

# On Target

The future of field artillery officer basic training

by Maj Jonathan Bush

Field artillery is the bread and butter of Fort Sill, OK. Since 1917, Marines have walked this sacred ground arm-in-arm with our Army and allied teammates. With the exact same mission, similar equipment, and a shared burning pride in our technical proficiency, we created and trained skilled and proficient artillery officers. It may come as a surprise to more senior officers that, until recently, Army and the Marine officers (and our allies) do not still train together. Combined officer training began 70 years ago when

upon the request of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, on 26 October 1950, Office, Chief, Army Field Forces, allocated a quota of 55 Marine students to the Associate Field Artillery Battery Officer Courses 7, 8, 9, and 10. In return The Artillery School requested that 23 Marine Corps officers be detailed as instructors during the period that the Marine students attended the School.<sup>1</sup>

This joint training continued for 66 years. That is no longer the case, as divergences in Service training priorities and standards eventually separated the Army and Marine officer students. Currently, Army officers attend Field Artillery Basic Officer Leaders Course B (FA BOLC-B) and Marine officers attend the Marine Artillery Officers Basic Course (MAOBC). With the exception of a select few live fire events, these two courses are taught separately. This article describes the devolution of training between the Army and Marine Corps' artillery officer basic training that led to the separation and further seeks to inform and highlight efforts underway to realign the two courses to a combined syllabus for Army and Marine officers. During the summer of 2019 the Field Artillery Commandant's (FA CMDT)

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office reviewed the current memorandum of agreement (MOA) and directed a long overdue examination and possible re-write to facilitate joint Marine Corps-Army training. The FA CMDT's office and the Marine Detachment at Fort Sill (MARDET) established a working group envisioned to review the differences and similarities between FA BOLC-B and MAOBC in an effort to determine if, when, and how the two courses might be re-aligned (either presently or in the future) and examine the current status of the support agreements between the schools, commands, and Services. While there are significant structural and cultural challenges the Services must overcome to combine the

two courses, what was discovered will assist in the future adaptation of each course and the potential to recombine them. Additionally, the efforts have revealed a number of informal, but long-standing, agreements that were neither codified nor analyzed for the sake (and budget) of each Service. The current situation indicates significant work yet to do.

The course manager for FA BOLC-B was traditionally a Marine major. He oversaw the course as he had personal interest in it since his Marine students were attending. As outlined in the current MOA signed when the two courses diverged, the billet remained as a Marine requirement on the 1-30th Field

Artillery (FA) Battalion table of distribution and allowances (TDA) (similar to Marine Corps' table of organization and equipment). This officer serves simultaneously as the course manager for both the FA BOLC-B and MAOBC. The story below explains the historical context of the divergence from the viewpoints of both the current FA BOLC-B and MAOBC staffs, those instructors and personnel that were on staff during period when the decision was made to split the two courses, and other relevant historical data. Names of current instructors and leadership are intentionally omitted to remain focused on the problem rather than the people. Amplifying information is also provided in order to "translate" terms from Marine and Army terminology.

In order to understand the previously combined course, we must first understand the framework behind it. The bulk of this course and other inter-Service training arrangements are guided by a document known as the *Standard Memorandum of Agreement Between the USA and USN and USAF and USMC and USCG*. This document is an Interservice Training Review Organization (ITRO) and practically specifies requirements for consolidated and collocated training both for the host Service and participating Service tenants. The ITRO is a high-level document that is largely common sense; for consolidated programs of instruction (POIs), all Services must agree jointly on substantive POI changes, provide instructors for a specified amount of time, and abide by the host's rules and regulations, among other things, where applicable. By necessity, the ITRO is intentionally written necessarily vague and all-encompassing to facilitate and encourage more specificity in lower level and locally drafted agreements. From the ITRO spring other MOAs signed by various command levels specifying requirements agreed upon by both Services to "keep the peace" and execute a course that aligns with the individual Services' training standards, requirements, resource allocation (ammunition, manpower, equipment, etc.), and MOS production plans. Generally, these MOAs are honored by all parties. Oc-

asionally, however, they deviate on varying scales, but this generally occurs with the knowledge and concurrence of both parties. In the case of FA BOLC-B prior to the split, there were deviations by both parties that were detrimental to artillery community writ large.

During 2015, the FA BOLC-B course consisted of four platoons of 40 students each. One platoon was traditionally designated as the "Marine Platoon," where approximately half the student body consisted of Marine students and was traditionally trained by Marine captains. With the exception of a few Army-specific classes, Marines and Soldiers executed the POI, graduated, and became artillerymen together. However, changes were underway. At the time, the POI content was entirely under the purview of the U.S. Army Field Artillery School (USAFAS). Since it was not a multi-Service course, the Army was well within their authority to change the POI without the approval of the Marine Corps. As a result of changing priorities and Army policies specific to the school at the time, the USAFAS leadership did not seek concurrence from the Marine Corps.

