

More than a “Moto Tat”

Will infantry MOS pride become a thing of the past?

by Capt Ross W. Gilchriest

Marines love their jobs. This is evident when visiting any gym on a Marine Corps installation. Any casual observer will notice the MOS tattoos adorning the bodies of many Marines. Tattoos of 0311, 0331, 0341, and 0352 cover the arms, legs, chests, and backs of nearly every infantry Marine. Far from being just “moto tats,” these symbols stand as visual reminders of the pride that Marines hold for their profession and the organization. As the Marine Corps reorganizes around the Marine Littoral Regiment to execute Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations in line with the *Force Design 2030 (FD2030)* concept, one could imagine a day when these symbols are non-existent.

From both a cultural and operational perspective, I find this to be one of the most concerning changes facing the future Marine Corps. The FMF, and by extension the infantry battalion, need subject-matter expertise on its weapons systems to sustain its mastery of combined arms. As a solution, I propose that the Marine Corps should create an Advanced Infantry Skills Training Battalion (AISTB) organic to each infantry regiment to increase the supply of specialty MOS training courses and provide units with more flexibility in fulfilling critical requirements for weapons systems subject-matter expertise.

The Current Situation

The 38th Commandant’s *FD2030* vision—a necessary and beneficial revolution in the way the Marine Corps organizes, trains, and fights—currently proposes to eliminate specialty MOSs

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Mortarmen with 1/7 Mar fire for effect During EXERCISE KOOLENDONG at MRF-D 21.2. (Photo by Capt Ross W Gilchriest.)

in favor of a highly trained, multi-disciplinary infantryman utilizing the arms room concept and mission-specific specialization, similar to Marine Special Operations and 75th Ranger Regiment units. Within the infantry community, the decision to reduce specialization has created apprehension about the cultural and operational impacts on future infantry battalions. Within the March 2020 *FD2030* report, Gen

Berger acknowledged this issue and the need for change, stating that the “current entry-level and advanced infantry training programs and policies will not meet future demands of our infantry elements.”¹ Notably, and most personally for me as a former 81mm mortar platoon commander, the elimination of the Weapons Company begs the question of how the future infantry battalion will man and train heavy machineguns,

anti-tank missiles, mortars, and mounted units.

Currently, the School of Infantry (SOI) on either coast provides the FMF with the basic and advanced-trained Infantry Marines, machinegunners, mortar Marines, and anti-tank missile gunners required to fill these capabilities at the Infantry Training Battalion (ITB) and Advanced Infantry Training Battalion (AITB), while the Assault Marine MOS has been eliminated. While CMC identified the need to “increase our upfront, entry-level training investment, and the look to make corresponding modifications to advanced infantry training to develop the quality, maturity and capabilities envisioned—including the multi-disciplinary infantry approach,” these changes are only in their infancy and primarily focus on the implementation of the Infantry Marine Course entry-level training program without addressing advanced infantry skills training.²

Under the current construct, the elimination of specialized MOSs during entry-level and advanced course training will create an immediate readiness shortfall, and subsequently, a spike in demand for AITB to close this gap. In keeping with the basic economic principle, without a requisite increase in supply, a rise in demand will lead to an increase in price. In this case, the price does not have a monetary value but an operational and human one: future infantry battalions will have to assume substantially more risk in both training and combat. The strategic and operational benefits of the Marine Littoral Regiment, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, and *FD2030* cannot neglect the tactical level without serious consequences.

Based on my personal experience, the current system already impacts the readiness of operational units because of limited course seats, funding, and prioritization issues. As the 81mm Mortar Platoon Commander for 1/7 Mar, my critical vulnerability was a combined lack of experience and training that placed high demands of responsibility on junior Marines and their leaders, increasing overall risks to force and mission. For example, a doctrinal 81mm

