



# Bradley Master Gunner Course Graduates Embody ‘Higher Standard’ of NCOs

*By Pablo Villa*

NCO Journal

The title “Mike Golf” carries significant clout throughout the U.S. Army, according to Patrick Hoffman.

**T**he sobriquet is applied to master gunners, the Army’s NCOs who are subject-matter experts on the weapon systems housed within military fighting vehicles. Hoffman, a retired first sergeant and Bradley Master Gunner Course instructor at Fort Benning, Ga., helps train Soldiers for these positions, which carry a significant amount of responsibility.

Hoffman says a Bradley master gunner not only maintains the stabilized platform 25 mm cannon that is mounted on the vehicle, he is also responsible for conducting the training program for Bradley-equipped units at the battalion level and higher, a job that places a heavy burden — and a high demand — on the Soldier who accepts it.

And Fort Benning’s Bradley Master Gunner Course is doing all it can to churn out more of them.

“A lot of people who understand the role of the master gunner — and have good master gunners —

hold them to a higher standard than anyone else,” Hoffman said. “It’s more of, ‘you’ve been trained to be able to make us successful back in our unit.’ So they expect you to be able to do that, and do it well.”

## **From Armor roots**

Fort Benning’s Bradley Master Gunner Course has its roots in the U.S. Army Armor School’s master gunner program, which began in the 1980s. The program aimed to provide battalions with a noncommissioned officer who was a trained expert on maintenance, operation and training for the M1 tank’s gunnery system. It was deemed a success as it allowed units to have multiple crews that were trained and could be effective using vehicles with complex weaponry. These units were able to use the vehicle in the most efficient manner possible in accordance with established training methods.

Eventually, the program expanded to include mechanized infantry and cavalry units. The M3 and M2 versions of the Bradley fighting vehicle — named for U.S. Gen. Omar Bradley — entered service with the



Sgt. 1st Class Travis Larson is the maintenance team chief of the Bradley Master Gunner Course at Fort Benning, Ga. Larson organizes the course's maintenance team and all of its classes, students, resources and planning. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

U.S. Army in 1981. By 1983, it had its own Master Gunner Course at Fort Benning.

The Bradley Master Gunner Course is aligned under the 316th Cavalry Brigade, which is part of the U.S. Army Armor School that joined the U.S. Army Infantry School in 2010 to form the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning. The course lasts 14 weeks and is split into two phases. The first phase deals with main-

tenance where students learn about ammunition capabilities, ballistics, the functions of turret components, surface danger zones, target safing and range overlays. The second phase of the course is gunner-specific. Students learn about training devices, range operations, ammunition forecasting, training management and creating short-range training plans.

### **Molding senior enlisted advisers**

Sgt. 1st Class Travis Larson, the maintenance team chief for the Bradley Master Gunner Course, says that though much of the subject matter will sound familiar to Soldiers, there is a bigger mission in the curriculum.

“They learn everything they thought they knew,” Larson said. “We have people who have been on Bradleys for 10 years, and they come here and they learn — or relearn — everything that they knew about the Bradley, from how to tear it apart, how to put it back together, how to service it, how to implement it in both training and in war. But more specifically, we teach people how to be the senior enlisted adviser of all things gunnery to their commander at whatever level they are selected to be at.”

With the goal of the course geared toward preparing capable leaders, the prerequisites to take part in it are commensurately stringent.

Soldiers entering the course must be sergeants to sergeants first class, though waivers may be granted for promotable specialists. National Guard master sergeants are also allowed in the course. A GT (General Technical) score of 100 is required. Other prerequisites are

platform-based — Soldiers must pass a gunnery skills test within six months of entering the class. A passing score on gunnery table VI must also be achieved.

“One of the reasons we have the prerequisites the way they are is because we don’t have time to teach people the basics here,” Larson said. “This is an advanced course. You have to arrive here ready to go.”

### Lessons from experience

Once Soldiers do arrive to one of the five courses offered each year, they are instructed by a cadre made up of NCOs and former NCOs, all of who are graduates of the course. Most of them have held a battalion-level position as a master gunner.

Learning from Soldiers who have been through the challenges of the course and have experienced the trials of the master gunner role in the field is a boon for students.

“We have first-hand experience,” Hoffman said. “We’ve been there. We’ve done a lot. Being in the vehicle, you know how to teach in a way that they would grasp it and understand the big concept of everything. Almost all of us who are contractors, and the branch chiefs and team chiefs, have all held battalion positions or above.”

Larson said, thanks to the NCO and former NCO instructors, graduates of the course come away with the knowledge and ability to make decisions on their own in a significant role. Larson said the authorized slots for Bradley master gunners are at the platoon, company, battalion and brigade levels. The NCOs in those positions teach their units how to properly use, maintain and utilize the Bradley’s firing mechanisms and lift them to an acceptable level of competence. The number of master gunners who serve in each unit varies depending on the mission. For example, infantry units will always have four Bradleys. Scout units will have from three to six.

“The work ethic is different with an NCO cadre,” he said. “Having an all-NCO cadre cuts out a lot of bu-

reaucracy. Civilian instructors are former master gunners and that is a prerequisite to becoming a contractor. They know as much, if not more, than most of us.”

Furthermore, Hoffman says because of an Army requirement to have gunner crews for unstabilized platforms — such as those found on the Stryker vehicle — some graduates of the course will be sent to light units solely to conduct their training program.

As such, Bradley master gunners are in high demand and are also often called upon to serve in a higher capacity far more quickly than other NCOs, Hoffman said. Larson says the Mike Golf title is indicative of an NCO who has been through meticulous training and has the potential to thrive in an environment with a large amount of responsibility.

### Moving forward

Recent changes at Fort Benning may eventually have bearing on how the Bradley Master Gunner Course is conducted. The post’s transition to the Maneuver Center of Excellence and acquisition of the U.S. Army Armor School from Fort Knox, Ky., has started conversations about meshing portions of the Bradley curriculum with that of the Stryker Master Trainer course. There are also efforts under way to develop a master gunner course for unstabilized vehicles. However, no concrete plans or timelines have been laid out.

In the meantime, students and instructors in the Bradley Master Gunner Course continue to toil in an effort to provide the Army with its necessary supply of Mike Golfs.

“It’s a lot of work,” Larson says of both the Bradley master gunner role and the instructors who teach it to students in the course. “There’s always work. A master gunner’s job is never done.

“It’s a very academically challenging course. There’s a lot of technical knowledge that can be applied not only to being a master gunner, but being a Soldier as well. We teach planning and resourcing that’s crucial for any NCO.” ■

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