

Transformation Before Contact:

A Rapid Transition to Improve Quality of Life, Instructors, and Instruction

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The Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course (IBOLC) at Fort Benning, GA, is the first step for aspiring Infantry officers who need branch qualification and certification before joining the operational force. Led by the cadre of the 2nd Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment, this 95-day program of instruction (POI) serves as the standardization gauntlet for all Officer Candidate School (OCS), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), and U.S. Military Academy (USMA) graduates. The POI has seen different areas of emphasis evolve throughout the years as the art and science of war have changed and the expectations of junior officers have adapted to meet the requirements of the global force. Still, whether you knew the course as the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) or IBOLC, the need for raising a corps of officers rooted in infantry basics has remained at

the forefront. To that end, IBOLC has recently undergone a major structural transformation into a committee model to maximize the quality of instructor — and instruction — that is rooted in the basics: troop leading procedures (TLPs), unit training management (UTM), fires integration, fitness, and leadership.

Committee Model Transition

Every schoolhouse has its unique method of delivering its POI to students. These methods typically factor in things like course length, student/instructor ratios, content complexity, and student knowledge to determine how information is presented. IBOLC has utilized a “cradle-to-grave” method of instruction (i.e., “legacy model”) for most of the last decade to deliver a POI built upon priorities that have remained largely



A cadre member (center) from the 2nd Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment demonstrates the use of an unmanned aerial system to Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course students during platoon live-fire training on Fort Benning, GA, on 9 October 2024. (Photo by Joey Rhodes II)

unchanged. This method involved an IBOLC class being assigned to a specific training company that it would remain with for the entire 19 weeks of instruction.

In 2023, 2-11 IN noticed impacts from a manning shortage that saw instructors experiencing substantial burnout with minimal recovery time between training cycles. Most companies were operating at nearly 40-percent instructor strength. This meant that each company had approximately 24 instructors responsible for the professional training and personal well-being of 160 initial military trainees per class, training up to three classes per year. This number only decreased when factoring in other life factors that pulled instructors away from the course for any duration of time. These observations led the battalion operations cell to test the feasibility of transitioning from the legacy model to a committee model, like that of the Basic Combat Training (BCT) brigades on Sand Hill.

Significant analysis of personnel, resourcing, and mission requirements determined such a transition would either require approximately 15 percent more personnel than the unit's existing table of distribution and allowances (TDA) allotted and increase the burden on existing instructors or would require permanent support from other organizations. These results caused the battalion to put a hard stop to any further transition to this model because of the unrealistic requirements. The legacy model POI continued for the next year without a feasible alternative to address the strenuous demands.

Then, in 2024, the battalion's first sergeants reengaged the battalion commander about their collective desire to consider the committee model. Strong in their belief that it would alleviate some of the pains from the manning challenges, a small team was selected to create an initial concept. The team realized that the first analysis had assumed all things POI would generally remain equal — classes, week-to-week flow, ratios, and so on. This time the approach was different. Operation Burn the Ship, a nod to Hernan Cortes' "no return" strategy, sought to completely restructure the organization and the POI model. Traces of the legacy model remained, but the course was completely reworked. The new approach prioritized cadre (quality of instructor), specifically the NCOs, and their development and well-being with the understanding that they make or break the POI. Well-trained, well-balanced, and invested cadre provide the best instruction (quality of instruction) to the students.

Qi2: Quality of Instructor and Quality of Instruction

Life as an instructor is grueling. While long and odd hours are not unusual for Soldiers, instructors must maintain a perpetually high level of physical and mental acuity to deliver top-tier instruction to students. Under the legacy model, instructors were required to perform every physical task (e.g., ruck progressions, weeks of patrols, and countless live-fire repetitions) while performing mental acrobatics to plan, resource, coordinate, and execute the finer details of the POI. This is compounded with the burden of leveling the intel-

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lectual baseline as students arrive from their commissioning sources with varied levels of knowledge and understanding of even the most basic warrior tasks and drills.

Instructors were left physically and mentally drained at the end of a cycle, yet some companies rarely saw more than a week of cycle break (i.e., time without students) to rest and refit. It certainly left no amount of time for professional development that would not noticeably hurt the team nor provide an opportunity to conduct thorough after action reviews (AARs) and implement meaningful changes. This seemingly endless cycle of exhaustion quickly reduced effectiveness among even the best instructors and kept interested parties away from the team. It needed to change if the organization wanted to see the new model flourish.