mortar platoon is task-organized with two Infantry Unit Leaders Course-trained staff sergeants (MOS 0369) as section leaders, ten Advanced Mortarman Course-trained sergeants as squad leaders, a field artillery operations chief (MOS 0848) platoon sergeant, and an infantry officer (MOS 0302) platoon commander as the leadership cadre. Prior to deployment, our platoon had zero 0369s and eight Advanced Mortarman Course-trained sergeants or corporals. Two of the sergeants were promoted to the billet of section leader because of manpower limitations and our trust in their abilities, leaving five advanced school-trained non-commissioned officers (NCOs). One of these Marines was unable to deploy at the end of the workup cycle and another chose to leave active duty, leaving us at, nominally, less than 40 percent readiness regarding subject-matter expertise and leadership billets for the Marine Rotational Force-Darwin 21.2. I acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic created unforeseen and unique challenges across the force, but I argue that it highlighted, rather than created, the structural problems with the current advanced infantry skills training system.

As a solution, I advocate for an Advanced Infantry Skills Training Battalion (AISTB) organic to each infantry regiment, not as a replacement for AITB but as a structural augmentation to solve the supply-side shortfall in the infantry training pipeline. Below, I will describe my proposed mission, task organization, staffing, and course implementation. As a matter of principle, I recognize the limitations of my experience and welcome the suggestions for improvement and critiques that may follow. Marines win because they think, talk, and seek to improve their individual and organizational effectiveness. Therefore, my intent is to simply start a conversation about an important problem by providing a recommended solution.

The proposed AISTB model owes its inspiration to the example I witnessed on Marine Rotational Force-Darwin 21.2. Australian Defence Force units conduct entry-level infantry training at their home station unit, such as the 5th Royal Australian Regiment stationed

in Darwin, Australia. Australian Defence Force soldiers are then assigned to a conventional infantry company as a rifleman. Their specialty weapon soldiers, such as mortarmen, missilemen, and machinegunners are recruited from the line companies and trained at the regimental level. The training courses are led by the respective support company (roughly equivalent to the Marine Corps weapons company) platoon commanders and staff NCOs. Once the soldier is selected and passes the training course, he is permanently assigned to the specialized platoon. Based on my conversations with my 5th Royal Australian Regiment counterpart, this allows for a more mature, well-rounded, and invested infantry soldier to provide these key capabilities. Given the current and future challenges facing the Marine Corps, a similar model could provide the FMF with a more decentralized, flexible, and responsive means to man and train its infantry battalions.

Mission

The missions of the AITB at SOI-East and SOI-West, respectively, are to “develop infantry small unit leaders and provide advanced skills training through professional instructors to empower Marines for service throughout the Fleet Marine Forces,”³ and to conduct “MOS validation and qualification for entry-level and advanced infantry skill progression training ensuring Marines are proficient in advanced infantry skills, reconnaissance skills, and light armored vehicle operations in order to provide MOS qualified infantry Marines to serve in the operating forces thereby enhancing the fighting capability of the MAGTF.”⁴ The regimental AISTB would take ownership of the MOS training portion of these missions. A sample mission statement would be “to provide the Infantry Marines with advanced infantry skills training by professional instructors in order to supply the Regiment’s infantry battalions with Additional Military Occupational Specialty (AMOS) qualified subject-matter experts on specialized organic weapon systems.” Two important aspects of this mission are the retention of the current MOS structure by redesignating it as an

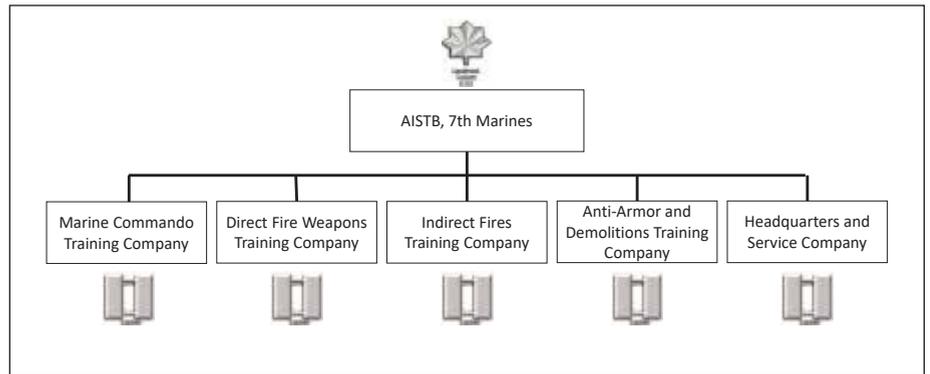
AMOS awarded at the AISTB and staffing a cadre of professional instructors. These topics will be discussed below in further detail.

