Forging Future Fires Leaders

A Revolution in Readiness at the Field Artillery Captains Career Course

By CPTs Susan Chiarella and Terrisia Templeton

This article reflects the mission of the 428th Field Artillery Brigade and its subordinate units, including Alpha Battery, 1-30th Field Artillery, to train and develop Soldiers, Marines, and international officers into competent, confident, and adaptive Fires leaders. Written by Field Artillery Captains Career Course Small Group Instructors, it reinforces the importance of critical thinking, effective fires integration, and leadership at all levels in support of unified land operations and the operational force.

The modern battlefield demands a level of adaptability, intellectual rigor and cross-domain mastery unprecedented in our nation's history. To meet this challenge, the Field Artillery Captains Career Course (FA CCC) has embarked on a comprehensive modernization effort, fundamentally transforming how we educate and prepare our future battery commanders and staff officers. This is not a simple curriculum update; it is a top-to-bottom revolution in our training philosophy, encompassing a strategic shift to the Indo-Pacific theater, a complete overhaul of student assessments, the groundbreaking integration of our air defense artillery (ADA) counterparts and a suite of innovative programs designed to holistically develop leaders of character and competence. These changes ensure our graduates are not just technically and tactically proficient but are truly ready to lead and win in a complex, near-peer fight.

A Strategic Pivot: From the Baltics to the Indo-Pacific

The foundational element of this transformation is the course's strategic pivot from a familiar Baltic scenario to the vast and complex challenges of the Indo-Pacific. This deliberate shift

Command Sgt. Maj. Raymond S. Harris, honors the 428th Field Artillery Brigade flag with the Fires Center of Excellence Best Squad on Aug. 18, 2024, in Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. ***(U.S. Army photo by Ed Muniz)***

moves students beyond a largely land-centric fight and immerses them in an operational environment defined by contested logistics, pervasive enemy ISR and the absolute requirement for Multi-Domain Operations (MDO). This new scenario is not just a backdrop; it is woven into the fabric of the entire curriculum, forcing students to solve problems where cover and concealment are luxuries, and the assumption is that they are always being watched.

Rigor and Relevance: A New Assessment Philosophy

Synchronizing Doctrine and Instruction: Central to this increased rigor is the validated update to the Program of Instruction, a formal revision that ensures our curriculum is perfectly synchronized with the ongoing doctrinal evolution. This update moves the course away from legacy, knowledge-based testing and into a performance-based environment that mirrors the Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) framework of FM 3-0. The "why" behind this shift is clear: The modern, transparent battlefield leaves no room for hesitation. By overhauling core blocks—including Common Core, Fire Support and Field Artillery Battalion Operations—we ensure that classroom instruction directly translates to the rapid, lethal decision-making required to out-pace and out-think a sophisticated adversary.

Elevated Academic Standards: The total points required to graduate have been increased, while quizzes and exams have been made significantly more challenging. Questions are no longer simple knowledge regurgitation; they are complex, scenario-based problems that require critical thinking and the application of doctrine in ambiguous situations.

High-Stakes Practical Exercises: The new Indo-Pacific scenario drives a series of demanding practical exercises. Students must now plan the Division Artillery's (DIVARTY) role in high-intensity operations like contested wet-gap crossings and combined-arms breaches. This requires them to deconflict congested airspace, manage complex tactical relationships like Direct Support and Reinforcing, and position their assets aggressively to be lethal, all while accounting for constant enemy observation.

A Unified Fires Front: The Air Defense Artillery Merger

Perhaps the most significant structural change is the integration of the Air Defense Artillery Captains Career Course (ADA CCC). Recognizing that MDO success is impossible without a truly unified Fires team, this merger is designed to build cross-domain tactical competence from the ground up. The level of integration is adaptable based on course scheduling, creating two distinct but equally valuable training pathways.

Ideally, when course timelines align, FA and ADA captains undergo a fully integrated curriculum. This begins with a shared Common Core foundation, moves into collaborative Integrated Cross-Domain Functionality (ICDF) weeks and culminates in a joint final exercise. When scheduling conflicts prevent full integration from day one, a modified but still potent model is used where the separate FA and ADA classes converge for the critical ICDF weeks and the capstone cumulative exercise.

