



The Battalion Fire Control NCO

By Sergeant First Class Robert M. Castillo

My first experience with the Field Artillery battalion fire control NCO (FCNCO) was as a young soldier in a battery fire direction center (FDC) during the battalion “Best FDC Competition.” I was the FDC advance party man in a 105-mm battery and had just pulled into position with the rest of the battery advance party.

As I began to enter the initial gun data into the back-up computer system (BUCS), I heard this gruff voice asking, “What are your priorities of work as the advance party man?” Before I could answer, he took the data and BUCS and entered the data in a few seconds. His final words were, “It’s getting ready to shoot!”

During the rest of my first tour, I experienced the wrath of that old, crabby, knowledgeable, chain-smoking, coffee-drinking manual fire direction guru many times. He dictated what we trained on and when and where we trained it.

The battalion FCNCO has remained essentially the same for the past 12 years—although with the introduction

of digital systems to the Field Artillery, the scope of his duties has increased and will increase even more in the next three to four years.

This article addresses the duties and responsibilities of the FCNCO and outlines some tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) for his increasing the effectiveness of the battalion.

Duties and Responsibilities. The primary duty of the FCNCO is to be the premier trainer of all the Military Occupation Specialties (MOS) 13E Cannon Fire Direction Specialists and 13C Automated Fire Support Systems Specialists in the direct support (DS) FA battalion. He determines the “gate” training strategy for all 13E/C tasks in the battalion; manages the 13E/Cs; mentors battery and platoon FDC soldiers, section chiefs and fire direction officers (FDOs); guards FDC Sergeant’s Time training; and develops the roadmap for digital training in his battalion.

In addition, the FCNCO brings much to the DS orders process in the military decision-making process (MDMP). With his shooter’s and executor’s perspective, he can serve the battalion well.

Training. While I was the FCNCO for the 2d Battalion, 320th Field Artillery (2-320 FA), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the battalion instituted an aggressive training program to introduce ex-Paladin FDC chiefs to the world of manual FDC secondary checks and computations. We did this via FDC consolidated training in Sergeant’s Time and the commitment of the command group to a liberal training program.

However, the FCNCO responsibilities and input are just as important in the mechanized artillery battalion. The FCNCO’s ability to understand both the light and heavy fire direction worlds is an asset to either battalion.

Our gate strategy began with prioritizing the basic fire direction tasks based on our mission essential task list (METL) and then training them in standardized crew drills supplemented with informally written standing operating procedures (SOPs). These SOPs had step-by-step procedures to enhance understanding. The training culminated in gunnery field exercises with advance party procedures, occupation crew drills and fire mission processing.

Later, as the FCNCO in 4-27 FA, 1st Armored Division, Germany, we established a training strategy to build the gunnery knowledge of all FDC soldiers based on feedback from a rotation to the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) in Hohenfels. The soldiers attended basic manual gunnery classes once a month during consolidated Sergeant’s Time. Determining soldiers’ training needs on an implied task—manual gunnery—is the FCNCO’s responsibility.

The FCNCO’s time should be spent with the battery and platoon FDCs concentrating on simple step-by-step drills at the lowest levels. This enhances and standardizes soldier knowledge at every level.

The time spent with the battery and platoon FDCs is beneficial in two ways. First, it ensures the training conducted at the battalion and section levels is useful and realistic and standardizes the battalion. The endstate is soldiers can be “plugged into” any battery because they all were trained in the same manner.

Second, the FCNCO learns the strengths and weaknesses of each of his battery and platoon FDCs, which makes him a better advisor to the commander in all matters concerning the FDCs.

Managing. The FCNCO gives the command sergeant major (CSM) a monthly “snapshot” of the FDC sol-

diers and where the battalion stands in team building. With the help of the personnel actions NCO and the battery first sergeants, each FDC soldier is tracked using a simple spreadsheet software program containing his name, rank, duty position, arrival date, previous duty position, departure date and battery.

This form allows the FCNCO to make recommendations to the chain of command and the NCO support channel on moving soldiers and replacing soldiers leaving the battalion. It also enhances the battalion's ability to promote soldiers from within, align new leaders with sections based on their abilities and that of their prospective sections, and create an environment for soldiers to strive to become leaders.

