

# Train for Real: Experiential Training in the Basic Officer Leader Department

Lieutenants at logistics Basic Officer Leader Courses are learning how to support real-world missions through relevant classroom training and realistic field training exercises.

■ By Keith H. Ferguson and Capt. Jeffery A. Hill

It's been raining for two days, mud is everywhere, and the temperature is in the low 40s. Several Soldiers are wearing balaclavas to shield their faces from the biting wind. The tactical operations center (TOC) is awash in activity. Although the TOC is heated, Soldiers are wearing gloves, using hand warmers, and stamping their feet to get their circulation moving.

In one corner, Soldiers are using radios to get updates on the progress of convoy missions. The company commander is reviewing assignments and coordinating efforts to keep the company performing and running smoothly.

In another corner, a translator and public affairs officer are talking to a regional governor about a situation in a nearby village. Others are sitting in chairs, escaping the miserable weather, and eating meals ready-to-eat.

Outside, convoys are loading up and preparing for various operations, from vehicle reconnaissance to route inspections. Vehicles are on the move, coming and going while Soldiers on security detail man machine guns and check people coming into camp.

This is training and education. An outdoor schoolhouse at Fort Lee, Virginia, is preparing the next leaders for the jobs they will be tasked to do throughout their careers.

## BOLD Training

The Army has long used experiential training and education to teach Soldiers about the rigors of their jobs, but the Army Logistics University's

Basic Officer Leader Department, (BOLD) which manages the Basic Officer Leader Courses (BOLCs), is taking this training to a new level. Increasing the rigor of field training exercises (FTXs) is the BOLD leaders' priority.

Like they do at every training center, students spend many hours in the classroom. They take notes, go on field trips, listen to lectures, watch PowerPoint presentations and videos, and take tests. But with the advent of the Army Learning Model and the current Army Learning Concept, the Army embarked on revolutionizing its training and education. This revolution is being led by schoolhouses that know what is best for their own Soldiers.

BOLC classes now have fewer lectures and more student discussions than they had previously. Instructors present students with real-world problems, lead students in problem-solving activities, and serve as guides rather than experts on every problem they present.

Remarkably, this training is not just for Soldiers. Army civilians are also participating. Civilians serve as continuity for the Army. As Soldiers deploy or move, civilians assist incoming Soldiers as they transition to their new assignments.

Some civilians have no prior military experience, so they are "greened" to understand the needs of Soldiers. Civilians within BOLD participate in land navigation, weapons qualification, and other typical Soldier tasks.

## Experiential Training

BOLD has embraced the philosophy of "real" training and is incorporating it into every aspect of its curriculum. This does come with a cost. Although all Army curricula go through certain processes and approvals, the approach individual schoolhouses take to teach their curricula is determined by commandants, course managers, and instructors.

BOLD teaches officers from the transportation, quartermaster, and ordnance branches. Every class has an assigned tactical officer (TAC) who models the Army values for the young officers. These TACs are committed to their classes and help them all the way through the 16-week course.

To keep training real, TACs and instructors have adapted the BOLC curriculum so that real-world problems, from ethics to common Soldier tasks, are incorporated into lessons. This has been a time-consuming process requiring great commitment.

## Transportation FTX

In addition to the changes made in the classroom, BOLD has applied its real-world training philosophy through FTXs. Operation Overland is a weeklong FTX in which transportation lieutenants are evaluated in a variety of leadership positions and situations. The entire event is planned and executed by students. They play the part of a distribution company supporting a heavy brigade combat team in a combat area.

During the planning process, they are given an operation order and relevant intelligence to set the stage for their area of operations. They are then responsible for creating a plan to convoy to their area of operations and support their brigade.

Each leadership role is filled by a lieutenant, and the remaining lieutenants are split into teams to support each position. The positions held throughout the exercise are company commander, executive officer, fuel and water platoon leader, transportation platoon leader, communications officer, movement control team officer-in-charge (OIC), highway regulation OIC, truckmaster, recovery OIC, and quick reaction force OIC. Once they have completed their plans, each section must create a standard operating procedure for approval.