Task Organization

Currently, each infantry regiment consists of a Headquarters and Service Company and three infantry battalions.⁵ The AISTB would be a new, non-deployable battalion with a command-slated lieutenant colonel commander that reports to the regimental commander and coordinates with the regimental staff for administration, logistics, and operations that align with regimental and battalion training requirements. Additionally, the AISTB commander would be subject to the oversight of the respective coast's commander of the School of Infantry regarding the Advanced Infantry Skills course standards and curriculums. This structure would provide a higher degree of responsiveness to home station unit requirements while maintaining a rigorous standard of training and AMOS qualification.

pany. The Marine Commando Training Company would be responsible for courses covering dismounted light infantry tactics, such as scouting and patrolling, military operations on urban terrain, fieldcraft, and survival. The Direct Fire Weapons Training Company

niques. The Headquarters and Service Company would support the planning, logistics, and execution of the training courses. By organizing as a battalion, the AISTB would be large enough to fulfill the administrative and logistical challenges it would face.

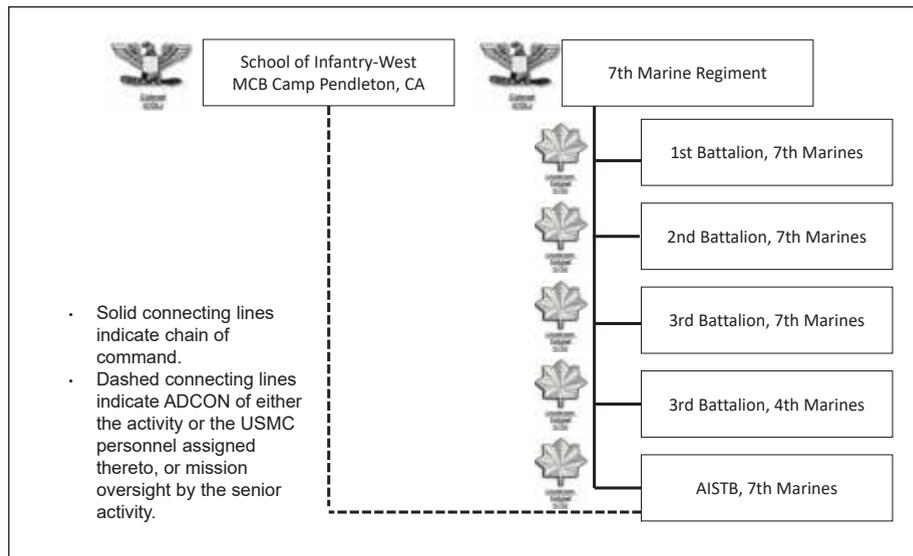


Proposed AISTB Task Organization. (Image provided by author.)

would be responsible for courses to train Marines in machinegunnery, advanced combat marksmanship, and designated marksmanship. The Anti-Armor and Demolitions Training Company would

Companies would be organized into the headquarters element and platoons based on the courses or AMOSs offered. The platoons would be led by a senior staff noncommissioned officer, such as a gunnery sergeant, in the course director role with staff sergeants and sergeants serving in instructor roles, much like at the current AITBs. Each instructor would be required to have completed Combat Instructor School and instructed at least one Infantry Marine Course at a School of Infantry prior to being eligible for transfer to an AISTB. Creating this requirement across the infantry regiments benefits both the units and individual Marines. The regiments would gain direct access to a professional cadre of instructors assigned as permanent personnel for three or more years that they could use to bolster their individual skills training phase. For enlisted Marines, the opportunity to become a combat instructor while remaining closer to the FMF would prove to be an attractive special duty assignment by granting them more flexibility in location, autonomy in execution, and impact on Marines than does the current system.

The primary benefit of the Advanced Infantry Skills Training Battalion versus a company-sized unit is that it would facilitate the appropriate level of com-



Proposed Command Relationships of the AISTB. (Image provided by author.)

