Establishing Effective Junior Air Defense Officers
An Institutional Approach
By 1st Lt. Bradley T. Hodgkins

Status quo Army officer institutional development courses are designed to ensure that officers arrive to their units with the baseline competencies required to be successful in their next assignment. TRADOC Regulation 350-36 notes in Chapter 4-9 that graduates of any Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) B branch specific training should “possess attributes and competencies to assess, train and lead in their first unit of assignment” and that they will need to “[adapt] troop leading procedures and problem-solving skills to branch specific mission support requirements.” For second lieutenants graduating the BOLC, company grade commanders demand that their new second lieutenants are prepared to serve as platoon leaders and accomplish tasks with minimal guidance or training required. This expectation requires different levels of training for lieutenants of various branches; the duties and responsibilities of an infantry platoon leader and a transportation platoon leader may share similarities, but still require different levels and lengths of branch specific training.

Infantry lieutenants, for example, spend a significant amount of time developing platoon-level leadership and tactical skills during their BOLC, and conduct follow-on training by attending Ranger School, Weapon System Leader Courses (Bradley, Stryker, etc.), and troop schools before reporting to their first assignment. By providing several opportunities for new infantry lieutenants to develop their skills as a platoon leader, new arriving infantry lieutenants are often considered reasonably prepared to step into their role and immediately begin executing within the organization. The progression in the maneuver community is direct: BOLC B provides students with a basic tactical understanding of the core competencies, Ranger School turns basic understanding into mastery by putting tactical concepts into practice under extreme stress, and special schools (i.e. Bradley/Stryker Leader Course) provide exposure to the breadth of knowledge that their Soldiers are required to know on their systems. This direct institutional progression is not leveraged by the Air Defense Artillery.

The ADA community stresses a unique level of expertise from their new lieutenants. New arrivals are not simply placed in a position of leadership over a platoon of Soldiers that learn similar skills. Serving as tactical control officers (TCOs) in Patriot, for example, involves a depth of understanding of a complex weapon system that necessitates a set of skills that have nothing to do with platoon leadership. The dilemma is simple, when young maneuver officers broaden their understanding of their tactical responsibilities they, in turn, develop as platoon leaders. As new air defense officers are immersed in the nuances of Patriot tactics during BOLC B they are not learning skills that translate to being a platoon leader. Even if a brand new BOLC B graduate is placed in a fire control platoon leader position in a Patriot battalion, the skills they learn while training to certify as a TCO do not generate second lieutenants that can effectively oversee a prepare for movement and emplacement (PM&E) crew drill, comprehend and interpret a defense design, or understand Patriot’s role in a broad air defense plan.

Additionally, the Table IVc written exam, used by unit standardizations teams to validate a baseline level of understanding for Patriot competency, poses a significant challenge to newly arriving lieutenants. Although the current BOLC B curriculum allocates a significant amount of time to Patriot Engagement Control Station (ECS) tactics, incoming TCOs are not retaining the information and the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) vary significantly. In June of 2018, 3rd Battalion, 43rd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, conducted a review of all Table IVc scores by second lieutenants and found that students graduating BOLC B scored an average of 30-40 percent. After an in-depth one week immersion course new officers showed a significant increase on their average scores (~80 percent), but were still missing the 90 percent mark required to certify baseline competency.

The trend operational units are currently seeing from second lieutenants arriving from BOLC is as follows: Second lieutenants are eager to learn Patriot, they understand that the NATO tactics they have been instructed on during their course must be unlearned and replaced with new TTPs and brevity, and they lack an understanding of air defense concepts beyond rudimentary Patriot tactics. This is particularly troubling when considering the role that officers play in the air defense community—the 14A designation does not tie officers to a particular weapon system, which requires officers to adapt to the circumstances they are placed in. This may be remedied by shaping BOLC B to serve as a course that introduces and drills the fundamentals of air defense, while
providing opportunities to deepen exposure to a weapon system in a follow-on course. This is not a novel concept in the ADA community, all second lieutenants assigned to Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) units are required to attend the THAAD follow-on course. Upon completion of this course, ADA Soldiers receive an identifier on their record brief that demonstrates their understanding of the weapon system.

