

Be an Observer Coach/Trainer

U.S. Army photo

by Lieutenant Colonel Ian Fleischmann

Observer coach/trainers and media personnel watch as 173rd Airborne Brigade paratroopers jump onto the drop zone in Valcea, Romania, during exercise Saber Guardian 2017.

While we teach, we learn.

—Seneca the Younger
Roman Stoic philosopher (circa 4 BC–AD 65)

Introduction

One January night, I walked out of the brigade headquarters into the cold night air at Fort Drum, New York, and plodded through the snowdrifts to my car. While waiting for the engine to warm up, I listened to my voicemails, which had built up over a long day in the SCIF. One message was from Human Resources Command. “Hey, it’s your branch manager. Congratulations. Your assignment to JRTC [Joint Readiness Training Center] was approved. You’ll be headed to Fort Polk in the summer.” Surely this was a joke. I double-checked the number and verified it came from a Fort Knox area code—no joke. After 3 years at Fort Drum, I had dreams of a joint assignment, maybe a broadening job in Europe. Maybe they had called the wrong number?

No, they had the right number. And yes, later that summer I did end up at Fort Polk. At the time, I was not pleased because I thought I was doomed to a dead-end job in a dead-end location. I was wrong. Serving as an observer coach/

trainer (OC/T) is one of the most professionally and personally rewarding assignments available. Competent non-commissioned officers (NCOs), post-key developmental (KD) captains, and majors should *want* to go to the combat training centers to serve as an OC/T. The job cultivates tactical expertise, offers fantastic opportunities for professional development, and provides a great work-life balance compared to any KD position.

A Vital Role for the Army

OC/Ts serve a vital role at the combat training centers—coaching, teaching, and mentoring rotational training units to prepare them to fight and win in the most complex environments. In practice, this means that OC/Ts wear several different hats:

- ◆ First, OC/Ts coach, teach, and mentor rotational units through rigorous training and live fire exercises. This requires OC/Ts to be masters of doctrine and experienced in its practical applications. OC/Ts do this through routine engagement with their counterparts and their teams, and through planned and rehearsed after action reviews.

- ◆ Second, they facilitate the exercise by enforcing the rules of engagement to maintain a safe and realistic training environment. This takes many forms, from controlling engagements with the opposing forces to enforcing safety regulations (wearing protective eyewear, not sleeping under vehicles, etc.).
- ◆ Third, OC/Ts provide timely and relevant feedback to the larger Army on everything from trends to doctrine to force design.

All these functions are critical to the role the combat training centers fulfill in preparing units for combat, hence the reason OC/T billets are a 100-percent fill rate each manning cycle, with many of those personnel selected by name.

Even so, many NCOs, captains, and majors are hesitant to volunteer for an OC/T billet. Most see the job as intensely demanding and undesirable after coming out of hard jobs, commands, or KD positions. Some choose to look for jobs they believe will allow them to broaden professionally. Others are concerned with the reputations of Fort Polk, Louisiana, and Fort Irwin, California. However, the truth is that few jobs in the Army give you the opportunity to develop yourself tactically and professionally, while affording you the time and space to invest personally in yourself and your family.

Develop Tactically

Being technically and tactically competent is a staple of leadership. NCOs swear to it in the NCO Creed; commissioned officers hold it as a point of pride. Most leaders see themselves as tactically proficient, but after action reviews from the combat training centers consistently show that even experienced leaders can get better. Regardless of latent tactical acumen, serving as an OC/T will sharpen your tactical skills and broaden your base of experience in valuable ways.

The job of an OC/T naturally builds technical and tactical proficiency by the nature of repetitively coaching, teaching, and mentoring rotational units on the details of your profession. One of the best ways to learn and master a skill is by teaching it to others. Sometimes called the *protégé effect*, studies have shown that teaching others leads to a deeper and longer-lasting acquisition of information and skills.¹ Many fields take a shortcut to this approach by having students teach subjects to inanimate objects in a process called *plastic platypus learning* or *rubber duck debugging*. This approach is helpful, but studies have shown that reflective knowledge-building (or integrating the instructor's understanding of the material with prior experience) results in greater gains than simple knowledge-telling (or summa-

rizing materials without integrating experience).² This aligns exactly with the role of an OC/T as a coach and trainer, integrating doctrinal answers with current or historical tactical experiences for the benefit of the rotational training unit.