Cornerstone patch for 428th Field Artillery Brigade (FAB). The Salute Battery (Bravo Battery) is under 2-2 FAR, the U.S. Army's Direct Support FA Battalion. ***(Photo courtesy of Fort Sill Public Affairs)***

The true synergy, regardless of the integration model, is forged during the ICDF weeks. This is where the curriculum deliberately breaks down branch-specific silos and builds a holistic understanding of the joint fight through a powerful blend of expert instruction:

- U.S. Air Force personnel provide the joint perspective, teaching Targeting, the Theater Air Control System/Army Air-Ground System (TACS/AAGS), Airspace Control, Joint Planning and Joint Fires.
- FA instructors focus on dominating the ground fight, covering Near-Peer Adversaries, Weapon Locating Radar (WLR) Operations, Counter-Fire (CF) Operations and the Fire Support System.
- ADA instructors complete the picture by teaching how to protect the force, with instruction on THAAD Planning, Counter-UAS (C-UAS), Patriot Missile Capabilities, the ADAM/BAE cell, Planning Considerations for SHORAD Weapons and C2 in the Joint Operations Area.

Regardless of the integration path, both cohorts culminate in Aloha Gold, the new capstone exercise for the course. This is not simply another practical exercise; it is a dynamic, fires-heavy simulation where students form the core of a DIVARTY staff. They are forced to operate in a complex, joint environment, integrating not just organic assets but also synchronizing effects with a Joint Air-Ground Integration Cell (JAGIC) and other enablers. This capstone moves beyond theoretical planning and forces FA and ADA leaders to work as a single, interdependent team, deconflicting airspace, massing effects and protecting the force in a near-peer fight. It is their first true taste of what future conflict will demand from a fully integrated Fires headquarters.

Developing Leaders of Character and Intellect: The Harding Project

Named after MG (RET) Edwin "Forrest" Harding, the Harding Project is the Chief of Staff of the Army and Sergeant Major of the Army's initiative to strengthen the profession.

This initiative requires every student to submit a professional article for potential publication, transforming PME from passive experience into an active contribution to our profession. For the individual captain, this initiative forces them to move beyond memorization and develop true intellectual agility. The process of researching, structuring an argument and articulating a complex idea in writing solidifies their doctrinal knowledge and hones their critical thinking skills in a way no multiple-choice test can. It compels them to find their professional voice and begin the transition from a consumer of doctrine to a thinker who can analyze, critique and improve it.

For the field artillery branch as a whole, the Harding Project is a powerful engine of bottom-up innovation. It provides a consistent, crowdsourced influx of fresh ideas and solutions from officers who are closest to the operational challenges. This creates a vibrant professional discourse, challenges long-held assumptions and ensures our branch's body of knowledge is a living, evolving entity, not a static collection of manuals. It empowers our junior leaders to solve problems and directly contribute to the future of the Fires force.

Forging the Chain of Leadership: The BOLC Mentorship Program

The most sacred duty of any officer is to train their replacement. The Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) Mentorship Program formalizes this duty, creating a powerful, symbiotic relationship between the captains of the CCC and the lieutenants of BOLC. This relationship is designed to strengthen the very fabric of our officer corps. The benefits for the mentee are clear: the lieutenants receive invaluable, practical guidance from a seasoned company-grade officer, helping them navigate the anxieties of their first assignment and avoid common pitfalls.

However, the benefits for the captain as a mentor are equally profound, epitomizing the axiom that to teach is to learn twice. In preparing to instruct a lieutenant on a piece of doctrine or a leadership principle, the captain is forced to achieve a higher level of mastery themselves. It reinforces their own knowledge, forces them to reflect on their own experiences and develops the patience and empathy essential for command. This act of mentorship is direct practice for the leadership they will soon exercise as battery commanders. The institutional benefits for the Army are profound. This program forges stronger bonds of trust and cohesion across the officer corps, accelerates the professional development of our junior leaders and improves retention by investing in our people from day one, ensuring the health and continuity of the force for years to come.

2024 Best Redleg Competition at Fort Sill. The "Best Howitzer Section" went to 2nd Battalion, 2nd Field Artillery Regiment (2-2 FAR)/428th FAB from Fort Sill, OK. ***(Photo courtesy of Fort Sill Public Affairs)***

On the Horizon: The Future of Captains' Education

Our modernization efforts are ongoing, with several key initiatives on the verge of implementation to further bridge the gap between institutional training and operational reality.

