



Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 148th Field Artillery Regiment, conduct a live-fire calibration, National Training Center, Calif. (Sgt. Mason Cutrer/U.S. Army)

Managing talent

FA majors to combat training centers post KD

By Maj. Benjamin Culver, Maj. Robin VanDeusen and Maj. Kurt Knoedler

As highly competitive field grade officers complete key and developmental (KD) jobs, we are faced with a decision of going to a Combat Training Center (CTC) or a myriad of other possibilities. The fact that this next assignment fills the important block of time between KD time and the possibilities of a tactical battalion command highlights the importance of this decision. Factors that weigh into an officer's decision for assignment post KD include, but are not limited to; career progression, available time with family members and posting location. The U.S. Army's three ground combat training centers, located in California, Louisiana and Germany, offer opportunities to fulfill all of the aforementioned factors. Additionally, CTCs offer a tremendous experience and learning environment for majors as they make the transition from running a battalion to commanding a Field Artillery (FA) battalion.

To start the decision of whether to request a CTC position (nominative), we should examine all aspects of what an observer, coach, trainer (OC/T) does, and how it

will affect themselves as well as their family. There are several clear advantages to being an OC/T. First, each year you have the opportunity to see nine to 11 brigade combat teams (BCTs) and multinational units rotate through to execute the highest level of collective training. Secondly, as an FA OC/T, you have a first-row seat to observe a current battalion commander and fire support coordinator (FSCOORD), operate in a decisive action training environment (DATE). Third, as an OC/T at a CTC, one has the opportunity to work closely with a post-command battalion commander (FA battalion senior trainer) and a post-command brigade commander operations group (COG). This type of close mentorship is invaluable for a future battalion commander and, more importantly, FSCOORD. The OC/Ts not only receive the experience of observing rotational unit commanders and FSCOORDs, but more importantly can have the mentorship and discussions with the team senior trainer and COG focused on their rich experience, lessons learned and best prac-

tices. I cannot think of any other position that provides the level of experience and environment to learn and grow as being a field-grade OC/T.

Involvement in multiple DATE rotations as an OC/T enables the future FSCOORD to draw upon those experiences as they provide purpose, direction and motivation for their unit's training glide path and leader development program. Commanders must "develop and communicate a clear vision" for training guidance,¹ and a key aspect of this is determining "what to train." A former OC/T gains two to three years' worth of real-world examples to inform them on what their unit needs to emphasize during a training cycle to overcome the common challenges associated with the DATE fight. They see units successfully negotiate these challenges and units unable to overcome the friction associated with these challenges. Likewise, the future FSCOORD becomes very familiar as an OC/T with the development required by leaders at echelon to succeed in the DATE fight. They can in turn utilize this knowledge to inform junior leader development strategy and integrate it into the overall unit training plan. Moreover, the OC/T conducts after-action reviews (AARs) on a regular basis and gains experience assessing training that directly benefits a future commander as they ensure proper execution of AARs during battalion command.

As stated above, being an OC/T gives you a view of how lieutenant colonels balance the challenging roles as both a battalion commander and FSCOORD. Coming out of KD time, you have no doubt identified gaps in your own military experience and tactical knowledge required to be a successful battalion commander. As OC/Ts observe the rotational units' field-grade officers execute their duties they have the opportunity to evaluate and take notes addressing these natural knowledge gaps in their military

¹ FM 7-0, 1-5

knowledge. Additionally, being an OC/T provides the opportunity to coach and train leaders across the FA battalion, increasing your knowledge in systems you did not master during time in KD positions. When executing training as a participant, the stresses of combat affect leaders and their ability to step back and see the bigger picture. As an OC/T, the CTC provides the unique opportunity to be a part of that training but from a more informed perspective. This perspective is one in which you have more situational awareness than the rest of those conducting the training.

Another question that field-grade officers need to ask themselves is whether being an OC/T is personally rewarding. For the majority of OC/Ts, a large part of the job satisfaction comes from coaching rotational units and their leaders. From the time a unit arrives at Leader Training Program, during execution, and after the rotation, OC/Ts provide the coaching and training required to help units see themselves and improve their organizations. Being an OC/T requires leaders to know and understand the most current joint and Army doctrine. There is a constant dialog with the Fires Center of Excellence (FCoE) for both current rotational trends as well as any adjustments required to doctrine. An OC/T has the ability to observe trends and then articulate necessary training adjustments to leaders across the force, from the centers of excellence to Army senior leaders. This fact is both humbling and rewarding. Often, Army senior leaders visit the CTCs allowing the OC/T to express this feedback first hand through face-to-face exchanges driving timely changes at the FCoE on important doctrinal, equipment, and training strategy issues.

An often-misunderstood aspect to being an OC/T is the impact on your family. After completing KD time, most officers desire to take their foot off the proverbial gas pedal and give time back to their

family. During the rotation OC/Ts have the flexibility to adjust coverage to allow time to return to main post for special occasions, such as anniversaries, birthdays, sports games, etc. During a 14-day rotation, OC/Ts work in a few overnight “refits” to take a shower, do laundry and conduct physical fitness. When not on rotation, weekends are turned into four days to give back the time to families, helping to build that time “savings account” up prior to the possibility of being a battalion commander. As we have all seen, being a battalion commander is both rewarding and challenging for the leader and their respective family.

What you do with family time while assigned to a CTC is of course your decision. The closest town to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) is Leesville, La. True, Leesville is not a large town, but it is filled with a community that loves its military and for just a tank of gas, you have access to Houston, Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Lake Charles. Most OC/Ts at JRTC spend time hunting, fishing or camping in the year-round moderate climate. The advantages of assignment to the Joint Multination Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, are obvious as the CTC is centrally located in Europe with access to many countries within a few hours’ car, plane or train ride. In addition to the travel options, the immediate area and communities surrounding Hohenfels are filled with events and fests throughout the year.

The National Training Center is only hours away from the beaches, theme parks and historical attractions of Southern California. It also is about a three-hour drive from Las Vegas, and only six hours away from Phoenix, Ariz. There is a lot more to CTCs than the box, which is what most people think of when they see the OC/T job on the list of possibilities from FA branch. As Army senior leaders at echelon start to vote on the future groups of battalion commanders,

it is our recommendation to guide their talented officers to serve as OC/Ts at one of the CTCs. As leaders mentoring captains and majors, we must help them to see the complete picture of how a tour at a CTC can help them be proficient tactical battalion commanders. Additionally, the Field Artillery Branch must continue to have honest dialogue with talented officers across the force and fill the CTCs with the requisite talent. BCT and DIVARTY commanders are the first line of communication counsel with their field-grade officers – they need to encourage them toward the tremendous opportunity available to maintain the edge at the tactical level prior to selection to battalion command.

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