Rubber Duck Debugging

In software engineering, rubber duck debugging is a method of debugging code. The name is a reference to a story in the book *The Pragmatic Programmer* in which a programmer would carry around a rubber duck and debug his code by forcing himself to explain it, line-by-line, to the duck. Many other terms exist for this technique, often involving different (usually) inanimate objects, or pets such as a dog or a cat.³

A second benefit of reflective knowledge-building is that OC/Ts rapidly expand their base of experience by observing rotational training units experiment in a broad range of environments and conditions in a short timeframe. No two brigade combat teams are the same. They all have slightly different equipment, different personnel with different strengths, different mission sets and standard operating procedures, and different commanders. Additionally, no two combat training center rotations are the same. They can be oriented in any direction across the training area, under a variety of differing operational variables, with no solidly defined "battle periods," against any permutation of a complex hybrid threat, and with orders to execute any sequence of tactical tasks. Each rotation provides a unique experience for lessons about which tactics and techniques work, training plans that breed results, and task organizations that are effective in accomplishing the mission. Given the normal rates of staff turnover, a staff officer would need to remain in a brigade combat team (BCT) for almost two decades to see the same level of experimentation by OC/Ts in a single year.

Currently, much of this experimentation centers around BCTs adapting to the Army's fundamental shift toward re-learning large-scale ground combat operations, and OC/Ts are in the best position to see developing doctrine and technologies take hold. As the "engine of change for collective training in the Army," combat training centers are driving changes in tactics and equipment, from the company to the division.⁴ Almost two decades of counterinsurgency operations have atrophied many of the skills necessary to fight and win these types of high-intensity conflicts. At the same time, new technologies and those same two decades of innovation-intensive combat have developed a force that is actively re-learning old tricks in new ways with new gear. OC/Ts support this role for the combat training centers by

gathering and developing tactics, techniques, and procedures and trends from every rotation, and then proliferating them back to the force through publication in professional journals, the Center for Army Lessons Learned, and video teleconferences with units and Centers of Excellence. At the same time, OC/Ts see a variety of units employ both old and emerging technologies and can learn optimal methods of employment for a wide range of missions and environments.

Develop Professionally

The mentorship doesn't stop at the boundaries of Atropia. The combat training centers are filled with a cadre of experienced officers and NCOs who want to help make each other better professionals. OC/Ts learn first and foremost from their peers. Maneuver experts become better versed in intelligence operations. Intelligence experts build their knowledge of fires and mission command systems. OC/Ts also receive fantastic and personalized mentorship from their own leadership. Every OC/T is assigned to a task force led by a post-Centralized Selection List lieutenant colonel. Military intelligence officers have the benefit of working with a post-G-2 or battalion command. For many military intelligence captains who spent their formative years in U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), this may be the first time they get regular facetime with a military intelligence lieutenant colonel. The commander of the operations group (a post-brigade command colonel) and the commanding general (a hand-selected one-star general) are actively engaged not only with every rotational unit but also with the professional development of their OC/Ts. For an NCO or a post-KD officer, no other job can provide the same level of access to battalion and brigade commanders, and their honest processes of decision making and leadership, than that of an OC/T.

Effective Leadership Techniques

OC/Ts don't just observe units; they observe Soldiers, leaders, and commanders acting under intense pressure. Every OC/T walks away from their time "in the box" with a full kit bag of leadership techniques that are effective (and often two kit bags of those that are not).

All this direct exposure to experimenting rotational training units and developing leadership places OC/Ts in a prime position to develop themselves and the profession through writing and engagement. At a minimum, OC/Ts are routinely engaging with their counterparts in BCTs across the Army as units prepare for their rotation. This kind of outreach is rewarding as OC/Ts see units taking advise-and-coach, building it into their home-station training, and putting it into

