

Training Leaders for Combat

By Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Howley

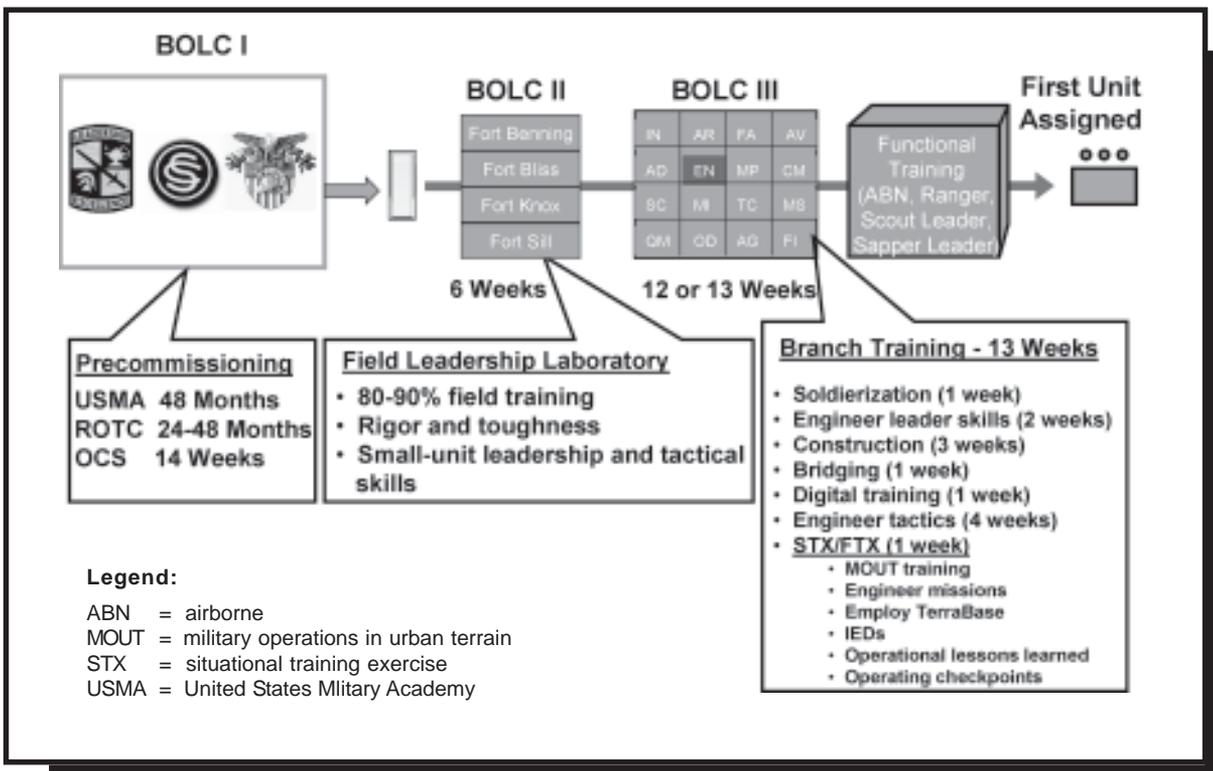
Teaching, coaching, and mentoring are basic blocking and tackling tasks of leader development, and that's what the "Dragon Battalion" is all about! The 554th Engineer Battalion conducts training and leader development to produce technically and tactically competent, adaptive, disciplined, and fit engineer officers for the Regiment. The battalion trains both Active Army and Reserve Component officers in the Engineer Officer Basic Course (EOBC), Engineer Command and Staff Course (ECSC), and the Precommand Course (PCC) and trains warrant officers in the Warrant Officer Basic Course (WOBC) and Warrant Officer Advanced Course (WOAC). The primary mission of the 554th is to train engineer lieutenants for combat, and the battalion has transitioned the training and education of the lieutenants in four distinct ways:

- Started small-group instruction for the EOBC.
- Redesigned both the tactics and engineering blocks of instruction to better focus on urban and complex terrain.

