

Training Battlefield Airmen



Report of the Commander-Directed Investigation

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Major General, USAF

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**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
AIR EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMAND**


29 September 2016

MEMORANDUM FOR AETC/CC

FROM: AU/CV

SUBJECT: Final Report, Battlefield Airmen (BA) Comander-Directed Investigation (CDI)

1. The following CDI report highlights 42 findings of notable concern and 58 recommendations to enable the AETC command environment's ability to effectively recruit, access, and train BA. In an effort to fulfil the intended task, the formed 18 member CDI team over the course of the last 70 days conducted more than 200 interviews, reviewed 5,545 documents and reports, convened 3 subject matter expert focus groups, and conducted separate trend analysis to assess AETC system(s) concerns.
2. In accordance with your 15 July appointment letter, the CDI focus areas were Leadership, Culture, and Institutional Safeguards with assessments up and down the AETC command structure, as well as, across sister-service special operation training institutions. The CDI Team has concluded that the Battlefield Airmen community is comprised of nothing less than top notch professionals dedicated to producing quality operators. All instructors interviewed and observed were professional, methodical, and intimately familiar with the techniques authorized to conduct training. Additionally, none of the students interviewed for this CDI identified any abusive behavior on the part of instructors. However, during this investigation there did appear to be quite a few institutional challenges, as mentioned in previous studies, reports, or meeting minutes, which may require commander intervention.
3. If there are any questions or concerns, the CDI team is standing by, and are prepared to reconvene if required.


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Investigating Officer

cc:
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On 15 July 2016, Lt Gen Darryl Roberson, the Air Education and Training Command (AETC) Commander, appointed Maj Gen Timothy J. Leahy, Air University Vice Commander and Commander, Curtis E. LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, to conduct a Commander-Directed Investigation (CDI) to “thoroughly and deliberately evaluate the Battlefield Airmen (BA) recruiting, accession, and training environment and to obtain recommendations to enable AETC to ensure a command environment that effectively recruits, accesses, and trains Battlefield Airmen.”¹ The Terms of Reference for this CDI appear at Appendix A.

The recently established Battlefield Airmen Training Group (BA TG) operates under the command of the 37 Training Wing (37 TRW) at Joint Base San Antonio (JBSA)-Lackland. The BA training programs are just a few of a diverse set of Basic and Technical training missions that fall within the 37 TRW responsibilities that include Basic Military Training, the Defense Language Institute English Language Center, Support Services Technical Training, Military Working Dog Training, and the Inter-American Air Forces Academy. The BA TG is comprised of four training squadrons, a training support detachment (to be stood up as a training support squadron), and four Operating Locations with high-risk training spread across 8 states leveraging 16 geographically separated training areas and ranges. The primary mission is to prepare officer and enlisted

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candidates to serve in seven career specialties: Special Tactics Officer (STO), Combat Rescue Officer (CRO), Air Liaison Officer (ALO), Pararescue (PJ), Combat Control (CCT), Special Operations

Weather Technician (SOWT), and Tactical Air Control Party (TACP).

The training programs for these career fields simulate austere combat conditions and thus are physically, psychologically, and emotionally demanding. The training syllabus relies on progressively increasing pressures on the candidates to assess their ability to adapt and persist beyond their normal endurance limits. Defining the line between training intensity and abuse is an essential requirement for operating a professional, credible BA training system.

The Terms of Reference specified three focus areas for the CDI: Leadership, Culture, and Institutional Safeguards. Leadership in the BA training program context has some special characteristics owing to the nature of the training mission and the ultimate operational environment in which Airmen in the BA career field function. The CDI team assessed whether the BA enterprise is organized to accomplish its assigned mission efficiently and effectively. More than merely looking at organization charts and Unit Manning Documents, this involved assessing the degree to which commanders and supervisors in the BA training enterprise had the requisite authority to accomplish their assigned missions.

¹ Memorandum from AETC/CC to Maj Gen Timothy J. Leahy, 15 July 2016, p. 1.

Organizational structures and characteristics can facilitate effective leadership or they can constrain leaders' actions in ways that are not productive. Consequently, the CDI examined how the BA training system was organized and how effectively that organizational structure supported and sustained mission success. This aspect of the BA enterprise has remained a persistent concern for trainers and operational customers. In the spring of 2016, AETC activated the Battlefield Airmen Training Group to improve the effectiveness of the training program. The CDI team found that, in many ways, this new organization was already proving its value, but whether it will achieve the anticipated results is yet to be determined.