The AISTB would contain five subordinate companies: Marine Commando Training Company, Direct Fire Weapons Training Company, Anti-Armor and Demolitions Training Company, Indirect Fires Training Company, and a Headquarters and Service Com-

pany. The Anti-Armor and Demolitions Training Company would be responsible for courses in anti-tank missiles, assault weapons (rockets and grenades), demolitions, and breaching. The Indirect Fires Training Company would be responsible for courses on mortar gunnery, fire direction center operations, and forward observer tech-

mand relationships across the regiment for the command and feedback loop to function as intended. A lieutenant colonel commander of an AISTB can more effectively have open and candid conversations with a peer battalion commander in the regiment than would a captain or major. The same principle applies to the company commanders and staff NCOs in the respective units. The Marine Corps is a human organization—and relationships matter. This structure would ensure that the human aspect of the specialized training system is optimized for cross-unit coordination and responsiveness to feedback.

Creating the AISTB as a division-level asset or as a company-sized unit at each regiment would have the effect of transferring many of the same issues as the current system—limited training locations, limited range space, limited allocations, and difficulty coordinating unit requirements—from Training and Education Command to the infantry divisions. As such, a battalion-sized unit at the regimental level with limited permanent staff and a valuable mission can have an enormous impact on unit readiness across the Service.

Course Implementation

Finally, the traditional concept of Marine Corps advanced MOS courses would change with the AISTB to create faster turnover, a greater variety of specializations, and more training opportunities for Marines to become better infantry fighters. Under the current AITB system, advanced-MOS courses have a limited supply of courses and seat allocations that create difficulty synchronizing with the demands of the fleet. For example, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, the Advanced Mortarman Course at SOI-East and West has a combined 370 seats spread over four courses running for a period of 52 training days. With 24 active-duty infantry battalions and eight reserve infantry battalions, this would seem sufficient to fulfill the requirements of ten advanced course-qualified NCOs in the battalion 81mm mortar platoon. This does not consider, however, the requirements of the line companies’ 60mm mortar sections, the distribution of allocations across the

FMF, Marine Special Operations and reserves, or the intricacies of individual units’ and Marines’ training and personal prerogatives. In fact, the published requirement in FY2020 was 406 seats, despite still only having enough capacity to train 370 Marines—a systemic shortfall of almost 10 percent.

Additionally, the current course length removes key leaders from the unit for an extended period, creating friction for the unit upon their departure and return, which if poorly timed, could cause serious challenges during a deployment by limiting the time to build unit cohesion. Furthermore, the advanced MOS courses place a high priority on physical fitness as a means of turning the training into a rite of passage rather than a training and educational experience. While physical fitness is important, it is an all-to-common logical fallacy of Marines to falsely equate a Physical Fitness Test and Combat Fitness Test scores with a measure of leadership ability, MOS proficiency, and overall human potential.

The AISTB courses would differ from and improve upon the AITB courses by making a wider variety of more frequent, shorter, and more technically focused courses at scale. For example, a Mortar Fire Direction Operations course of four weeks in length could reasonably accommodate 30 Marines and run as many as ten times per year, allowing each AISTB to train and qualify 300 Marines in Fire Direction Center procedures per year. At this scale, nearly every Mortar Marine in the regiment could complete the course—every year. The same principle of intensity, frequency, and scale applies to other AMOSs. The courses would deemphasize physical training as a means of the overall evaluation and prioritize classroom instruction, practical applications, and performance evaluations over the technical subject matter of the weapon systems.

Upon completion of one or more courses, the AISTB would award Marines with a MOS as an AMOS, which would include the current MOS categories as well as additional AMOSs pertaining to each course. These would

include AMOSs such as 0311–Advanced Infantry Marine, 0320–Marine Com-mando, 0331–Medium Machine Gun-ner, 0332–Heavy Machine Gunner, 0341–Mortar Gunner, 0342–Mortar Fire Direction Computer, 0343–Infantry Forward Observer, 0351–Infantry Assault Marine, and 0352–Anti-Tank Missile Gunner. As an added benefit, this course structure would comple-ment the multi-disciplinary future of the infantry community by allowing Marines to receive formal qualifications in various weapon systems and control the direction and degree to which their careers progress. Overall, the decentral-ized AISTB course structure would pri-oritize the needs of the infantry battal-ions and the individual Marines, rather than the antiquated, “Industrial Age” formal school bureaucracy.⁶