- Redesigned the field training exercise (FTX) to be an all-encompassing exercise, stressing troop-leading procedures, tactical skills, and engineering skills.
- Sent qualified lieutenants to follow-on combat preparatory courses on their way to their next unit of assignment. The overarching focus for the lieutenants is to be able to "shoot, move, communicate, and engineer." (Yes, the lieutenants *do* qualify on their M16, land navigate both dismounted and mounted, communicate tactical tasks on the radios, and build and blow up stuff in this battalion!)

The current organization and focus of the 554th is in an interim stage as the Army transitions in March 2006 to the new Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC). BOLC (Figure 1) has three phases:

- BOLC I is the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and Officer Candidate School (OCS) commissioning source.



BOLC Model

- BOLC II is a combined arms training phase focused on small-unit tactics.
- BOLC III is technically focused (for engineers) on assured mobility and field force engineering.

The 554th is currently training about 80 percent of the curriculum that will be used in BOLC III. It is continuing to refine and improve the instruction as it incorporates observations and lessons from the field. The battalion is currently in a transition point between decades of “that’s the way we’ve always done it” and “shaping” the training and education methods that will allow it to execute the BOLC III mission, while simultaneously preparing leaders for combat.

On 15 November 2004, the battalion began training EOBC lieutenants at the small-group level with captains as small-group instructors (SGIs). The method is much the same as the way we train captains in the ECSC with small-group leaders (SGLs). The SGIs are selected from a graduating ECSC class and are placed in an “SGI Academy” much like the Observer/Controller-Trainer Academy at one of the combat training centers. While in the SGI Academy, they attend the Instructor Training Course (ITC) and become familiar with the processes that support EOBC and instructional blocks they will teach to the lieutenants. A typical EOBC class of 70 officers is divided into four teams of approximately 16 to 17 lieutenants. An SGI is responsible for training, educating, and developing each team. The training and education is coordinated with the large-group “platform” instructors from the Tactics and Engineering Division in the academic section of the battalion to ensure that the appropriate method of instruction is used, based on the subject to be trained. Close coordination with the large-group instructors and the SGIs also supports the consistency in the instruction between the small groups.

The tactics and engineering blocks of instruction have been refocused to better train the lieutenants on urban and complex terrain operations. The battalion has incorporated lessons learned from current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan into lesson plans to better prepare the officers for their “first unit of assignment”... in *your* platoons! Some of the improvements made in the tactics block are improvised explosive device (IED) awareness, urban breaching techniques, and assured mobility fundamentals. Improvements in the engineering blocks include force protection, quality control, infrastructure reconnaissance, and reinstating “hands-on construction” at Fire Base Thunder, the battalion forward operating base in the Fort Leonard Wood training area. Senior officers will remember this as “Project Hammer” training, during which there was “hands-on construction” training for lieutenants. The purpose of restarting this training is to familiarize the junior leaders with quality control and project management of a construction project.

The FTX is the “capstone” event for the lieutenants’ training in the Dragon Battalion. The lieutenants execute a 2-week exercise during which they plan, prepare, and execute tactical and engineering missions. Some of the missions are

route reconnaissance, bridge reconnaissance, react to contact, airfield reconnaissance, and infrastructure reconnaissance—all consistent with a Southwest Asia area of responsibility. There is a common training theme in which the instruction taught in the tactics block will be revisited in the FTX, as well as the engineering block. The Opposing Force (OPFOR) is dressed in a mix of old military uniforms and/or “Arabic regional-style clothing” such as the *salwar kameez*, a very long shirt and pants.

The 554th further prepares junior leaders for combat by coordinating directly with the Engineer Branch to obtain slots for the Ranger School, Sapper Leader Course, and Airborne School, just to name a few. The battalion has been successful in these courses and continues to strive to get lieutenants in other courses to better prepare them for their units. Other courses being planned for lieutenants to attend are the Scout Leaders Course and the Bradley Leaders Course.

Teaching, coaching, and mentoring are still the foundations upon which we train and educate leaders for our Regiment. The 554th Engineer Battalion is totally dedicated to ensuring that the officers it trains are as prepared as it can possibly make them—for your unit, the Regiment, and the Army. 

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