The quality of instructor initiative driving this program change considered several factors, such as the quality of life, professional development, and instructor certification. The team needs instructors who want to be there and feel supported by a network of like-minded, driven teammates. Under the committee model, time in the field and garrison became generally balanced across the committees, and field time saw a drastic cut. With the legacy model, more than two-thirds of the 95-day course were spent in the field, but the new model reduced it to about one-third. This provided more time to the instructors (fewer overnight shifts), reduced resource demands, and lessened physical demands.

Beyond the field-time balance, the new model increased the balance of cycle breaks. Each committee is responsible for three to four weeks of training and would provide that training to every class that rolled through. These training weeks are followed by an almost matching amount of cycle break that is dedicated to professional development (e.g., POI-enhancing and career-enhancing schools), recovery, and preparation for the next class. The routine cycle breaks of nearly three weeks were a stark improvement from the cumulative three weeks that some of the companies endured.

The structural changes to the POI were critical, but talent management proved to be even more so. Instructors are placed on committees based on perceived strengths, interests, and, perhaps most importantly, team compatibility. They remain in assigned committees for approximately one year where they move through the instructor progression as an assistant instructor (AI) to primary instructor (PI) and eventu-

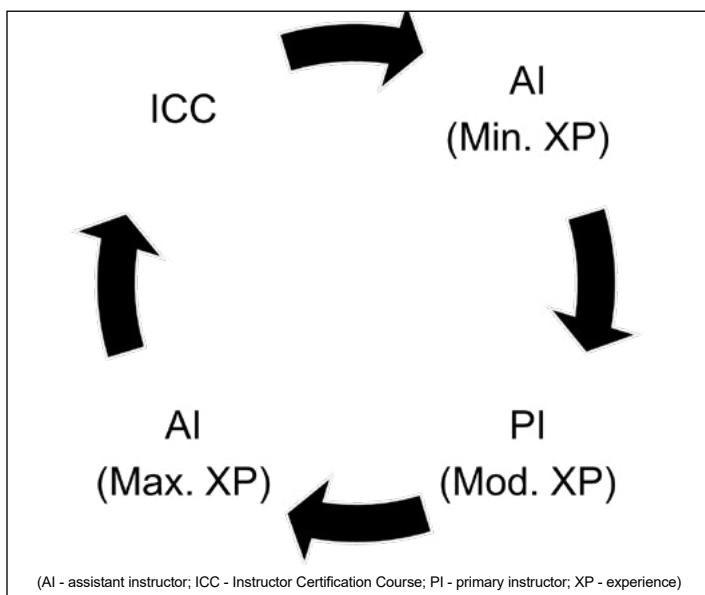


Figure 1 — Instructor Progression

ally back to an AI position near the end of their tenure so they can train their successors (see Figure 1). During this time, cycle breaks are used to address potential weaknesses and hone skills. This is crucial as instructors transition to different committees at the end of their one-year mark. This transition ensures instructors remain well-balanced and continue to develop throughout their three-year assignment; however, it requires the oversight of and a second visit to the Instructor Certification Cell (ICC).

The ICC is the first stop for instructors arriving at the battalion and serves as the connection between the quality of instructor and quality of instruction. While the legacy model lacked sufficient time to train the trainer, the committee model prioritizes it. Every instructor, regardless of rank, is required to pass through the ICC for at least two weeks. During this time, seasoned instructors train the “rookies” in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and organizational policies; assess knowledge, skills, and abilities; and provide initial repetitions at instructing in front of an audience of peers. During this certification process, the prospective instructors are challenged physically (12-mile ruck, Army Fitness Test [AFT], and team-building events) and mentally (knowledge assessments and a comprehensive exam). This time culminates with prospective instructors going before a board of the command teams to introduce themselves and explain their self-professed passions and abilities. Instructors are then assigned to a company and committee based on their strengths, compatibility, and organizational needs.

As the instructors move through the previously mentioned instructor progression, they are validated by the company command team and certified by the battalion commander. While the instructors leave the ICC with most of their certification requirements, this is their opportunity to learn the specific POI classes that their new committee is responsible for. This creates a standard of instruction that is provided to

every IBOLC class, ensuring that each student leaves with the same knowledge and experience provided by a subject matter expert (SME). This is a marked improvement from the legacy model that attempted to make all instructors in every company SMEs on all 19 weeks of POI. Now IBOLC sees a high quality of instruction from instructors who have been certified on and dedicated to their small piece of the greater picture of POI.