Third-43rd Air Defense Artillery Battalion recently sent a new arrival, 2nd Lt. Reed E. Simmons, to the German Air Force Air Defense course. As the first U.S. Army graduate of the course, it was immediately apparent that he graduated with a much more nuanced and broad understanding of both Patriot and air defense concepts. He now communicates with a fluency and understanding that places him well beyond the level of his peers that have been forced to learn in an operational environment. A critical aspect of the training plan during the course required students to translate ‘real world events’ during air battles into concepts that are applied in the ECS. This forced operators to remain vigilant and understand their role in the ground and air fight occurring outside their fire unit. Training dynamic thinkers creates more adaptable ADA officers in the long term. Students in the course spend a significant amount of time drilling autonomous and decentralized methods of operation, which forces them to understand the role of their higher echelon unit and consider the actions of friendly units around them. The German course also taught graduates to understand all aspects of the platform, including PM&E and reconnaissance, selection and occupation of position, which enables graduates to serve more effectively in a supervisory role as Soldiers train for certifications. Finally, this knowledge was provided in a distraction-free institutional environment which allowed Simmons to become a more expert ADA officer without being drawn away by the demands of platoon leadership.

In BOLC B, rather than providing new lieutenants’ exposure on the purpose and principles of radars, defense designs and surface-to-air platforms, second lieutenants are introduced to NATO doctrine and brevity by German exchange instructors that focus primarily on tabular and Patriot-specific tactical knowledge. This results in a botched attempt at achieving two separate goals simultaneously: Second lieutenants do not graduate with a tactical knowledge that is practical in FORSCOM/PACOM units and they do not graduate with a breadth of understanding that enables them to be plucked from a Patriot unit and be immediately successful as a Short Range Air Defense (SHORAD) platoon leader. The German Air Force acknowledges this deficit and sends their BOLC B exchange student graduates to the course that Simmons attended to supplement their tactical expertise.

The Aviation Branch demands technical expertise from their second lieutenants similar to ADA, but Aviation BOLC B functions as their exposure to platoon leader-level training and the fundamentals of flight operations as defined by TRADOC, then all officers are sent to follow-on flight school to master their assigned aircraft. ADA officers are not currently developed to be successful in any possible ADA position or understand the scope of ADA tactics. This problem is going to be magnified as the branch looks to implement the Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS). The 'plug-and-play' capability of the IBCS expects ADA officers to understand ADA concepts and not simply the capabilities of a specific platform. Anticipating this evolution in ADA operations ensures that future leaders are more equipped to function in a multi-domain environment.

This ultimately begs the question ‘what does the branch expect from junior officers in the Air Defense branch? In the past, ADA separated the institutional model into a SHORAD versus High to Medium Altitude Air Defense (HIMAD) dichotomy. This fostered a culture that discouraged exploring the transitivity that exists between short-range and high-altitude air defense planning and procedures. It is understandable that FORSCOM is required to remain dynamic, and adapting to real world events, a luxury that takes much longer in a TRADOC environment, but divisions between SHORAD and HIMAD will exacerbate the current institutional mold as the Army seeks to adopt the IBCS. As ADA approaches this critical moment of innovation and transition it is imperative that officers are developed into air defenders and not simply Patriot, THAAD, or SHORAD officers.

The multi-domain environment requires air defense units at all echelons to not only understand the capability of every sensor and shooter in the Joint Operations Area but to have the knowledge to properly emplace and integrate them. We can no longer accept the stove piped approach to professional military education and career development, and the institutional community must get ahead of this problem now to ensure our branch is in the optimal position to address emerging threats. The institution should not wait for units to receive the IBCS to implement a dynamic and tailored BOLC B curriculum. Adopting an institutional model that more closely mirrors the developmental model that the Aviation and Infantry branches currently use would serve the ADA branch well today, while concurrently ensuring that the force is prepared once IBCS or any similar system is fielded.

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