In FY04, MOS 13E and 13C are scheduled to be consolidated into MOS 13D FA Tactical Data Systems Specialist. With the introduction of the 13D program to the fire direction community, tracking FDC soldiers increases in importance because of the effects of consolidating two MOS on a DS battalion. For example, unless the FCNCO has a tracking system in place, if the battalion receives an abundance of ex-13Cs to run the battery and platoon FDC, this could lead to problems throughout the battalion. In addition, to qualify as a 13D, the 13C or 13E, at a minimum, must undergo a battalion-directed training program and be certified as a 13D by the first lieutenant colonel in the soldier's chain-of-command.

Mentoring. A battalion mentoring program is, perhaps, the hardest to start but the easiest to maintain. By the nature of his job, the FCNCO is the senior "observer/controller" in all matters related to the battalion's FDCs. During field problems, the FCNCO learns about the individual abilities of each leader and soldier by visiting the firing batteries and observing the crew drills, fire direction procedures and other training.

The FCNCO's visits to the battery FDCs with the Battalion Master Gunner provide invaluable information for the command team to use in future training events, field exercises and deployments to the various training centers. During these visits, soldiers begin to understand the role of the FCNCO, his training plans and his ability to make them better at their jobs. The visits also can evaluate the effectiveness of training and refine TTPs that aren't working. The visits promote the FCNCO's interaction with the FDC soldiers and build

teams around the programs instead of vice-versa.

The FCNCO mentorship of battery and platoon FDC personnel must include the battalion FDO and the soldiers in the battalion FDC. The relationship between the FCNCO and the battalion FDO is easy to define if one understands what each "brings to the table." At the battalion level, the FDO is either a senior lieutenant or captain who, in most cases, has served as a battery or platoon FDO. His understanding of the tactical and technical aspects of the battalion FDC is limited to his experience as a battery FDO.

The battalion FCNCO is a senior enlisted leader (E-7/sergeant first class) who has served as a battery fire direction NCO (FDNCO); in most cases, as a 13C, he will have spent much of his time at the battalion FA tactical operations center (TOC). Together, the two must build on each other's strengths and knowledge and dedicate themselves to training the battalion fire direction capabilities.

They share duties in the orders process and developing battalion FDC leaders and, most important, perform each other's duties in the other's absence. Together they are key to the FDC program and, therefore, share in the mentorship program.

In many cases, the FCNCO must develop the skills of the battalion FDO to help him understand the difference between his role as a planner and executor. For example during the MDMP, the FCNCO can help the battalion FDO develop a plan that is tactically and technically effective.

Too often, the technical aspects of a plan are overlooked until it is already in the hands of the battalion FDC and the battery and platoon FDCs. The FCNCO's mentoring of the battalion FDO improves the plan and, at the same

time, allows the FCNCO to gain experience in planning, learning skills most FDOs learned from their first days in the service.

The battalion FDO and FCNCO can develop FDC leaders in programs such as the "FDC University" held one night a week, Fire Direction Conferences to validate new SOPs or TTPs held quarterly and the occasional brown-bag lunches with various combinations of FDC chiefs, FDOs, the battalion's officers and the command group. The battalion FDC personnel can be developed with classes in the MDMP, essential fire support tasks (EFSTs) versus essential FA tasks (EFATs) and ammunition management.

Guarding Sergeant's Time. The CSM establishes the battalion's Sergeant's Time standards. His format is a tool for all NCOs to ensure precious training time is not wasted—or worse, is not "just another event" annotated in the monthly training calendar.

As the guardian of Sergeant's Time, the FCNCO ensures FDC soldiers maintain the high standards established by the CSM. In Sergeant's Time, FDC soldiers meet one day a week for consolidated FDC training taught by section chiefs and leaders in the various FDCs. This consolidated program allows NCO trainers to train as they were trained, standardizing the battalion's training.

The training plan is the "digital road map," a plan that allows the FCNCO to share his training vision for 13Es/Cs with the command group, showing how the training meshes with the battalion's METL. This allows the command group to prioritize training, consolidate assets and resources, and map the training objectives in the six-week training calendar. Figure 1 is an example of a digital road map for a task, in this case, developing a digital fire mission processing SOP.

- **Week One**—Determine the format for the SOP; participants include all current fire direction NCOs (FDNCOs) and fire direction officers (FDOs).
- **Week Two**—Determine the database requirements for sensor-to-shooter links.
- **Week Three**—Link the sensor-to-shooter, for example: handheld terminal unit (HTU) to task force advanced FA tactical data system (AFATDS) to battalion fire direction center (FDC) AFATDS to battery lightweight computer unit (LCU) AFATDS.
- **Week Four**—Determine fire mission step-by-step procedures using a sensor-to-shooter link (classroom environment).
- **Week Five**—Conduct a sensor-to-shooter communications exercise (COMEX) using a "TACFIRE [tactical fire direction system] Park" or motor pool.
- **Week Six**—Introduce the digital field environment in a field training exercise (FTX).