TUFF Leadership

With the structural changes came a renewed vision and a look at the POI priorities. The collective of commissioned officers, guided by the NCOs, came together to assess what an Infantry lieutenant must leave the course understanding. The organization had already put the “L” of leadership back in IBOLC (see <https://www.USAIA.org/articles/learning-leadership-new-course-emphasizes-key-command-tenet>). The focus had to be on the basics. Following guidance from the U.S. Army Infantry School (USAIS) commandant, the team came to the following four priorities after boiling down the initial thoughts and concepts: TLPs, UTM, fires, and fitness (TUFF). These four priorities became the focus. All POI material needed to nest within and contribute to the development of these training priorities because of their vital nature in the force and on the battlefield.

Troop Leading Procedures

Operation orders (OPORDs) have always been an essential component of IBOLC. Historically, students were provided two or three complete OPORDs to build and brief throughout the course, supplemented by “field expedient” orders during their graded patrols. The committee model condenses the TLP classes into a three-week block of the course where students’ primary focus is learning the operations process to standard and conducting the necessary repetitions. The three orders are progressive, increasing complexity through the addition of enablers and enemy capabilities. Additionally, the three orders cover an attack, a defense, and a movement to contact, thus ensuring the students have experience in planning and briefing more than one type of operation. The foundation students built in the TLP committee are further developed as they transition to the patrol committee and continue to apply their tactical planning in real-world situations.

Unit Training Management

One of the most significant yet often overlooked components of platoon leadership is the unit training plan. Lieutenants left IBOLC technically and tactically proficient as individuals, yet they often arrived at their gaining units without knowing how to train their platoon to standard. To address this gap, 2-11 IN implemented two weeks of deliberate training in UTM. These weeks address the mission-essential task list (METL), resources like the Army Training Network (ATN), and the use of Army doctrine and local regulations (e.g., Training Circular 3-20.40, *Training and Qualification - Individual Weapons*, and range control standard operating procedures).

During the first block of instruction, students are divided into small teams to plan an M4 qualification range. At the end of the week, they are required to brief a concept of operation to their instructors as if they were briefing their company commander, providing detailed timelines, resource requirements, limiting factors, and more. They then transition the following week to conduct Basic Rifle Marksmanship (BRM), where they can observe a qualification range executed to the book standard. Classes get their next look at UTM approximately 13 weeks later, but they progress from an M4 range to a team live fire. This specific training event was selected since platoon leaders are responsible for the training and certifying of their fire teams. Unique to this block of instruction is that the students get to execute a blank iteration of the plans that they created. These two weeks help minimize the amount of on-the-job training the lieutenants' gaining units must conduct and build confidence when they are tasked with planning training events.

Fires

The Infantry is expected to close with and destroy the enemy on the ground through a combination of fire and maneuver. Students have previously received surface-level instruction on company-level indirect fire (IDF) capabilities and the principles of direct fire control, but there was much to be desired regarding their ability to adequately integrate IDF and direct fire assets through echelonment of fire. A team from the fires cell of the Maneuver Center of Excellence Combined Arms Integration Directorate collaborated with the IBOLC cadre to reinvigorate IDF classes and exposure throughout the course. The combined efforts added touchpoints to every committee. Students receive face-to-face instruction on capabilities, gain confidence through practical exercises at the simulation center, leverage enablers in TLPs and patrols, and culminate in a fire support coordination exercise (FSCX). The FSCX allows the students to see firsthand what eche-

