, all of which could not be identified without firing a live burst through the weapon system. Furthermore, all five weapon issues were quickly identified and fixed to maintain an operational fleet throughout gunnery. There were zero crew-induced weapons malfunctions throughout the entire gunnery process, which is a testament to the training and maintenance conducted by all 45 Bradley crews.

Lastly, the squadron developed a stronger appreciation for the gunnery process, which Soldiers can carry to their next units.

Conclusion

It is no secret that the Army is preparing for the next big fight. With that comes the need for well-trained armored brigade combat teams. To better ensure this force is ready and capable of meeting this task head on, organizations need to focus on the basics. The 2-13 Cav did that when preparing training for its RoK rotation through increased planning, preparation and training. These things resulted in substantial improvement of crew proficiency and qualification throughout the squadron as a whole.

SFC Larry Finefield is a platoon sergeant in Troop B and the squadron master gunner, 2-13 Cav, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX. His previous assignments include Simulations Training Management Manager's Course (STMMC) developer and noncommissioned officer in charge, 1st Battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment, 316th Cavalry Brigade, Fort Benning, GA; and squadron master gunner, 1st Battalion, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX. SFC Finefield's military schools include the Senior Leader's Course, STMMC, Small-Group Instructor Course, Basic Instructor Course, Bradley Master Gunner's School, Advanced Leader's Course, Army Recruiting School, Basic Leader's Course and Air Assault School. He holds an associate's of arts degree in general studies from Central Texas College and a bachelor's of science degree in cybersecurity/information-technology management from Excelsior College. SFC Finefield is currently pursuing a master's of science degree in cybersecurity/information assurance from Excelsior College.

Notes

¹ SSG Alexandra Hemmerly-Brown, "ARFORGEN: Army's deployment cycle aims for predictability," Army News Service, Nov. 19, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.army.mil/article/30668/arforgen_army_deployment_cycle_aims_for_predictability.

² Training Circular (TC) 3-20.31, **Training and Qualification Crew**, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015.

³ TC 3-20.31-1, **Gunnery Skills Test**, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ARFORGEN – Army Force Generation

BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle

GST – gunnery-skills test

GTII – Gunnery Table II

NTC – National Training Center

RoK – Republic of Korea

SRM – Sustainment Readiness Model

STMMC – Simulations Training Management Manager's Course

TC – training circular

VCE – vehicle-crew evaluator