The future of the field artillery warrant officer

By Brig. Gen. Stephen Maranian and Chief Warrant Officer 5 John Robinson

On Jan. 19, Maj. Gen. Wilson A. Shoffner, Jr., Fires Center of Excellence commanding general, declared 2018 as the Year of the Fires Warrant Officer on Fort Sill, Okla. Army warrant officers trace their lineage back to the July 1918 creation of the Mine Planter Service, a subordinate to the Coast Artillery, which in turn was subordinated to the Army’s Artillery Corps. It is truly special that our modern-day Fires warrant officers are so directly connected to that moment in history. It’s also an opportunity for the field artillery branch to look ahead to the next millennia of field FA technicians. What follows is our vision of the future of the FA tech, in some cases recapping recently made decisions, highlighting initiatives already under development and otherwise providing our prospective roadmap.

We will begin by formally announcing a change in military occupational specialty (MOS) title – from FA targeting technician to simply field artillery technician. Just seven of the 17 Army branches that have warrant officers have but a single MOS; ours is 131A. With just a single occupational track, we ask our warrant officers to lead, manage and develop the field artillery’s most technical disciplines – target acquisition (TA) platoons, counterfire, FA intelligence and of course, targeting, at echelon. Since three of those four disciplines are related to, but not explicitly targeting functions, we should acknowledge the full breadth of our warrant officers’ impact across the entire branch. Job titles, including TA platoon leader, counterfire officer, FA intelligence officer (FAIO) and targeting officer should not change, but moving forward, MOS 131A will be known as field artillery technician. This MOS title adjustment is already underway.

We will continue to ask our FA technicians to support the mission of the field artillery as stated in Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-09, “to destroy, defeat or disrupt the enemy with integrated Fires, to enable maneuver commanders to dominate in unified land operations.” Our FA techs are not merely system integrators, but rather are our lead integrators of a system of targeting systems (Figure 2). Using mission command digital platforms and tools like the Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System, the Joint Automated Deep Operations Coordination System, the Precision Strike Suite for Special Operations Forces and the Digital Image Exploitation Engine 2.0 for target mensuration and collateral damage estimation (CDE), our counterfire officers, FAIOs and targeting officers network with the Air and Missile Defense Workstation, the Distributed Common Ground System-Army and the Tactical Airspace Integration System to develop integrated battlefield designs, enabled by fire support and airspace coordinating measures. These designs must be permissive and responsive to maneuver commanders’ objectives and missions. Again, targeting, integration and the delivery of Fires must enable maneuver dominance.

As we mitigate and reverse the proficiency gaps in fire support skills in our branch officer population, developed over years of execution of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, we should make our FA techs part of the solution. Limited sets and reps at the combat training centers, as well as uneven home station training approaches, have had a significant impact on the operational force and have affected collective training strategies, as well as our ability to plan, rehearse and synchronize joint Fires. As we rebuild our capabilities to address these critical skills, we should re-configure and in some cases increase our capacity to provide integrated Fires planning at the tactical echelons. We should consider replacing the assistant fire support officer, typically a first lieutenant, with a junior FA tech at each maneuver battalion Fires cell (FC) – for both infantry and armor formations. This would establish greater continuity, as well as provide additional skill and maturity. This would also create a better developmental path for FA techs to assume future roles in the brigade combat team (BCT) FCs, where they now serve.

Over the last 15 years, we have grown our BCT FC capacity to include an increase in targeting officer grade from W-2 to W-3 and authorized a second FA tech (W-2) to assist the integration functions, particularly with the additional intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets made available or organic to the BCT. The duty title of this second FA tech changed from target analyst to targeting officer in the non-lethal element of the FC, but the actual mission of the officer has never really changed – that Soldier is the integrator of ISR and informa-
tion collection assets within the BCT’s targeting effort. Moving forward, we will call that person what they are, the FAIO. This duty title adjustment is already underway.

While our FA techs already serve as targeting officers for battlefield coordination detachments (BCD), we are considering the utility of positioning them in the subordinate ground liaison detachments (GLD). GLD teams are currently comprised of a captain and senior noncommissioned officer and are typically positioned with U.S. Air Force fighter and bomber wings. They serve a liaison function, to help prepare aircrews to deliver Fires in support of ground maneuver commanders. This positioning would also create a better developmental path for some FA techs to assume future like roles in the BCDs, where they now serve.