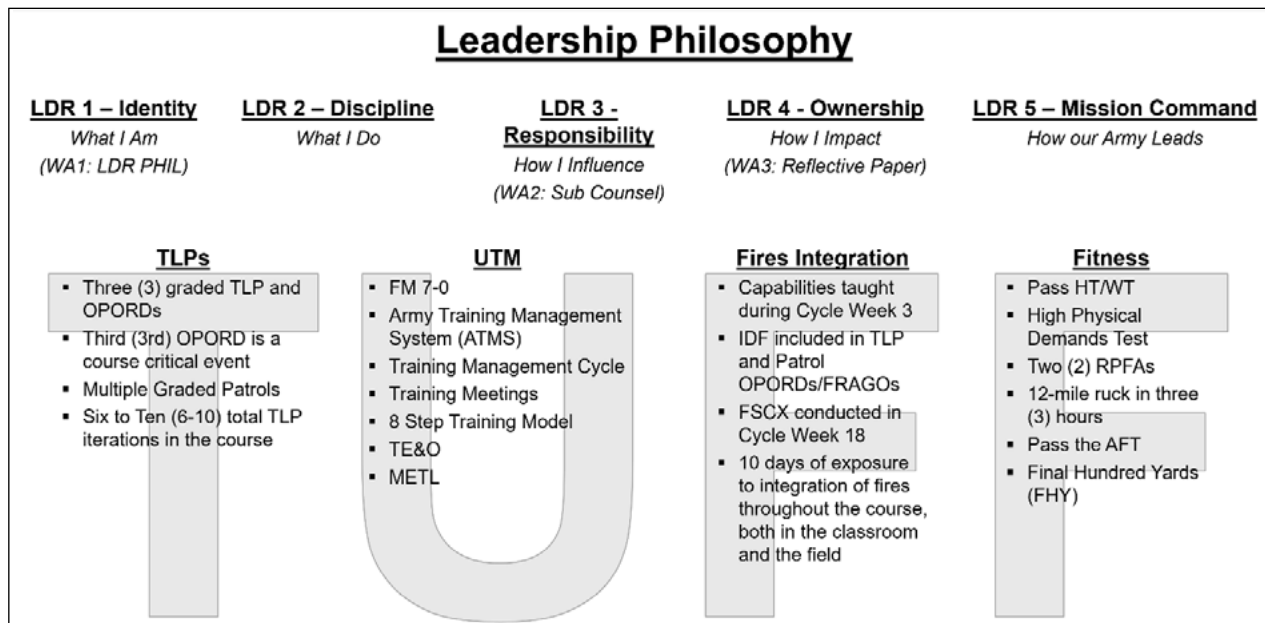
lonment of fires looks, sounds, and feels like. They gain an increased appreciation for the resources at their disposal and the combat multiplier that well-timed and well-placed fires become.

