

Master Gunners — Vital to the Force Rewarded By the Force



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There is a rumor being passed by some soldiers: that service as a master gunner is no longer as desirable or as valuable for a tanker or scout's professional development as it once was. This rumor is incorrect.

"Shoot first, kill first" is the critical war-fighting skill for every soldier. The master gunner is the key advisor to armor and cavalry commanders concerning every aspect of planning, preparing, and executing tank and Bradley gunnery programs. The master gunner is the expert that every tanker, scout, and turret mechanic can rely on for the sound, current, and doctrinally correct answer on any turret or weapon problem. The master gunner is the competent and confident leader who eagerly seeks increased responsibility and who advances through the full spectrum of armor and cavalry assignments. Let there be no mistake about the vital importance of the master gunner to the readiness and combat effectiveness of the armor force.

As stated in the review and analysis of the latest master sergeant selection board, "...The best qualified are successful master gunners who have excelled as TOE armor and cavalry platoon sergeants." Master gunners account for less than 5% of the Armor Force, yet 26% of the CY 98 master sergeant selectees were master gunners; 21% of the CY 98 sergeant first class selectees were master gunners. Three master gunners are currently serving as CSMs in Four-Star positions: Jack Tilley, John Beck, and Ben Palacios. Don't let anyone tell a tanker or scout that service as a master gunner is not an important or career-enhancing assignment!

Master gunner authorizations have been affected by the drawdown: the CINCOS reductions rolled master gunner authori-

zations down to MSGs at division and regiment, SFCs at battalion and squadron, and SSGs at company and troop. The Conservative Heavy Division redesign will eliminate 29 master gunner authorizations from the total force by taking one company from each tank battalion. The second round of CINCOS reductions has eliminated so many Fort Knox instructor authorizations that the 16th Cavalry may have to reduce each master gunner class by up to four students (up to thirty-two fewer graduates each year). These eliminations do not mean that master gunners are any less important to the armor force. Master gunners are paying a bill proportional to the entire armor force. There is still a healthy career development pyramid for those who want to do the full job of a master gunner.

Commanders must look at their best young staff sergeants and at their truly exceptional promotable sergeants when selecting prospective candidates. The unit should get at least two years of service at company/troop level from the new master gunner. As CSM of 2-68 Armor, I would not accept new master gunners in the S-3, insisting that they complete at least two annual gunnery cycles and gain the credibility needed to help design and execute the battalion gunnery program. Due to the CINCOS reductions, I am reconsidering the rank requirements: sending a sergeant first class may actually hurt the NCO, if he does not get the chance to demonstrate his skills at company level before he must be assigned as battalion/squadron master gunner.

Commanders and candidates must be very wary of waiving or asking for waivers of prerequisites. The course is the hardest functional course that the Armor School offers, and is harder than BNCOC or ANCO. Only Fort Knox can waive

the rank requirement, but commanders may request waivers on behalf of their truly exceptional promotable SGTs. The prerequisites are:

- SSG to SFC, volunteer, interviewed and recommended by their battalion/squadron commander.
- Two years tank commander experience with 6 months on an M1A1 or M1A2 tank.
- AC soldiers must have qualified Tank Table VIII as a tank commander within the last twelve months (RC soldiers, qualified on TT VII or TTVIII within the past twenty-four months). If the unit has not had the M1A1 or M1A2 for that long, successful completion of NET gunnery as a tank commander will meet the requirement.
- Ten-month in-service retention, after completion of the course.
- GT score of 105; CO score of 110.
- BNCOC graduate.
- Passed TCGST within three months of attending the course.
- Secret clearance.

All candidates must pass the height and weight/or body-fat content test prior to admission. They must pass the APFT prior to graduation. There are four gunnery exams, and three maintenance exams; the candidate has three opportunities to pass each exam and the APFT. Prior to beginning the Master Gunner Course, each candidate should complete the Senior Instructor Operator (SIO) course (they all have the opportunity). During the Master Gunner Course, your candidates will be trained in mounting, troubleshooting, and employing the Tank Weapons

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Gunnery Simulator System (TWGSS). They will return to you both confident and competent to be your advisor on all gunnery issues; to mentor your crews on gunnery strengths and weaknesses; to serve as experts for turret maintenance and gunnery staff actions. They will be tremendous combat multipliers.

I recognize that 19DJ3s do not have nearly as many opportunities to serve as master gunners, and that assignments to HMMWV scout platoons may prevent them from serving even the minimum-expected two years as a Bradley master gunner. My centralized promotion board instructions have asked that the armor panels be very careful before judging such NCOs as uninterested in filling master gunner assignments; they may be only doing what the Army assigns them to do!

The master gunner will be a combat multiplier throughout his career, with

guidance and careful management by commanders and command sergeants major. A platoon sergeant or first sergeant who is a trained master gunner is a tremendous asset to the unit. Master gunners must be assigned into these positions of greater responsibility once they have served successfully as company and battalion-level master gunners. They can return to master gunner positions at the higher grade, but these NCOs deserve the chance to lead armor and cavalry soldiers. Do not allow the master gunners to stay on the staff over two or three years, or assign them into consecutive master gunner positions. Do not make master gunners into "headquarters platoon sergeants" and expect such duty to earn leadership certification as platoon sergeants! Do not enable NCOs to become complacent and remain as "career Mike-Golfs!" Promotion board results are proving that such careers often end at staff sergeant.

Master gunners lead through technical competence and professional example. The entire Armor Force is better for those sergeants who volunteer for this toughest of courses, succeed as gunnery advisors to armor and cavalry commanders, train tankers and scouts to kill and to kill quickly, and then serve as technically accomplished platoon sergeants and first sergeants.

"SERGEANT, TAKE THE LEAD"

July-August 1998 Correction

Due to an editorial error in the July-August 1998 "Driver's Seat" column, we misidentified the 5th Squadron, 15th Cavalry as the 5th Squadron, 16th Cavalry. We apologize to CSM Lady and the 5-15 Cav's troopers for the error.