Personnel resources are a persistent leadership concern of any military organization. For the BA training program the CDI team focused on the manpower standards for Instructors, Military Training Leaders (MTL), and support staff. At the outset, the intensity of the training environment suggests a requirement for robust instructor-to-student and MTL-to-student ratios. The CDI team found that instructor-supervisors and instructors across this enterprise were intimately familiar with the instructor-to-student ratios for each training event and adapted their training plans to remain in compliance with these standards.



The emotional and psychological pressure inherent in this type of training suggests a requirement for more robust embedded support resources such as chaplain and psychologists to assess how candidates cope during the various phases of the program. Similarly, instructors and MTLs must perform their duties over long hours of intense, stressful interaction with the candidates. This suggests a need for robust monitoring and sustainment measures from leadership to ensure stress levels on the Cadre remain within acceptable ranges.

The Terms of Reference tasked the CDI team to examine the leadership tools available to all levels of the BA training enterprise to assess, evaluate, and, at times, eliminate candidates from training. Perhaps unlike any other career field, the BA training enterprise experiences very high elimination rates—for FY 17 Air Force Recruiting Service (AFRS) anticipates that from 62 to 89 percent of eligible candidates in four BA specialties (CCT, TACP, SOWT, and PJ) will be eliminated from the program.² Attrition occurs because of self-elimination, academic, medical, administrative, or disciplinary issues that arise in the course of some of the longest technical training programs in the Air Force. Given these systemic characteristics, the CDI team explored what leadership tools are available to the various levels of leadership to assure mission success. Ultimately, commanders and supervisors need to understand the trends that affect their units and

² Data provided by HQ AFRS. The Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape and (SERE) and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) career fields are not considered Battlefield Airmen, but many aspects of these career fields' training programs are similar to the BA training program. They also experience high attrition rates—the AFRS FY17 projections are 77% for SOWT and 69% for EOD programs.

the overall enterprise. Armed with an understanding of the trends, leaders must act to prevent undue negative consequences deriving from those trends.

The final area the CDI team examined with respect to leadership focused on the effectiveness of the MTL, First Sergeant, and support agencies (e.g., chaplains, psychologists) to help assure the success of the BA program. In large part, this aspect of the leadership team provides support and accountability to ensure the system does not devolve into mal-training, mal-treatment, or other abusive behaviors. This critical aspect of the system serves both students and Cadre to assure mission effectiveness.

The second overarching area Lt Gen Roberson charged the CDI team to address was the BA training program's culture. As mentioned above, the BA operational mission requires individuals capable of forming cohesive teams that go into high threat, austere, high-intensity situations. The training program relies on recruiting a particular breed of elite athletes who can think on their feet despite fatigue, injuries, and the swirl of chaos around them. These very strengths of the career field can also become liabilities in the training environment if trainers set the bar too high for candidates.

Assessing the culture of the BA training enterprise requires understanding how the training teams (instructors, MTLs, First Sergeants, support staff, supervisors, and commanders) perceive the distinction between the training environment and the operational environment. If this distinction becomes blurred in the minds of the training teams, candidates may be at risk for higher rates of attrition or physical injury. The CDI team looked at institutional climate and culture characteristics that positively or negatively influence the retention of qualified candidates in the training pipeline as manifested in Cadre conduct, student conduct, and institutionalized occupational stressors.

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Cadre in any training program, but especially in programs like the BA program that inherently ratchet up the levels of physical, psychological, and emotional stress on the candidates, are subject to losing sight of the boundaries that separate sound training practices from those that are unnecessary. To address such concerns, the CDI team reviewed the processes, procedures, and practices designed to discourage, identify, and deal with Cadre misconduct. The responsibility of supervisors and commanders to monitor and assess how effectively the Cadre functions in this respect is an essential requirement for maintaining the professionalism and credibility of the training program. Signs of a healthy, functioning, and credible culture include clearly defined tools designed to move candidates toward progressively higher levels of proficiency and confidence; similar tools that assist Cadre in identifying substandard performance along with



remediation processes; a current and active internal standardization program that assesses Cadre performance; and a trend analysis program that provides supervisors and commanders indicators of the full range of Cadre proficiency and performance.

All instructors interviewed and observed were professional, methodical, and intimately familiar with the techniques authorized to conduct training. Additionally, none of the students interviewed for this CDI

identified any abusive behavior on the part of instructors. The students appeared to understand the purpose of the training and the ways that it is intended to prepare them to operate within their individual BA specialties.