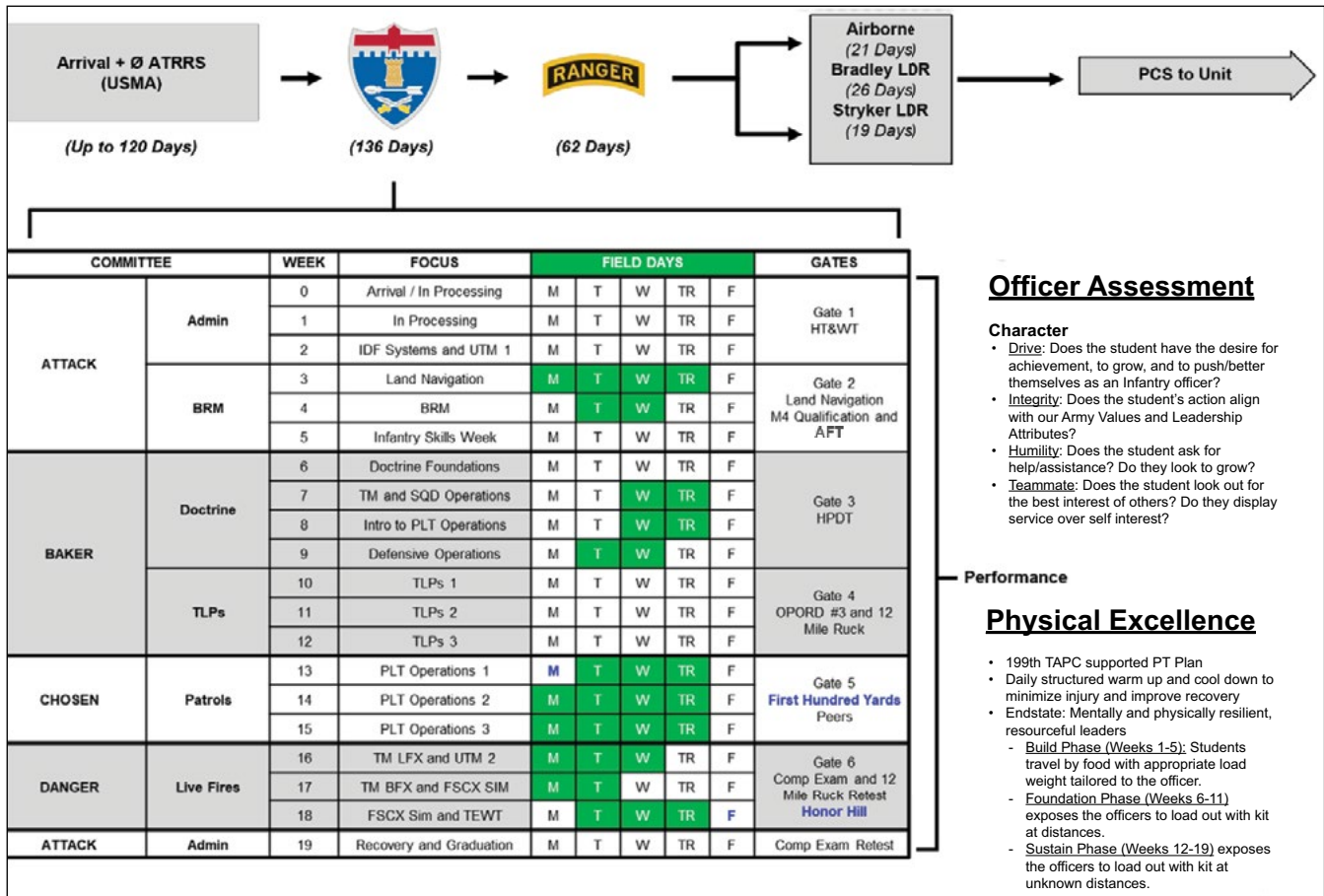
Fitness

As the cornerstone of the Army, fitness is paramount at IBOLC. The Infantry lieutenant must understand the integral role of fitness in the lethality and survivability of their formation, along with the crucial role it plays in building cohesive teams. The focus on fitness extends beyond the standard fitness assessments expected at the course (e.g., ruck progressions, AFT, and Ranger Physical Assessment). In collaboration with the experts at the 199th Infantry Brigade's Tactical Athlete Performance Center (TAPC), 2-11 IN built a standardized 19-week training plan to set an example for students and to build strength among the future platoon leaders. This plan is technology-enhanced, allowing students and cadre to access the plan from their smartphones or computers, which increases availability and consistency. The training plan is rooted in the pillars of the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program, ensuring students understand the greater picture of their physical needs.

Outside of traditional physical training (PT), the field weeks presented a significant physical demand on the students. The cadre performed an exhaustive study of students' physical performance, the physical demands of each training week, week-by-week mileage, ideal loads, and more. This study forced students and cadre to begin critically thinking about the training being conducted and the loads to carry. This then translated into the tactical realm as students began optimizing the load in their rucks and kits, allotting additional time and thought to the sustainment paragraph of their OPORDs, and considering the impact of physical readiness on their operations.

Figure 2 — IBOLC Core Principles





Officer Assessment

Character

- **Drive:** Does the student have the desire for achievement, to grow, and to push/better themselves as an Infantry officer?
- **Integrity:** Does the student’s action align with our Army Values and Leadership Attributes?
- **Humility:** Does the student ask for help/assistance? Do they look to grow?
- **Teammate:** Does the student look out for the best interest of others? Do they display service over self interest?

Performance

Physical Excellence

- 199th TAPC supported PT Plan
- Daily structured warm up and cool down to minimize injury and improve recovery
- Endstate: Mentally and physically resilient, resourceful leaders
 - **Build Phase (Weeks 1-5):** Students travel by food with appropriate load weight tailored to the officer.
 - **Foundation Phase (Weeks 6-11)** exposes the officers to load out with kit at distances.
 - **Sustain Phase (Weeks 12-19)** exposes the officers to load out with kit at unknown distances.

Figure 3 — Infantry Lieutenant Glide Path at Fort Benning

Conclusion

The Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course is “one giant leap” for our future rifle platoon leaders. The time they spend at Fort Benning for the first months of their career as a commissioned officer is incredibly formative for both them and the formations that they go on to lead. The cadre assigned to 2-11 IN face no

small feat. In many regards, they are the face of the Army and the NCO Corps for every Infantry officer who enters the force. They set the tone for our fighting force and must be top-tier Soldiers who build a cohesive and passionate team dedicated to excellence. Their efforts ensure that the students leave the schoolhouse standardized with the foundational knowledge of the Infantry officer — TLPs UTM, fires, fitness, and leadership.

The transition to the committee model has set conditions for success in creating a healthy cadre team dedicated to producing high-quality Infantry lieutenants who are competent and confident rifle platoon leaders of character.

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An instructor (center) from the 2nd Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment observes IBOLC students during platoon live-fire training at Galloway Range on Fort Benning, GA, on 9 October 2024. (Photo by Joey Rhodes II)

