

Turning Civilians into Tankers

19K One Station Unit Training at Fort Knox

by Captain Lance Roper

It's early in the morning on Tank Table V. You and your gunner have been summoned to a platoon rehearsal. There's not much time to boresight and you want to get started, but your loader just arrived from Fort Knox two days ago. What can he do to get the tank ready? Will he hurt himself if left alone in the turret?

What should you expect from your brand new soldier who just arrived at your tank company? How much additional training will he need to accomplish basic tasks? How much proficiency does he have in maintaining the tank? NCOs may remember their days from basic training years ago, but many officers do not know much about what their new recruits have learned. This article's aim is to provide an idea and some specifics about the initial four months each tanker spends at Fort Knox, earning a place on his first tank crew.

New tankers train with one of eight 19K One Station Unit Training (OSUT) companies in the Army. Although numbers vary, based on recruiting and the same shortages the rest of the Army faces, two drill sergeants are responsible for the training, motivation, and welfare of 33 soldiers in each of five platoons in the company. Each OSUT company also has a tank section of 11 M1A1 tanks and 11 tank commanders who train three soldiers at a time on the tank, as well as conducting normal maintenance.

The first few weeks of training focus on soldier-specific skills and qualifications. The trainees are under complete supervision and spend their days in classes taught by their own drill sergeants and subject matter experts. Subjects include first aid, NBC, and land navigation, all taught by the medical, NBC, and infantry/cavalry NCOs of 381 Armor, the training support battalion in the 1st Ar-



Drill Sergeant Dennis Bellinger observes as the Tank Commander, **SFC Willie Hicks**, trains soldiers on how to erect the crosswind sensor of D15.

mored Training Brigade. Other subjects taught by the drill sergeants include drill and ceremonies, weapons, guard and sentry duties, and, physical fitness. Starting FY99, the Army added an additional week of values and human relations training taught primarily by the drill sergeants. The soldiers negotiate several ranges, including M4 carbine, M9 pistol, hand grenade, and the bayonet assault course. They also conduct foot marches that increase from 3 km to 15 km. The soldiers execute a two-day, infantry-intensive exercise during which they learn individual tactical movement, bivouac and fieldcraft procedures, and negotiate an exciting night infiltration course. During this course, the soldiers low crawl through a series of obstacles while directly under live 7.62 machine gun fire and among live explosion pits. The trainees often refer to this night as the best training event of the cycle.

During the majority of their training weeks, the platoons rotate to the motor pool where they receive over 80 hours of instruction on the M1A1 under the specialized supervision of the company's tank commanders. Each TC normally takes three soldiers and instructs them in great detail on how to operate the tank from the various crewmen's positions. While most instruction focuses on preparing them for probable assignments as drivers or loaders, the trainees qualify on several gunner's station tasks as well. They also get basic instruction on operator-level maintenance and recovery, including emergency procedures. Each

soldier's goal is to pass two armored crewman tests which measure his ability to operate the tank stations, and finally to pass the Tank Crew Gunnery Skills Test (TCGST), the same test given any other tanker in the force.

Their training culminates with Gun-Field week, during which the soldiers perform their learned skills in a field environment. The 5-6 day exercise includes training events that test their general soldier skills, require them to spend four hours in MOPP 4, and exercise basic fieldcraft in company bivouac sites. Lately, the training companies have designed scenarios to approximate the recent dismounted missions tankers perform in Bosnia and Macedonia. The week is also their chance to see and experience the Abrams tank in action. Each soldier drives the tank across the Kentucky countryside on the "mud course" through trails and puddles. Then the soldiers shoot the tank on a live fire range. During tank gunnery, each soldier drives, loads, and guns the tank, firing the main gun, coax, and loader's 240 machine gun. At gunnery, soldiers negotiate defensive and offensive engagements under both day and night conditions. The week finishes with a final foot march through a Rites of Passage Ceremony, where qualifying soldiers receive their Armor Branch insignia for their class A uniform. This solemn ceremony, following a week of rugged field training, marks their entrance into the proud Armor Corps. To incorporate a historical perspective, the Patton Museum hosts the ceremony. By

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the end of the week, the soldiers know they can operate the tank in a field environment and recognize their place as vital members in the Combat Arm of Decision.

Two additional programs offer specialized training to certain soldiers. Following each cycle, the battalion uses its nine M1A2s to qualify 27 soldiers assigned to Fort Hood or Fort Carson on the digital systems specific to that tank. These soldiers remain at Fort Knox for an extra week after graduation and earn the K4 skill identifier. The top soldiers in each cycle enter the Excellence in Armor program (see “Driver’s Seat,” page 7). The soldiers who qualify for this prestigious program gain additional UCOFT experience and fire extra engagements during gunnery. If they can remain in the program, they graduate as PFCs. Requirements, however, are strict. Soldiers who graduate EIA have maintained a 230+ APFT score, first time GOs on all tasks, and received a commendable rating while appearing before a board of senior NCOs.

The product we provide to the Army’s armor units is a trained tanker. Your new tanker has proven his proficiency in a



Drill Sergeant Dennis Bellinger corrects a trainee while the Tank Commander, SFC Willie Hicks, instructs soldiers on track maintenance using D15.

Photos by CPT Lance Roper

variety of basic soldier tasks, including NBC, first aid, and land navigation. He has passed an external evaluation of armor crewman tasks, including the TCGST to FM 17-12 standards. He has passed the APFT within two weeks of his graduation date. The drill sergeant influence, by tradition, has taught him discipline and motivation. The tank commander influence has taught him how to work professionally with an NCO in a four-man crew. Of course, all soldiers have different competencies, but at a minimum each one has the basic skills to perform both dismounted and mounted tasks, individually and as part of a crew, in Bosnia, Kuwait, Korea, Germany, CONUS, or wherever the Army needs him.

“TC, while you were out, I powered up the gunner’s station, conducted a computer self-test, computer data checks, zero pressure check, and firing circuit test. Everything’s good. Do you want me to start boresighting procedures from the gunner’s seat?”

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