This emerging situation at Fort Sill and growing concern by Fleet Marine Forces (FMF) commanders drove the MARDET Commanding Officer (CO) to have the Officer Instruction Branch staff assess the impact of the significant and rapidly changing POI with the Marine Corps training and readiness (T&R) Standards for an MOS 0802 Marine Artillery Officer as required by the Commanding General of Training and Education Command (TECOM). (Note: 1000 level T&R standards are the equivalent of Army's Individual Combat 641146.)

*Task List Skill Level.* The assessment revealed Marine lieutenants were instructed and evaluated on only 30 percent of the required T&R standards that an 0802 must obtain prior to serving in the FMF as a result of the various changes to the FA BOLC-B POI. In addition, USAFAS removed the stand-alone joint fires observer (JFO) course that was conducted at the conclusion of FA BOLC-B. The JFO material was reapplied with 40 instruction hours into

FA BOLC-B in order to provide exposure to the material but, unfortunately, no additional course length was added to the POI. This resulted in students who were not graduating with JFO certification. (Since such time, JFO has been added as a standalone course at the end of FA BOLC-B for a portion of students who will utilize the certification upon graduation.) The detailed assessment also revealed that fire support instruction was deficient by as much as 80 percent of the required T&R standards, gunnery as much as 2 to 30 percent deficient, and battery operations were not being taught at all. The MARDET received numerous complaints from FMF commanders that lieutenants were reporting to FMF units insufficiently trained which, in turn, was eroding readiness. Based on these findings, the MARDET CO directed the staff to identify viable courses of action (COAs) to remedy the problem.

The Officer Instruction Branch staff began analyzing the details of the Service MOA that dictated the requirements for both the Army and Marine Corps at Fort Sill. Essentially, the Marine Corps is required to provide officer instructors and curriculum developers proportionate to a percent of the overall student throughput, while the Army provides the necessary facilities and the opportunity for Marines to attend instruction. When it was written, artillery programs between the two Services were nearly identical; however, as a result of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) driven inputs to the POI such as Common Core, emerging operational requirements (transition from counterinsurgency operations), and a reluctance from both Services to extend the course length, the two Services' missions and how they trained for them began to diverge. As a result of the 2015 analysis that identified that Marine Corps T&R standards were simply not being met, the MARDET stood up a MAOBC follow-on course to cover the differences. As Service requirements continued to drift further apart, MAOBC simply could not keep up. To further exacerbate matters, the Fires Center of Excellence (FCoE) was



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considering removing manual gunnery from enlisted and officer training to “modernize gunnery.” At the same time, FCoE was developing a concept to combine field artillery (FA) with the air defense artillery as a single fires branch. This combination was attempted in the 1950s and 1960s without success. This concept further strained the ability to create subject matter experts in fire support and field artillery operations. (This is no longer an FCoE or USAFAS concept.)

As directed by the MARDET CO, the staff proposed three COAs to bring artillery officer entry-level training back into standard with the T&R and address the FMF commanders’ concerns. Keep Marine students in BOLC-B and grow MAOBC to cover all the differences in the POI. The COA would grow the course length and prohibitively impact the Marine Corps training, transients, patients, and prisoners population. Keep Marine students in some of BOLC-B instruction (primarily gunnery) while they attend MAOBC throughout the course to receive additional fire support and battery instruction. This COA was considered a “blended curriculum” and required inordinately complex scheduling and depended on FCoE acquiescence to Marine scheduling requirements.

Remove Marine students from BOLC-B altogether and they would receive training in fire support, gunnery, and battery operations at MAOBC.

The COAs were presented to TECOM with all the supporting details. Initial feedback was that the removal of manual gunnery was not acceptable. The MARDET CO made it clear that the Marine Corps would not remain part of artillery training at Fort Sill if manual gunnery was eliminated. TECOM declined to approve lengthening MAOBC as it was cost prohibitive and must remain within the temporary duty under instruction time limits (less than six months). Therefore, either of the two latter COAs were viable, as long as 0802s were sent to the FMF fully trained in 1000-level T&R tasks.

Given the direction handed down by the Army at the time, the FCoE disagreed with the position on gunnery when the MARDET relayed the directives from TECOM but understood our dilemma and were willing to accept the decision so long as the MARDET continued to provide Marine instructors at BOLC-B. The FCoE leadership also assessed that Marine students had a positive influence training with Army students (academically, socially, etc.) and wanted to maintain as many touch points as possible. This view was shared

by MARDET leadership. The reality, however, was that other than classroom instruction, the students did not spend much time together. After exhaustive deliberation, the staff was unable to develop a viable training schedule that facilitated a blended curriculum, so the MARDET leadership opted for the “break away” COA. The staff was directed to write the curriculum for a complete MAOBC program.