Course	AMOS Awarded
Urban Combat and Close Quarters Battle	0311*
Advanced Combat Marksmanship	0311*
Scouting and Patrolling	0320*
Survival, Field Craft, and Camouflage	0320*
Medium Machinegun Gunnery	0331
Heavy Machinegun Gunnery	0332
Mortar Gunnery	0341
Mortar Fire Direction Center Operations	0342
Infantry Forward Observer	0343
Assault and Anti-Tank Weapons	0351*
Demolitions and Breaching	0351*
Anti-Tank Missilery	0352

*Would require completion of multiple course in order to be awarded AMOS

Examples of Courses and the associated AMOS that AISTBs could provide. (Image pro-vided by author.)

Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities

The proposed structure seeks to ben-efit the Marine Corps at the individual, unit, and Service levels. On the indi-vidual level, it provides Marines with more opportunities to broaden their technical skillsets and career progres-sion opportunities as combat instruc-tors. At the unit level, the regiments can more precisely meet the specialized skill needs of their battalions. At the Service level, the AISTB would support the Commandant’s vision of a multi-disciplinary infantry Marine and save the Marine Corps excess costs for tem-porary additional duty travel, lodging, and sustainment.

One major benefit of the AISTB model would be the reduced costs to both Training and Education Command and home station units. According to the FY22 operating budget justification, the Marine Corps spent \$67.144 million on Training Support for Specialized Skills Training (SST) in FY20, making up approximately 15 percent of the \$436.41 million Training and Support budget.⁷ This sub-activity of the operating budget funds the “necessary temporary additional duty funding to support Marines who attend formal training courses for MOS, skills progression and billet specific training ... to meet requirements for career progression, enhancement, and sustainment, as well as certification, recertification, and advanced skills in the primary MOS.”⁸ This includes both entry-level MOS training and advanced MOS training. Additionally, this sub-activity funds the myriad of travel, sustainment, logistics, and personnel required to support unit training, major exercises, and professional military education.

The line item of “Travel of Persons” accounts for \$42.94 million of the overall \$436.41 million budget.⁹ While the exact figure for travel of persons to and from SST is not available, one can assume for the purposes of analysis that it is proportional to the overall SST portion of the budget. Applying this assumption, the Marine Corps spent approximately \$6.6 million on travel for SST in FY2020, \$5.51 million in FY21, \$6.67 million in FY22, and is projected to spend \$7.12 million in FY2023. According to the budget, “over 62K students are trained in schools such as Marine Combat Training, initial MOS assignment schools, advanced MOS training courses, and individual skills enhancement courses.”¹⁰ Applying this figure to the overall cost of SST travel, sending a Marine to and from an SST course cost the Marine Corps \$106.56, on average. Currently, the total capacity of both Schools of Infantry to train 0311, 0331, 0341, 0351, and 0352 Marines at advanced courses is 1713 students per year. Therefore, the Marine Corps spent roughly \$182,532 on the travel of these Marines to and

from their courses in FY2020, with the cost set to rise in subsequent years.

While this figure may seem insignificant with respect to the overall budget, one must consider the degree to which my analysis hides the true cost. As a result of the limited information available, I was forced to apply assumptions and average costs based on a large-scale examination of the Marine Corps Operation and Maintenance budget. The SST budget examined includes both initial and advanced MOS training, making a precise analysis difficult. Further examination by Training and Education Command and unit financial personnel would likely reveal a much higher average cost.

Based on logical analysis, one concludes that the cost depends on the duty station of the Marine prior to departing for school. It costs significantly more to send a 3rd Regiment Marine from Hawaii across the Pacific Ocean to Camp Pendleton for Advanced Mortar Marine Course than it does to send one from 1st Regiment a mere two miles north along Basilone Road from Camp Horno. Furthermore, the administrative and logistical cost of planning, coordinating, approving, and reconciling the travel claim wastes countless man-hours for battalion personnel. Under the AISTB system, the administrative, logistical, and financial costs would be reduced to the resources required to print temporary duty orders.