Figure 1: The FCNCO's Training Road Map for Developing Digital Fire Mission Processing Standing Operating Procedures (SOP)

The FCNCO and the MDMP. With all the duties and responsibilities discussed, introducing the FCNCO to the orders process is the most beneficial to the battalion because of his experience at both the battery and battalion levels. For example, the FCNCO can have input into no less than eight sets of orders involved in the battalion's rotation to the CMTC, not including the deployment and redeployment orders.

The following information walks through the MDMP for developing orders and presents TTP for the FCNCO's involvement in the process.

As we begin the orders process, the first step is mission analysis. The FCNCO should bring the information listed in Figure 2 to the mission analysis. Using their experience, the FCNCO and battalion FDO can provide insight into the digital technical and tactical aspects of the mission.

As the mission is analyzed, the FCNCO can provide insight for the S3 to develop the warning order (WARNO) for the batteries, to include battalion-directed rehearsals for the battery and platoon FDCs.

The next phase of the MDMP is developing courses of action (COAs) and wargaming them. The FCNCO and battalion FDO can help the S2 develop the plan that portrays the enemy actions in the various COAs. Figure 3 lists the information the FCNCO must have for wargaming.

The FCNCO's and battalion FDO's contributions up to this stage of the



The FCNCO leads an after-action review (AAR) at one of his FDCs. He oversees the training of and mentors all the battalion's 13Es and 13Cs.

MDMP have been technical in nature. But during wargaming, they must shift from planner to executor. The FCNCO's knowledge of what the gun line can and cannot do is critical information for planners. Much like the battalion operations officer/S3, he is the honest broker of the plan.

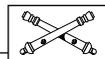
After the commander chooses the COA, the FCNCO attends the Field Artillery support plan (FASP) briefing and the battalion Rock Drill. He provides technical expertise and explains how the targets will be attacked and what the triggers are for ammunition resupply. In fact, he may have to brief the plan in the absence of the battalion FDO.

- Gunnery Solution for All Targets
- Ammunition Requirements
- Shift Times
- Met Schedule Confirmed
- EFATs Plotted with Range Arcs
- Key Decision Points Identified
- Ammunition Resupply Synchronized with EFAT Execution

Figure 3: The FCNCO's Information for Wargaming

TTP that has evolved out of Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations has the FCNCO present at the brigade fire support rehearsal and brigade combined arms rehearsal to increase his understanding of the plan. His ability to envision the brigade commander's intent for fires helps him synchronize the shooter with the sensor. The FCNCO's presence at these two major events also allows for invaluable cross talk with the aviators (fixed-wing and helicopters) and helps him understand critical decision points for the brigade during the fight. With this knowledge he can ensure the battalion FDC is more flexible—can change the plan during the fight, as needed.

As a major player in training and directing fire direction personnel, the FCNCO can enhance the effectiveness of the battalion. His knowledge of his fire direction leaders and soldiers at the battalion and battery/platoon levels allows him to focus the battalion's fire direction efforts to accomplish the mission. He can live up to his title as the battalion's "Fire Control NCO" if his priority is "Getting ready to shoot!"



Sergeant First Class Robert M. Castillo is the Fire Control NCO (FCNCO) for the 4th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery (4-27 FA), part of the 1st Armored Division in Germany. He previously served as an Operations Sergeant and FCNCO for 2-320 FA, part of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) at Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Fire Direction Center Observer/Controller and Fire Support Analyst at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California; FCNCO for 3-29 FA and Battery Fire Direction Chief for 5-29 FA, both in the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson, Colorado; and Battery Fire Direction Chief for 1-7 FA, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) at Fort Drum, New York. He entered the Army in 1989 and holds a BA in English from St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas.

- Digital Status: Do we have digital communications with observers, fire support elements (FSEs) and battery/platoons?
- Communication Issues: Do we have communications with observers, FSEs and battery/platoons?
- Essential Fire Support Task (EFST) to Essential Field Artillery Task (EFAT): What are our EFAT requirements?
- Range: What ranges must we be prepared to shoot?
- Munitions: What munitions are required?
- Meteorological: What is our Met schedule?
- Required Supply Rate (RSR): What is our RSR?
- Controlled Supply Rate (CSR): What is our CSR?

Figure 2: The FCNCO's Information for Mission Analysis