In early 2016, the instructors began writing the new curriculum. The course design was based entirely on T&R standards and followed a logical, concurrent, progression of increasing complexity in both fire support and gunnery instruction. Battery operations were taught throughout, and the staff began working with both the enlisted and Warrant Officer Basic instructor cadres to ensure the standard techniques were taught across the Marine artillery community. Also, based on demand from FMF commanders, the Marine Logistics Course was introduced to provide students with a basic understanding of artillery logistics. Finally, after completing the MAOBC POI, the students attended a contracted JFO course (not a graduation requirement). The first stand-alone MAOBC course began instruction in mid-2016 with MAOBC Class 7-16.

Since the first course in 2016, both FA BOLC-B and MAOBC POIs have undergone changes. Each course was adjusted and improved, and FA BOLC-B and MAOBC are currently teaching MAOBC 2.0 and FA BOLC-B 6.0, respectively. The MARDET provides two to four instructors (occasionally and temporarily surging past four) to the FA BOLC-B that work solely with the Soldier instructors and students.

FA BOLC-B typically runs eight classes annually with a throughput of roughly 1,100 lieutenants. MAOBC offers seven classes annually aligned with TBS in Quantico class schedules with a throughput of roughly 125 lieutenants. The courses are similar in length and instruction hours (792 for the USMC hours versus 799 hours for the Army) but have varying requirements. Since Marine lieutenants attend TBS, they obtain basic knowledge of military skills required by a Marine officer to include,



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but not limited to, rifle and pistol range, basic infantry tactics, field craft, Marine Corps history and traditions, and Marine Corps design and capabilities and limitations of its units. This six-months training at TBS permits the students and instructors at Fort Sill to focus solely on artillery. In contrast, the FA BOLC-B receives lieutenants directly from their commissioning source. Regardless of commissioning source—Officer Candidates School, Reserve Officer Training Corps, or West Point—newly commissioned officers arrive at FA BOLC-B and must execute Common Core training objectives that include but are not limited to rifle range, field craft, Army organization, and many other classes also covered at Marine TBS. FA BOLC-B also includes a Combined Arms Division that instructs the lieutenants on the basics of maneuver and how to apply fires to support different types of units. Aside from these blocks of instruction, the material in the gunnery, fire support, and battery/platoon leader blocks are remarkably similar. Instructor to student ratio also differs by course, with a ratio of 1:20 for the Marine Corps and 1:35 for the Army. While there are differences in the number of hours taught because of extra requirements for FA BOLC-B and some differences in

grading, the basic materials and skills are the same.

This puts us to where we are today. The MARDET and the FA CMDT's office remain committed to combining instruction of our officers by working closely to mitigate existing and emerging challenges. The MOA Working Group is taking a methodical and purposeful approach at a framework to combine the courses and define the necessary equitable inter-Service support. Under the auspices of the G-3/5/7, the FCoE G-8 (Comptroller) is actively working with Training Command (which is subordinate to TECOM) and TRADOC to draft the necessary Inter-Service Support Agreements to account for support provided and received by both parties under the existing ITRO. At the local level, the two courses are still taught separately; however, certain touch points are in play to facilitate conditions to combine training where it is practical to do so. To that end, we continue to push forward with several initiatives designed to overcome some of the most basic challenges. One example is having MAOBC students routinely attend planned FA BOLC-B socials to mingle, share experiences, ideas, and culture between the two Services. Also, commencing in the spring 2020, as part of a pilot program to practically and

fully assess bringing the two schools back to joint training, several Soldiers will attend MAOBC to provide the student's view of the course differences. Supervised by a Marine major who is the Course Manager for both BOLC-B and MAOBC, four Marine captains remain as part of the instructional staff for FA BOLC-B to provide teaming, leadership, and mentorship to the future generations of Army artillery officers. The MARDET CO and the Course Manager remain invested in the success of both programs.

So, what is next? While the future is still uncertain, the MOA Working Group continues its process to identify differences in the two courses and work together to overcome them. Naturally, some of these challenges lie beyond the scope and control of the MARDET, FA CMDT, and FCoE, and will require concurrence and approval from higher-level commands such as Marine Corps Training Command, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, USATRADOC, U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training, and U.S. Army Human Resources Command. The fact remains, however, that the goal of Fort Sill (Marine Corps and Army) are the same: to produce the finest artillery officer possible for the good of our Nation. This is a no fail mission to which we remain committed.

#### Note

1. 1stLT Robert W. Whitfield, *History of the Field Artillery and Missile School Volume III*, (Fort Sill, OK: USFAS, 1957).

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