Lt Gen Roberson tasked the CDI team to look beyond the tactical component of the BA training programs. This requirement involved assessing AETC's policies, processes, and procedures in response to eliminations and misconduct among candidates and Cadre. Areas of particular relevance for this task included a review of policies requiring MAJCOM-level reviews of reasons for eliminations among BA students; the rationale for elimination policy differences for non-prior service, prior-service, and cross-service candidates; policies governing the levels of reviews for BA Cadre discipline and misconduct; the levels of review required for trends in eliminations and misconduct.

The final major area Lt Gen Roberson tasked the CDI team to address involved the institutional safeguards involved in recruiting, assessing, selecting, and assigning individuals as candidates to the BA career fields. Current policies establish different processes and procedures for managing non-prior service, prior service, sister service, and cross trainee candidates. The CDI team reviewed the rationale for these differences to determine if they were necessary from training and operational standpoints.

Because of the importance of physical, psychological, and emotional fitness required for the BA career fields, the team examined ways to incorporate a more comprehensive assessment of all categories of recruits. Considering the previously mentioned high attrition rates among candidates, especially in the first ten days of the training program, the CDI team looked closely at the "Scout, Recruit, and Develop (SRD)" program managed cooperatively between AFRS and the BA TG. This program, modeled after the US Navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) program, seeks to identify high-potential candidates and mentor them as they complete Basic Military Training to increase their chances of success when they enter the BA training pipeline.

Finally, the CDI team compared the BA programs to the comparable methodologies used by the US Navy Special Warfare Center and the US Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. Both programs serve similar operational requirements, recruiting and selection

processes, and have recently conducted similar reviews to assure safety, quality control, and mission effectiveness.

The following are the most significant findings and associated recommendations arranged

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according to CDI Team-assigned category and in priority order within each category. While the CDI Team believes that all its

findings and recommendations will improve the BA Training Program, implementing the recommendations listed below will have an immediate and strategic effect to assure the program produces combat-ready Airmen safely and efficiently.

LEADERSHIP

Finding 1

1.1 Based on the operational nature of BA training, the BA TG is more appropriately aligned under 19 AF or as a separate pillar within the AETC portfolio.

Recommendation

- 1.1 Conduct a thorough review to develop recommendations for Numbered Air Force “best fit” for BA TG to assure optimal alignment and support for operational requirements.
- 1.2 Conduct a Continuous Process Improvement event including subject-matter experts from AETC/A3, 2 AF, 19 AF, AFSOC and ACC to review the “as is” structure of the BA TG.

Finding 2

- 2.1 The AETC and 2 AF staffs do not have appropriate BA expertise for curriculum and programming oversight of unique high-risk activities and life cycle sustainment requirements.
- 2.2 AETC has not adopted the 2014 BA Summit recommendation to provide staff expertise to oversee curriculum and programming for BA high-risk activities and life cycle sustainment.

Recommendation

2.1 Create a BA O-6-led division within the AETC/A3 directorate to advocate for, coordinate, and synchronize all BA efforts.

Finding 3

- 3.1 AETC/A1M and the BA TG did not accomplish a manpower study prior to activating the BA TG.
- 3.2 Confusion over the numbers of required vs authorized manpower billets delayed the full activation of the BA TG.

Recommendation

- 3.1 Complete a manpower study to validate positions required for BA TG mission accomplishment.
- 3.2 Complete all Authorization Change Requests (ACR) to the current Organizational Change Request (OCR).

CULTURE**Finding 7**

- 7.1 BA TG does not follow established processes prescribed in AETCI 36-2642, *Technical and Basic Military Training Administration*, for assuring positive control over students who are eliminated from or delayed in training.
- 7.2 BA TG does not have a standardized positive control procedure for eliminated students.

Recommendation

- 7.1 BA TG create a standardized positive control procedure for eliminated students.

Finding 11

- 11.1 Prior Service/Sister Service (PS/SS) Airmen have higher initial qualification scores (ASVAB, PAST) than other student categories, and eliminate at rates similar to those of cross-trainee and officer BA candidates.

Recommendation

- 11.1 Formalize the criteria for washback within each Course of Initial Entry (COIE), document the reasons for not considering washback as an option on the AETC Form 173, *Student Record of Academic Counseling and Comments*, and provide a second level of review for students who decline washback.
- 11.2 2 AF and BA TG analyze data (e.g., AETC Form 173 coupled with washback codes in TTMS) related to causes for students to washback or to be eliminated from training.

Finding 8

- 8.1 There are longstanding and systemic issues with pay for Prior Service/Sister Service (PS/SS) Airmen.