All of their planning and rehearsals lead up to their deployment to the field. For this phase of the operation, the lieutenants team up with Soldiers and noncommissioned officers from the 508th Transportation Company to convoy to Fort Pickett, Virgin-

ia, where the weeklong FTX takes place. The 508th supports this training by providing vehicles and skilled operators not only to drive the vehicles but also to provide lieutenants with information and advice.

Logistics support and coordination for these exercises can be challenging. It takes the entire department to make sure that they run smoothly. Student Soldiers must carry out assignments in the field that would be typical of logistics Soldiers in the real world. Students are no longer in listening mode. They are actually performing the duties that they will have when they graduate.

The lieutenants fill all leadership positions required to run a convoy support operation. Each day they switch positions and learn how to do new jobs. They conduct nightly battle update briefs and reference the standard operating procedures created for each section. Every lieutenant gets the opportunity to be a convoy commander at least once and conducts a convoy in support of the company's mission.

Lieutenants plan, prepare for, and execute missions based on various scenarios, from supply drops to recovery operations to key leader engagements. A small opposing force exposes the lieutenants to some of the dangers they may face when conducting convoys in a combat zone. The opposing force places improvised explosive devices along the road and uses intermittent indirect and small-arms fire on the company area to build up to a culminating attack.

Instructors teach priorities of work in the classroom and expect them to be followed during the FTX. With the opposing force roaming, area security is essential. The lieutenants have to ensure that security is emplaced and that their base is well defended. To accomplish this, the lieutenants set up concertina wire and fighting positions prior to the operation.

### Applying Lessons

During the FTX, students learn about how their actions can affect Soldiers. This exercise exposes the lieutenants to every aspect of conducting a real-world support mission for combat troops in an austere environment.

Students are not lectured but mentored. Do they make mistakes? Absolutely. But in the learning environment, students can immediately see the consequences of their actions.

At the conclusion of each mission, students and TACs conduct after-action reviews. Students can discuss what they saw and how they felt and ask questions about their individual and team performance. TACs present the students with ways they could have acted that would have improved the results of each mission.

During the exercises, unless there is a safety issue, TACs will not correct mistakes as they are happening. They allow students to observe the consequences of their errors. The exercises allow students to make mistakes without endangering personnel or equipment. They provide students with a safe learning environment.



*A Transportation Basic Officer Leader Course student pulls guard duty on the perimeter during a field training exercise at Fort Pickett, Va., on Oct. 8, 2017. (Photo by Keith Ferguson)*



*A Soldier drives in a convoy to a key leader engagement during a Transportation Basic Officer Leader Course field training exercise at Fort Pickett, Va., on Oct. 8, 2017. (Photo by Keith Ferguson)*

In one FTX recently conducted at Fort Pickett, students running a convoy with a key leader aboard spent too long at a particular village. The scenario involved taking the key leader to meet with village leaders. However, when the meeting was over, the convoy commander did not move his convoy fast enough away from an area that might have contained hostile forces. Role-playing instructors, seeing this, improvised within the lesson plan and had the convoy attacked by insurgents. One vehicle would have been lost and casualties would have occurred.

The lessons of planning ahead, using time wisely, and understanding cultural situations were much more effectively learned in a single half hour than they would have been learned in hours of classroom training. Instructor role-players took advantage of the opportunity to teach these valuable lessons.

Every FTX is different because what is real varies with each exercise. For example, if the FTX is in January, snow might be on the ground. Snow would influence many aspects of the missions. Although safety is always a top priority, instructors and exercise controllers take advantage of the operational conditions to simulate actual missions that students will eventually perform once they graduate the course.

The FTX gives students an opportunity to learn both what to do and what not to do. It teaches that in the real world, several correct answers exist for any given set of problems, and it allows students to try to find the “optimal right.”

This type of training goes beyond textbook theories or ideas and has people taking action to solve problems. Students learn from mistakes and still get to fight another day.

The best teaching tool is experience, which is exactly what they gain from these exercises.

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