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Owner FROM: CAPTAIN JEFFREY D. WRIGHT

Title SUBJECT: After Action Report (AAR) for Special Tactics Officer Airfield Operations course

SM Field 1, 2, 3

1. **Purpose**. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide 24th Special Tactics Wing leadership with a comprehensive report on the Special Tactics Officer Airfield Operations Course from the perspective of an experienced student.
2. **Overview:** I attended the course from 15 September 2014 through 9 January 2014. This course had two very distinct components: academics during the work day, and physical training in the mornings and the after-hours work it requires. In order to provide room for the three lieutenants on this team to gain leadership experience, I was not in a positional leadership role on the team.
3. **Airfield Management Academics.**
4. ISSUE: Applicability of course content to the Special Tactics Officer (STO) career field
5. DISCUSSION: This course succeeded in teaching STOs the fundamentals of air traffic control (ATC) in order to enable them to understand the training and combat employment of Special Tactics teams. Blocks I through III (respectively: fundamentals, tower, and RADAR) contained the appropriate information, and were taught in an efficient and effective manner. No changes are recommended.

Blocks IV through VI teach airfield management in non-deployed locations, aboard airfields that are long since established. As such, there was very little overlap with the mission set of Special Tactics. Bluntly, these blocks are wasted time for a Special Tactics Officer student.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:

* 1. In the short term, combine STOs and 13Ms during Blocks I-III, but separate them for Blocks IV-VI. Contract a STO-specific course from maneuver SMEs. For the longer term, create a STO-specific program.
     1. In determining specific curriculum for this block, reference the instruction that other SOF and combat arms O-1s are receiving during this point in their careers, e.g. The Basic School (USMC), Junior Officer Training Course (NSW), and Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course (Army infantry), and the 18A course.
  2. A note on the willingness of 334th TRS to adapt to our needs: in responding to my end of course critique, the squadron wrote that: “…the career field manager for STOs determines whether or not they should be here” and “the bottom line is that **it will be up the special tactics community to determine whether or not STOs need to attend some or all of this course**.” (emphasis mine)

This matches the informal discussions I had with them on the subject. From their perspective, they don’t care what we teach our STOs or how we do it – so long as we keep them in the academic building for X hours per course so they can justify their manpower and numbers (per the following AAR issue).

1. ISSUE: Misuse of time during the academic day
2. DISCUSSION: The academic day is defined by time (0900-1800), not mission accomplishment. During simulations, most of this time is used for training. The day’s objectives are accomplished between 1630 and 1730, so students rarely wait more than 90 minutes before being allowed to leave the building.

During classroom blocks of instruction, however, only a third of the training day is spent accomplishing learning objectives. It is important to note that this is not because instructors rush through the material; on the contrary, they take their time by sharing anecdotes, prompting discussion, and thoroughly answering any questions that may arise.

The ground truth is that there is far more training time allocated than is required by the material. Previous classes dealt with this by securing students for the day when the mission was accomplished. That policy has changed: now students are held in the classroom until 1800 regardless of circumstances. Most classes pass the time by watching YouTube videos, playing cards, throwing darts, and making idle conversation.

The following schedule was a typical day from Blocks I, IV, V, and VI. Note that only 3 hours of an 8-hour academic day (+1 hour for lunch) is spent actually training.

0900 – Class scheduled to start, students in seats.

0930 – Class starts (30m block)

1000 – Break

1015 – Class resumes (45m block)

1100 – Break for Lunch

1300 – Lunch break ends

1315 – Class resumes (45m block)

1400 – Break

1415 – Class resumes (1hr block)

1515 – Class concludes

1800 – Students allowed to leave building

It could be inferred that confining students to the classroom would be a good thing for individual and group study. In practice, however, students are burned out from having been in the same classroom all day and are frustrated with being unable to leave. As a result, study seldom occurs before students are able to leave the building and are able to ‘shift gears’ mentally. Not allowing students to begin this decompression time until 1800 is a significant obstacle to academic progress, physical fitness, and STO mission accomplishment WRT team leadership.