We are mindful that senior commanders value the capabilities our master FA techs bring to their formations. Ideally, every corps, theater Army and Army service component command would have a master FA tech assigned, but today, that structure remains uneven across the force. We are examining options to rebalance our master FA tech population to ensure a more equitable distribution across these formations, with a priority to those theaters with the highest operational need.

Leveraging the capabilities, limitations and profiles of a system of targeting systems – a combination of air, ground and weapons locating radar sensors, as well as the delivery platforms and the mission command platforms and tools to integrate them, is what we train our FA techs to do at the U.S. Army Field Artillery School. Positioning our FA techs in maneuver battalion FCs, in addition to the BCT, division and corps FCs in which they already serve would necessitate additional fire support instruction during their professional military education (PME). This ensures new FA techs are educated to a common baseline, regardless of previous enlisted MOS, and guarantees they are making the needed contributions to fire support planning, rehearsing and integration at echelon. As always, our Warrant Officer Instruction Branch (WOIB) would lead this effort. WOIB provides PME, including functional training, to establish the technical depth required of an FA tech, at echelon. Currently, WOIB includes the Warrant Officer Basic and Advanced Courses (Figure 3). WOBC is attended by newly-minted warrant officers 1 and moving forward, we recommend WOAC be attended by chief warrant officers 2 within one year of their chief warrant officer 3 promotion board (active) and by chief warrant officers 2 identified to fill a chief warrant officer 3 vacancy (National Guard).

The re-balancing of additional fire support instruction and existing instruction on target mensuration only (TMO) and CDE may result in cross-leveling some period of time between the current WOBC and WOAC programs. TMO and CDE have been essential in the COIN fight, but we must consider balancing their criticality with the additional counterfire and fire support instruction needed to excel in unified land operations. TMO and CDE, as components of advanced target development, will remain essential to the FA techs’ toolbox.

To better provide the technical depth required of senior FA techs operating at the division/joint task force (JTF) levels and above, the Field Artillery School is developing a Warrant Officer Intermediate Level Education, Phase 3 course, designed to be attended by chief warrant officers 2 within one year of their chief warrant officer 3 promotion board (active) and by chief warrant officers 2 identified to fill a chief warrant officer 3 vacancy (National Guard).

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new course may be attended by FA techs either before or after their WOILE, Phase 2 (common core) attendance at the U.S. Army Warrant Officer Career College. While still not finalized, we intend to launch the first course in Fiscal Year 21. Attendance of all phases of WOILE would be mandatory, in order to later attend the Warrant Officer Senior Service Education (WOSSE) Course (for active 131As). The National Guard would not require the Phase 3 course for promotion to chief warrant officer 4, but would require it prior to WOSSE attendance.

We have developed this WOILE, Phase 3 in conjunction with our air defense artillery counterparts. The course is designed as a three-week, blended (distance learning and resident) program, with the final component having FA and ADA warrant officers in the same classroom, addressing common Fires issues at the division/JTF levels and above. With both branches using common doctrine and in the future, potentially using common delivery and acquisition platforms, it makes more sense than ever to provide senior Fires warrant officers common PME.

Wrapping up our education initiatives, we are considering a total force approach to our WOIB Manning by adding a guardsman to the faculty. This is already something we do for the FA Captains Career Course and it would be win-win for both components; we relieve the active side of a Manning requirement, while at the same time providing greater exposure to the nature of guard missions and experiences. It would also serve as a developmental job for a sharp guardsman and would prepare the officer to be a better leader, mentor and FA tech, once they return to the ARNG formation.

The addition of new FA tech positions and increased responsibilities, at echelon, will not happen without command and senior FA tech emphasis on increased recruiting, across the force. We have recently expanded our accession pool to include MOSs 11B (infantryman) and 19D (cavalry scout), capitalizing on their maneuver know-how. Our earlier expansion to include MOS 11C (indirect fire technician) has proven to be a success. We are also willing to consider cross-service applications from U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Control Party Specialists (CMF 1C4) and select U.S. Marine Corps field artillerymen. Still, we ask that commanders and command sergeants major at all levels consider their most technically astute field artillery leaders as potential future FA techs. We would have to modestly increase our accessions in order to man our future formations, as envisioned.

The future of the field artillery technician is a bright one, filled with opportunities for positive impact on the maneuver fight, additional technical training and increased relevance to the total Army. This Year of the Fires Warrant Officer is just the beginning of that journey!

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