

Training Junior Engineer Officers: *The Way Forward*

By Mr. Cody A. Fields

Editor's note: This article presents the U.S. Army Engineer School (USAES) response to First Lieutenant Tyler A. Skidmore's article "Junior Engineer Officers Need Better Training"¹ available at https://home.army.mil/wood/contact/publications/engr_mag/Junior-Engineer-Officers-Need-Better-Training

It is hard to argue against the assertion that all military training, regardless of the skill level or branch, could benefit from some adaptation and advancement. Leaders at all levels are responsible for assessing existing information and training methods and adapting those methods to fit the needs of the force. The ever-evolving variables of the current operational environment; advances in equipment; and new tactics, techniques, and procedures need to drive training. Furthermore, world events dictate that we have a far different focus on operational requirements than we did over the last 2 decades. This is just as true for the USAES Engineer Officer Basic Leader Course (EBOLC), Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, as it is for training units conducting training at the operational level.

Current EBOLC Mission and Intent

To set the stage for a better understanding of EBOLC, it is necessary to outline the current parameters and goals of the course. EBOLC now consists of 19 weeks and 4 days of in-person familiarization and training of newly commissioned engineer lieutenants in the basics of military engineering. Some of the baseline concepts covered include doctrinal common core, combat engineering, and general engineering; the focus is on a brief introduction of these topics. The Engineer Regiment is so robust that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to impart complete expertise in all of these disciplines in the short time allotted.

It is difficult to precisely predict where every student leaving EBOLC will be assigned and—based on the vast set of skills required throughout the Engineer Regiment—the job that each will be doing. As a result, it is only possible to provide a brief overview of key and essential tasks throughout the course. We ask ourselves what each engineer lieutenant needs to be exposed to. And the answer is: Everything. With an “everything” mentality, the depth to which the topics can be covered is limited. We must assess where risk can be assumed based on experience and guidance from higher command.

Sharpening of Skills: Training and Education Domains

The Army functions through three training domains—institutional, operational, and self-development. The three domains support one another and, together, help build the understanding and training readiness required for success. Knowing and understanding these three domains helps close gaps or shortcomings in training/readiness. But then, who becomes responsible for what training? Training requirements that affect individual and organizational readiness are likely to be conducted in the institutional and organizational training domains. However, the question becomes more and more subjective as each domain begins “pointing its finger” at another. Now, how do we decide who is *truly* responsible?

The focus in the institutional domain lies heavily on the basics, with the primary focus on what is doctrinally correct. Courses such as Advanced Individual Training allow our Soldiers to learn and practice new tasks and skills. As Soldiers advance through Professional Military Education levels, they are exposed to more advanced tasks that build on the hands-on skills they previously learned. For EBOLC, the focus is on conceptualizing, planning, and managing the skills learned by junior enlisted and noncommissioned officers. Every effort is made to introduce students to as much as possible; however, with a vast array of topics and limited resources, it is difficult/impossible to expose students to virtually anything and everything they may experience over their careers. It would be very unrealistic to expect 100 percent hands-on experience in all engineering skills and trades.


The operational domain is where the “rubber meets the road”—where the initial institutional training and leader training come together. Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, explains how to make this effective: Train as a combined arms team, train using multiechelon techniques, train to standard using appropriate doctrine, train as you fight, sustain levels of training proficiency over time, train to maintain,

and train to fight.² These concepts can truly only be implemented at the operational level, and specific resources are needed for this approach to be truly beneficial. By utilizing the concepts and skills acquired during “schoolhouse” training, Soldiers and leaders can practice and become proficient in far less resource-constrained environments.

The bottom line is that the operational force holds the reins for preparing its units for the upcoming fight; individuals and leaders can sharpen their skills through realistic, relevant, and rigorous unit training. Although we would love to add as much practical application to USAES courses as possible, it is much more important that Soldiers and leaders to get the hands-on practice they need from the units with which they will fight in combat. Our goal is to provide students with as much doctrinal information as possible to set them up for success in their future assignments.

Way Forward

So, what does the future of training look like for the Army? More specifically, what are the future training requirements for EBOLC? Most of our EBOLC improvements currently stem from the experience of organizational leaders and instructors as well as student feedback throughout the course. This input—which could be dated or irrelevant, based on individual experience levels—results in subtle changes over time. What would be truly beneficial is input from the force. Former graduates could relay information about what they are currently doing or suggest topics for which a deeper understanding would have been more helpful. This is the only way that we can improve things—but it is not happening. Instead, Soldiers and leaders are leaving their institutional training and taking no ownership in improving the educational process for the future. They are complaining about how bad their training was rather than helping to improve it. The focus should be on the needs of the future to ensure that follow-on Soldiers and leaders have the tools that they will need to be successful.

USAES is taking steps to improve its courses. Critical task site selection boards for EBOLC and the Engineer Captains Career Course were held in January 2025. These boards will consist of field grade officers currently serving in the operational force across the Regiment. They will provide their input on what training is truly critical for engineer lieutenants and captains headed to platoon leader, company command, and staff positions. These boards will generate new objectives, lessons, and tasks for these courses. 

Endnote:

¹Tyler A. Skidmore, “Junior Engineer Officers Need Better Training,” 17 December 2024, <https://home.army.mil/wood/contact/publications/engr_mag/Junior-Engineer-Officers-Need-Better-Training>, accessed on 23 January 2025.

²FM 7-0 *Training*, 14 June 2021.

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