The reason I am bringing this up to 24SOW leadership is that my attempts at addressing it through 334th TRS stakeholders were fruitless. In discussions about this matter they consistently expressed apprehension about losing resources, GS positions, etc. if the course requirements (classroom hours) were revised down. They cited these concerns as justification for keeping the numbers inflated far beyond the course’s actual requirements.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:
   1. Work with 334th TRS leadership to allow STO/CCT students to be secured for the day upon mission completion. Use the morning PT hours as justification: our training day really does start at 0530, not 0900.
   2. Immediately provide STOs with a ST-centric program of instruction as a stop-gap measure to keep them gainfully employed during the course’s downtime. Consider using tools like CBTs through MarineNet/AKO and reading lists. (Given a few days and a mandate from leadership, I can accomplish this if so directed.)
2. ISSUE: Physical fitness training
3. Discussion: The physical component of this course is first rate. It is highly effective in advancing student’s physical capabilities while simultaneously inculcating them with the habits required for success on a small combat arms team. Despite the tremendous workload put on students for a protracted period of time, incidences of overuse injuries were relatively low. The skill in coaching, availability of physical therapy, and availability of training equipment accounts for this success.

1. Recommendation: Reinforce success by ensuring that the key elements receive additional funding and authority. At a minimum, maintain the status quo. Prime among the elements responsible for mission accomplishment is Nathan Barnes, a true force multiplier. His encyclopedic knowledge of athletic performance training is important, but he stands out from other strength coaches because he understands career field’s mission intuitively and adapts training to match it.
   1. Consider retaining Mr. Barnes’ experience and skill by hiring him in a permanent capacity. The billet itself is important, but the man himself is the reason the program is working so well.

1. ISSUE: Cadre professionalism and empowerment
2. Discussion: Cadre were consistently professional and responsible while doing their best to provide the arduous, demanding, and even adversarial environment that this program demands. I specifically looked for any hint of abusive treatment towards students. I observed no maltreatment, heard no rumors of any, and am confident that it is not systemically occurring. At the same time, I did see problems that could easily lead to abusive treatment if not corrected.

Cadre are simultaneously charged with conducting quality control for the career field but are not given the ability to use their judgment in accomplishment of that mission. There aren’t enough tools to deal with students who are clearly a bad fit for the community but still manage to attain minimum standards. Thus, cadre are put in a position where they must either neglect their duty to perform quality control for the community, or to break the rules in an attempt to remove under-performing students. They are frustrated because they are torn between those two equally bad options. This is made worse because of the current 334th Commander’s stated reluctance to out-process CCT students for marginal performance. He stated that attrition means lower student success rates, which makes him look bad.

1. Recommendation:
   1. Establish a Performance Review Board process to deal with students who meet standards but are not a good fit for the community. This process needs to occur without involvement from non-SOF personnel; their role needs to be in executing the decisions of the board.
   2. ‘Quantify the subjective’ by employing performance evaluating software of the type found at Special Forces Assessment and Selection. It turns peer and cadre evaluations into metrics suitable for board processes. Use it throughout the pipeline.
   3. Give cadre complete control over the training schedule on “Down Fridays.” This is their best opportunity to evaluate student’s capabilities; predictability hinders this effort.

e. ISSUE: Warrior Mindset

(1) Discussion: With few exceptions, ATC graduates are physically fit team players, primed for further training. Many of them lack a warrior mindset, however. Their athleticism is still a ‘sport,’ not a function of combat readiness. While they will get this later in the pipeline, it is possible to capitalize on ATC’s success by adding elements that will help them develop this mentality.

(1) Recommendation:

a. Issue rubber rifles to all students and require that they be kept within arm’s distance at all times during the duty day except when in a simulator. This is a cheap (about $5,000 total) and easy way to train weapons accountability and muzzle awareness. Having weapons also opens the door to teaching basic combat arms concepts that need to be instinctual among all warfighters. Beginning that training at ATC will allow for even higher levels of proficiency to be achieved later in the pipeline.

b. Incorporate martial arts training into morning PT. As it currently stands, most ATC graduates have never been in a fight or anything like it. They are athletes, but many are still timid and lack the capacity for violent aggression that is the baseline for success in combat. Martial arts (or ‘combatives’) would be a great way to ensure that our special operators attain a warrior mindset early in their development. It is also among the most physically demanding activities possible; this recommendation is a way to ratchet up the physical intensity of ATC without creating more overuse injuries. Traumatic injuries can be largely prevented by avoiding standing-to-ground engagements, and focusing on pad striking, ground-and-pound drills with dummies, and live grappling from the knees. For a small investment in equipment and instructor training, ATC can produce graduates who are both athletes and fighters.

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Special Tactics Officer