

On Target: The Future of Field Artillery Officer Basic Training



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Students at the Field Artillery Basic Officer Leaders Course, 2ndLt William Ostermeyer, left, and 2ndLt Daniel Lowery call for fire on May 12, 2016. Both officers and enlisted Marines in the artillery occupational field are trained at the Army's artillery school at Fort Sill, Okla.

By Maj Jonathan Bush, USMC

Field artillery is the bread and butter of the U.S. Army's Fort Sill located near Lawton, Okla. Since 1917, Marines have also walked this sacred ground arm-in-arm with Army and allied teammates. With the same mission, similar equipment and a shared burning pride in our technical proficiency, skilled and proficient artillery officers are created and trained. It may come as a surprise, however, that, until recently, Army and Marine officers (and our allies) were not training together.

Combined officer training began 70 years ago when, "Upon the request of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, on Oct. 26, 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." This joint training continued for 66 years until divergences in service training priorities and standards separated the Army and Marine officer students.

Currently, new 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. The devolution of training between the Army and Marine Corps artillery officer basic training led to the separation, but efforts are underway to realign the two courses into a combined syllabus for both Army and Marine officers.

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amination and possible rewrite to facilitate joint USMC-USA training. The field artillery commandant's office and the Marine detachment at Fort Sill established a working group to review the differences and similarities between the Army and Marine officer courses in an effort to determine if, when, and how the two courses might be realigned and examine the current status of the support agreements between the schools, commands and services. There are, of course, significant structural and cultural challenges the services must overcome to combine the two courses. The discoveries will assist in the future adaptation of each course and potential to recombine them and have already revealed a number of informal but long-standing agreements that were not codified nor analyzed for the sake and budget of each service. The current situation indicates significant work yet to do.

The course manager for the Army's FA BOLC-B was traditionally a Marine major, and that the officer also serves simultaneously as the course manager for MAOBC.

In order to understand the previously combined course, we must first understand the framework behind it. The bulk of this course and other interservice 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 largely is common sense. For consolidated programs of instruction (POIs), all services must agree jointly on substantive changes, provide instructors for a specified amount of time, and, where applicable, abide by the host's rules and regulations among other things. 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 springs other MOAs signed by various levels of command

specifying requirements agreed upon by both services to “keep the peace” and execute courses that align with the individual services’ training standards, requirements, resource allocation (ammunition, manpower, equipment, etc.) and military occupational specialty (MOS) production plans. Generally, these MOAs are honored by all parties. Occasionally, 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 the 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.” Approximately half the student body consisted of Marine student lieutenants who were 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 already underway. At the time, the POI content was entirely under the purview of the U.S. Army Field Artillery School. Since it was not a multi-service course, the U.S. Army was well within its 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 Field Artillery School’s 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

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commanding officer of the MARDET to assess the impact of the significant and rapidly changing POI with the Marine Corps Training and Readiness (T&R) Standards for a MOS 0802 Marine Artillery Officer.

The assessment revealed that as a result of the various changes to the FA BOLC-B POI, 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. In addition, the Field Artillery School had 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 not graduating with JFO certification. Since such time, JFO has been added as a stand-alone 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, and gunnery was as much as 20 percent to 30 percent deficient. 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, eroded readiness. Based on these findings, the MARDET CO directed the staff to identify viable courses of action (COAs) to remedy the problem.



Capt Andy Richards instructs an FA BOLC-B class in fire support at Fort Sill.

An analysis of the details of the Service MOA that dictated the requirements for both the Army and Marine Corps at Fort Sill was conducted. 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 the Army's Training and Doctrine Command driven inputs to the POI, emerging operational requirements, 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 was considering removing manual gunnery from enlisted and officer training in an effort to "modernize gunnery." At the same time, the Fires Center of Excellence was developing a concept to combine field artillery 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.

As directed by the MARDET CO, the staff proposed three courses of action to

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.

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. This would increase the course length which would prohibitively impact T2P2 (training, transients, patients and prisoners) for the Marine Corps.

- 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 while also depending on the Fires Center of Excellence's 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 courses of action 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 course lengths must remain within the temporary duty under instruction time limits, which is less than six months. Therefore, either of the two latter COAs was 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 U.S. Army at the time, the Fires Center of Excellence disagreed with the position on gunnery when the MARDET relayed the directives from TECOM, but understood the Marines' dilemma and were willing to accept the decision as long as the MARDET continued to provide Marine instructors at BOLC-B. The Fires Center of Excellence leadership also assessed that Marine students had a positive influence training with Army students, both academically and socially, 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 de-



COURTESY OF 1-30TH FIELD ARTILLERY BRIGADE

Capt James Baird conducts FDC simulations with an FA BOLC-B class at Fort Sill.



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Students at the Field Artillery Basic Officer Leaders Course conduct firing drills at Fort Sill, Okla., May 11, 2016. Marine artillery officers spend five months at the school as part of their MOS training.

mand 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, which was not a graduation requirement. The first stand-alone MAOBC course began instruction in mid-2016.

Since the first course in 2016, both FA BOLC-B and MAOBC POIs have undergone changes as each course was adjusted and improved. 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 The Basic School's graduation schedule with a throughput of roughly 125 lieutenants. The courses are similar in length and instruction hours with 792 for the Marine Corps hours and 799 hours for the Army, but have varying requirements. Since Marine lieutenants attend TBS, the six months of training there permit 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 Candidate 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 covered at 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. The instructor to student ratio also differs by course with a ratio of 1-to-20 for the Marine Corps and 1-to-35 for the Army. While there are differences in the number of hours taught due to extra requirements for FA BOLC-B, and some differences in grading, the basic materials and skills are the same.

Today, the MARDET and the field artillery commandant's office remain committed to combining instruction of 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 Fires Center of Excellence-8 (Comptroller) is actively working with the Marine Corps' Training Command and the Army's Training and Doctrine Command 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 touchpoints 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 of 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 the 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's 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, Field Artillery Commandant, and the Fires Center of Excellence, and they will require concurrence and approval from higher-level commands within both the Marine Corps and the Army. The fact remains, however, that the goal of Fort Sill is the same for both the Marine Corps and the Army: to produce the finest artillery officers possible for the good of our nation. This is a no-fail mission with which we remain committed.

Author's bio: Maj Jonathan Bush is an artillery officer currently serving as the course manager for both MAOBC and FA BOLC-B. He has deployed and served in various training, command, and FMF billets during his career. 



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Marine 2ndLt Jolyon Gidari assists in a firing drill at the Field Artillery Basic Officers Leaders Course at Fort Sill, Okla., May 11, 2016. Students at the course learn how to calculate and transmit firing positions to quickly and proficiently fire at the target.