Battery Command Panels: This program is of critical importance as it directly bridges the gap between the tactical planning learned in CCC and the harsh, administrative realities that often determine a commander's success or failure. Each panel is a full-day deep dive into a pillar of command responsibility—such as the Command Supply Discipline Program (CSDP), the Command Maintenance Discipline Program (CMDP) or military justice. The morning is dedicated to instruction by true subject matter experts—seasoned JAG officers, senior maintenance warrant officers or experienced Property Book Officers. These experts provide crucial context, sharing not just the doctrine, but also their hard-won personal experience, answering questions with nuance that cannot be found in a regulation. The afternoon then transitions from theory to practice with a hands-on practical exercise. Instead of just hearing about a report of survey, students will walk through the paperwork. Instead of a lecture on maintenance, they will get their hands dirty learning what to look for on a vehicle inspection. This kinesthetic approach ensures that they don't just know the information: They fully understand its application, building the muscle memory needed to confidently execute these tasks on day one of command.

Command and Staff College-Style Oral Boards: This initiative is the ultimate test of cognitive agility, designed to replace rote memorization with genuine understanding. A student will be given a complex question drawn from any section of the course curriculum and have exactly 10 minutes to formulate a coherent answer. They must then stand before a panel of instructors and deliver a professional, impromptu verbal brief lasting between 4 and 10 minutes. This format makes it impossible to simply regurgitate a memorized answer. Success requires a student to draw from a deep, internalized well of knowledge, rapidly synthesize key concepts, structure a logical argument and articulate it with the clarity and confidence expected of a professional staff officer. It directly assesses their ability to think, organize and communicate under pressure—a skill set at the very core of effective leadership.

Guided Leadership Seminar: This seminar moves beyond doctrinal manuals to study the art of command and the human dimension of war. By dissecting a curated reading list in instructor-led discussions, students learn from the successes and failures of those who came before. Discussing Stephen Ambrose's "Pegasus Bridge" provides a masterclass in mission command and the strategic impact of a well-led, perfectly rehearsed company-sized element. James M. Scott's "Three Days in June" immerses them in the brutal friction of combined arms

warfare at Tarawa, forcing them to consider the consequences of failed integration and the critical importance of junior leader initiative in chaos. Finally, Jim Frederick's "Blackhearts" serves as a powerful, cautionary case study on the absolute necessity of ethical leadership and positive command climate, showing how easily standards can erode under pressure with catastrophic results. These guided discussions provide rigor by presenting complex, ambiguous situations that have no easy "school solution." They challenge captains to analyze the ethical dilemmas, the friction of combat and the immense pressure of command in a way that a doctrinal template cannot. This adds substance by connecting tactical decisions to human consequences, forcing future commanders to confront the gray areas of leadership: how to uphold standards under extreme stress, how to inspire troops when a plan fails and how to bear the moral weight of their decisions. It is in the grappling with these historical dilemmas that tactical knowledge is forged into genuine wisdom, preparing them for the art of command, not just the science of war.

Joint Firepower Course: Another significant initiative being explored is the integration of the Joint Firepower Course into the curriculum. This addition would be a pivotal step in developing true multi-domain leaders. While the current course integrates ADA, the Joint Firepower Course would expand this aperture, formally educating captains on the capabilities, planning processes and employment of fires from our sister services. Graduates would gain the competencies needed to seamlessly integrate naval gunfire, Marine Corps assets and Air Force strike capabilities into their plans, transforming them from proficient FA officers into lethal Joint Fires planners. This would provide the force with company-grade leaders who can instinctively operate in a joint environment, a critical advantage for success in the Indo-Pacific theater and beyond.

Conclusion

The modern battlefield demands a level of adaptability and cross-domain mastery unprecedented in our nation's history. To meet this challenge, the FA CCC has undergone a profound evolution, anchored by a validated Program of Instruction that bridges the gap between institutional theory and the brutal realities of modern combat. By embracing a high-intensity Indo-Pacific scenario, increasing academic rigor and integrating with our air defense partners, we have moved beyond traditional graduation requirements to forge adaptive, critical-thinking warfighters. These graduates return to the force as leaders of character, fully prepared to innovate, integrate and dominate on the multi-domain battlefields of today and tomorrow.

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