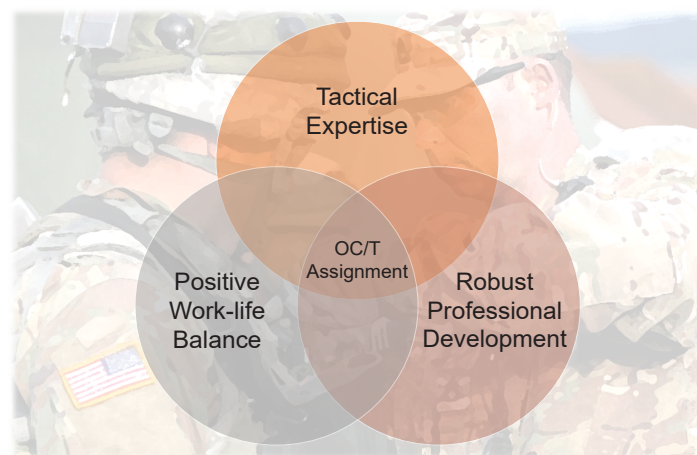
practice in rotation. Beyond individual engagement, OC/Ts provide data to FORSCOM and the Centers of Excellence on performance trends, with the ability to drive larger changes in everything from equipment to doctrine to force design. And even beyond providing institutional feedback, OC/Ts have the access to directly see the results of unit experimentation and publish feedback in professional articles for broad exposure.

Develop Personally

Perhaps counterintuitively, one of the key selling points for volunteering as an OC/T is work-life balance. OC/Ts have the time to write those articles, read those books that have been piling up in the corner of the office, or catch up on that hobby they have shelved in the garage for the last few years. The rotational calendar is locked in by FORSCOM, providing a generally stable prediction of your work schedule up to a year out. Your division or brigade calendar can't compete with that. Rotations do roll through weekends and holidays, but OC/T task forces generally abide by a "work hard, play hard" mentality that respects OC/Ts as experienced professionals. Personally, I never once missed a key event for any of my three boys, and my wife can affirm that she saw me more when I was an OC/T than when I was in my KD jobs.

Location


The "dirt" combat training centers at Fort Polk and Fort Irwin do not have the best reputation for being desirable locations. After 3 years at Fort Drum, I personally had choice words for my assignment officer when the request for orders to JRTC hit my inbox. Anyone who has been to a combat training center can tell stories of the Leesville Walmart or the bustling city of Barstow, but it's important to remember your exposure as part of a rotational training unit is completely different from your life as an OC/T. What the combat training centers may lack in local metropolitan glamour, they more than make up



for in other ways. The National Training Center is a prime launching point for exploring the American Southwest, with both Los Angeles and Las Vegas only a short drive down the road. JRTC is nestled in the Louisiana “Sportsman’s Paradise,” surrounded by a unique local culture and cuisine. It’s been said that “you’ll cry when you get orders to Fort Polk, and you’ll cry when you leave,” and it’s true. Do not let the locations dissuade you—the mission, the people, and the communities come together in ways that make up for any number of minor inconveniences.

Conclusion

Very few jobs in the Army provide the same suite of benefits as those enjoyed by an OC/T. In the Venn diagrams of jobs, the intersection of tactical expertise, robust professional development, and space to invest in a positive work-life balance is unique. The trick is in the timing. Post-KD captains and majors are at a critical point in their careers. Usually they have only a few years between command/KD and the Command and General Staff College or lieutenant colonel promotion board to invest in broadening. In both cases, the timing generally works for officers to invest

in their own self-development while affording their family some of the balance they may have lost in KD assignments. The combat training centers offer a rare opportunity to combine self-development, the ability to have a real impact on the Army Total Force, and work-life balance. So go ahead, give it a shot. You won’t regret it. 

Endnotes

1. Annie Murphy Paul, “The Protégé Effect: Why teaching someone else is the best way to learn,” *Time*, November 30, 2011, <https://ideas.time.com/2011/11/30/the-protege-effect/>.
2. Aloysius Wei Lun Koh, Sze Chi Lee, and Stephen Wee Hun Lim, “The learning benefits of teaching: A retrieval practice hypothesis,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 32, no. 3 (May/June 2018): 401–410, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/acp.3410>.
3. Wikipedia, s.v. “Rubber duck debugging,” last modified 14 February 2021, 19:10, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubber_duck_debugging.
4. Department of the Army, Army Regulation 350-50, *The Combat Training Center Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2 May 2018), 3.

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