To resolve the funding issue, I hesitate to provide a specific solution regarding the allocation and movement of funds between activities and sub-activities. I will, however, provide general principles upon which to make improvements: eliminate travel costs, push money down to the lowest level (i.e., the regiment), and support the development of training infrastructure. The creation of the AISTB would greatly reduce the costs of travel, sustainment, and lodging for Marines attending AMOS courses. They could sleep in their own barracks, eat at their usual chow hall, and drive their own vehicles to class. The reallocation of this and the overall advanced MOS funding to the AISTB would allow the regiments to execute more effective training by spending more of

it on ammunition than on auxiliary costs. The regiments could also use this increase in funding to construct more range facilities aboard their home station to support the AISTB, limiting its impact on operational unit training and major exercises.

The AISTB concept does present concerns. One of the primary concerns is the risk of less rigorous standards. Although a decentralized AISTB has the potential to create different *experiences* at each duty station, the overall *standard* must remain the same. The Marine Corps already demonstrates its ability to create a consistent product at different locations through both Recruit Depots and the Schools of Infantry on either coast. In fact, the AITB Detachment-Hawaii operates an Advanced Infantry Course for 0311 Infantry Marines separate from the main element at Camp Pendleton, validating the concept that specialized skills training can be standardized across geographically separate locations without a reduction in quality. Decentralization and standardization are not incompatible. Given the appropriate intent, resources, and oversight, the AISTB would expand on the successful implantation of AITB Detachment-Hawaii by scaling it across the regiments and empowering commanders at a lower level.

The AISTB also creates opportunities, especially to reform the purpose and mission of AITB. Let me be clear, I do not advocate for the abolishment of the SOIs or AITBs. In fact, I argue that the creation of the AISTB would allow the AITB to specialize in the development of unit leaders and specialized unit skills, such as small boat tactics, light armored reconnaissance, and mounted operations. The development of competent fire team leaders, squad leaders, section leaders, and platoon sergeants is essential to the success of the Marine Corps infantry, and an AITB less burdened by the need to conduct specialized skills training could focus on the modes of thinking and action required to perform better planning, tactics, command and control, and small unit leadership, as well as the tactics, techniques, and procedures to succeed in littoral combat.

Conclusion

The current means of training infantry Marines in advanced MOS skills are barely adequate to meet the needs of the current FMF. As the *FD2030* concept becomes more tangible and the Marine Corps seeks to generalize the average infantry Marine, infantry battalions will crave specialization in key capabilities such as mortars, anti-tank missilery, and machinegunnery that the scope of SOI-East and West will not be able to meet. By decentralizing specialized skills training through creating an Advanced Infantry Skills Training Battalion at each infantry regiment, the future Marine Corps will be more adaptable to the needs of its fighting men and women and bolster overall force lethality.

And, perhaps, make tattoo shops busier than ever before.

>Author’s Note: The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and in no way represent the views of the U.S. Government, the DOD, or the Marine Corps.

Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC: March 2020).
2. Ibid; and Chief Warrant Officer Zachary Dyer and Lance Corporal Kerstin Roberts, “New Infantry Marine Course Aims to Create Smarter, Tougher Infantrymen,” *DVIDS*, (January 2021), available at <https://www.dvidshub.net>.
3. Staff, “Advanced Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry-East Homepage,” Marine Corps, (n.d.), available at <https://www.trngcmd.Marines.mil>.
4. Staff, “Advanced Infantry Training Battalion, School of Infantry-West Homepage,” Marine

Corps, (n.d.), available at <https://www.trngcmd.Marines.mil>.

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Reference Publications 5-12 D, Organization of Marine Corps Forces*, (Washington, DC: 1998).

6. Gen David H. Berger, *38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).

7. Department of the Navy, *Operation and Maintenance, Marine Corps, Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 Budget Estimates*, (Washington, DC: May 2021) and *Operation and Maintenance, Marine Corps, Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Budget Estimates*, (Washington, DC: April 2022).

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

