

TRAINING NOTES



The Bradley Master Gunner

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A Bradley master gunner plays a key role in the training management, training execution, and maintenance of a Bradley-equipped unit. The tables of organization and equipment (TOEs) for a Bradley infantry battalion call for a master gunner in the rank of sergeant first class at battalion level, and one in the rank of staff sergeant in each rifle company and infantry platoon.

Despite the criticality of master gunners to unit training, many soldiers who have this qualification find that it is detrimental to their career development. One reason is that relatively few of these slots are filled; rarely does a company have a master gunner in all three of its rifle platoons. Because of this scarcity, a unit tends to hang onto its master gunners, particularly the good ones. A graduate of the Army's Bradley Master Gunner Course (conducted at Fort Benning, Georgia) is likely to be kept in master gunner assignments instead of being given opportunities to work in other positions, such as dismounted leader positions. This is especially critical, since more than half of the soldiers in a Bradley platoon are in the dismount elements. This hurts both the professional development and the career opportunities of soldiers who are master gunners.

As a result, a master gunner NCO

may lack the balanced experience and training expected of his MOS and grade, and may not be considered competitive for promotion to sergeant first class or higher. Thus, the Army ends up hurting some of its best and brightest sergeants, despite the fact that a master gunner is trained to do the same jobs a



platoon sergeant has traditionally accomplished.

One reason for the shortage of master gunners is the academic difficulty of the nine-week Master Gunner Course. The course has averaged dropout rates as high as 40 percent. Slots in this course are as important to a Bradley unit as Ranger school slots are to light infantry units, so commanders should ensure that they select their best and brightest

to attend the course.

Many sergeants do not want to attend the school. They think that if they attend and fail, they may be viewed as substandard, and if they attend and pass, they risk remaining in master gunner positions with restricted opportunities to develop further. On the other hand, if they do not attend at all, they can probably expect to progress from position to position and remain competitive for promotion and other assignments such as drill sergeant.

To keep from losing these valuable NCOs, the Army should modify the TOE to code the Bradley platoon sergeant position with the master gunner additional skill identifier (ASI) of J3. Like the Ranger positions in a light infantry TOE, not all of the master gunner positions will be filled by personnel with the required MOSs, but changing the TOE will allow dedicated NCOs to progress in infantry assignments. Additionally, promotion boards for sergeant first class and higher should more carefully consider the special qualifications and duties of master gunners during their deliberations.

The skills a master gunner learns in the course are the same ones we have habitually associated with the infantry platoon sergeant—training and management. A master gunner is an expert on



training management. Bradley gunnery, which is among the most complex company-level training in the Army, is divided into four phases—preliminary, basic, intermediate, and advanced.

Preliminary gunnery includes the training that takes place at home station, whether in the motor pool or in a local training area. It includes the Bradley gunnery skills test and training in the unit conduct of fire trainer (UCOFT) simulator.

Basic gunnery, which consists of four subcaliber tables, trains the crews on target engagement. In intermediate gunnery, a crew fires 25mm rounds for the first time, and the gunnery culminates in crew qualification on Bradley Table VIII. Table VIII consists of ten firing tasks that are conducted under various conditions, such as NBC, night, and use of the auxiliary sight.

Advanced gunnery concludes with Bradley Table XII, a platoon qualification. In this final stage, the platoon leader must demonstrate the proficiency of both his Bradley crews and his dismounted squads in hitting targets. This training also consists of a tactical evaluation based on the infantry platoon mission training plan (MTP), which counts as 50 percent of the overall score. As Bradley crews' experience becomes broader, the emphasis on advanced gunnery and Bradley Table XII continues to increase as well.

Throughout the Bradley gunnery cycle, an infantry platoon still needs to conduct qualification on its small arms—six M249 squad automatic weapons, six M203 grenade launchers, and three Dragons. Additionally, the dismount squads must become profi-

cient in their battle tasks. When vehicles and dismount elements are incorporated, gunnery training is a complex subject to manage.

The master gunner learns how to do his job, from training soldiers on individual skills up through teaching platoon fire distribution and control, and also learns how to use the various training aids available. One key example is with UCOFT training.

UCOFT training must be supervised by a trained instructor operator (IO). To become an IO, a soldier must successfully complete a 40-hour class. When certified, he can train crews as they progress through the levels of difficulty. Instructor operator certification is also a prerequisite for the Master Gunner Course. Furthermore, upon graduation, the master gunner becomes senior IO and can train other soldiers to become IOs as well. On the other hand, if a platoon sergeant is not certified as a senior IO, he cannot train his soldiers on the UCOFT, a key training aid for Bradley crews.

Another key area of the Master Gunner Course is Bradley turret functions and maintenance. The master gunner learns how the turret and its weapon systems operate and how to troubleshoot problems. He is qualified to conduct organizational level maintenance on the 25mm cannon, the Bradley's primary weapon system. If he cannot fix a problem himself, he can at least help the turret mechanics.

Once again, maintenance and technical expertise are also a platoon sergeant's areas of responsibility. Thus, a master gunner is an excellent choice to fill a platoon sergeant slot, because their roles and duties are so similar. By

requiring that platoon sergeants be master gunners, we can help ensure that master gunners receive the professional development opportunities they deserve and need.

At the same time, junior NCOs will be more likely to attend the school because they know it will improve their careers. This, in turn, will cause them to prepare for the school and become more proficient in their MOSs.

A sergeant's master gunner qualifications should not be the only reason he is selected for assignments or promotions, however. I have seen excellent platoon sergeants who were not master gunners, and I have seen master gunners who would have had a difficult time serving as platoon sergeants. In the former case, the Master Gunner Course would have made these platoon sergeants even better. Commanders still have a responsibility, however, to evaluate every soldier on the basis of his performance and potential.

I believe the Army is beginning to move in this direction. As more and more leaders gain Bradley experience, more soldiers will attend and complete the Master Gunner Course. The Army, by setting a goal of requiring that Bradley platoon sergeants be master gunners, will protect its investment in time and training. At the same time, it will provide its soldiers with the most competent leaders available.

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