Recommendation

- 8.1 Conduct a continuous process improvement event to reduce the number of days PS/SS students are in no-pay status after joining the Battlefield Airmen Training Group.
- 8.2 Conduct an audit of station join dates (via 802 FSS) to ensure that PS/SS Airmen are being joined, and therefore are on the payrolls of 37 TRW within their first five days on station.
- 8.3 37 TRW and BA TG establish metrics and monitor progress toward reducing numbers of students in no-pay status.

INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS**Finding 24**

- 24.1 Involuntary Discharge of a BA Airman did not have a valid basis, and was not in compliance with the Air Force Instruction.
- 24.2 There is a practice of pressuring students to self-eliminate (SIE) when they have a training-related injury lasting longer than 60 days, thereby resulting in discharge from the Air Force.
- 24.3 After Battlefield Airmen wash out or SIE resulting in discharge from the Air Force, they often receive inappropriate re-enlistment codes that prevent future reenlistment.

Recommendation

- 24.1 Use proper discharge basis for students who SIE and decline reclassification so that the appropriate reenlistment code is assigned.
- 24.2 Conduct a comprehensive independent review of all Entry-Level Separations at Lackland AFB over the past 12 months to identify and correct major deficiencies, and to ensure the discharge process follows appropriate governing policies.
- 24.3 Consider requesting Headquarters USAF conduct the review and include representatives from the JA and SG communities.

Finding 12

- 12.1 The Air Force does not currently use non-cognitive/personality screening for prospective enlisted BA to help determine their potential for completing BA training pipelines.
- 12.2 Similar sister service (e.g., The US Navy Special Warfare) and most Air Force Assessment Programs (i.e., Special Tactics Officer, Combat Rescue Officer, Air Liaison Officer, SOF, TACP Selection, CCT/PJ/SOWT cross-trainee) rely heavily on non-cognitive/personality screening to determine suitability for the career fields and potential for success in completing training programs.

Recommendation

- 12.1 After considering the results of the current RAND study, AETC, 2 AF, and BA TG leaders partner with AFPC (Industrial-Organizational psychologists), ACC, AFSOC, and RAND to introduce rigorous pre-accession non-cognitive screening.
- 12.2 AETC conduct a longitudinal study to determine the effect on attrition and graduation rates with the introduction of non-cognitive screening assessments.

Finding 18

- 18.1 There are insufficient feedback processes and procedures to allow early detection of problems in the BA training and social environment. (e.g., Cadre behavioral drift).

Recommendation

- 18.1 Ensure the fidelity of the anonymous student feedback system in all aspects of the BA training enterprise in accordance with AETCI 36-2909, 2 AF Supplement.
- 18.2 Ensure all students and instructors fully understand policies, processes, and procedures governing the feedback system.
- 18.3 Institute a process whereby both positive and negative critiques obtained from all feedback mechanisms are reported to all levels of BA training staff and leadership.

Finding 21

- 21.1 High attrition rates in the Courses of Initial Entry (COIE) suggest that existing post-BMT preparation is insufficient to ensure BA candidates' success in the COIE.

Recommendation

- 21.1 Direct AETC staff to expedite authorizing and resourcing a BA Preparatory Course as a post-BMT solution similar to the US Navy Special Warfare PREP program, as previously recommended in the 2014 Battlefield Airman Summit.

Finding 23

- 23.1 There are not enough dedicated Human Performance and medical support personnel assigned to the BA TG to train and maintain BA students adequately.

Recommendation

- 23.1 Direct AETC staff to collaborate with AFPC to expedite filling Human Performance and medical billets allocated to BA TG.
- 23.2 BA TG consider leveraging a contract vehicle as a near-term solution for providing Human Performance and medical support for BA pipeline programs until completing fill actions for authorized billets.

Finding 25

- 25.1 37 TRG is not administering ATAF in a manner consistent with the policies and procedures established in AETCI 36-2643, *Military Standards Training (MST) Program*.
- 25.2 The process of transferring BA Airmen into ATAF creates gaps and seams in the oversight of those Airmen.

Recommendation

- 25.1 BA TG/CC and 37 TRG establish comprehensive processes for reclassifying BA Airmen.
- 25.2 Keep former BA Airmen undergoing reclassification assigned to the BA TG until the reclassification process is complete.
- 25.3 Do not assign Prior Service/Sister Service (PS/SS) or cross-trainees to ATAF while they await reclassification.

25.4 Do not house TACP students on the same dormitory floor as Airmen assigned to ATAF.

The BA training program is large, diverse in terms of its operational specialties, and covers 16 installations. The CDI team reached a general conclusion that the BA training program functions effectively, however, there are improvements that can make it more effective and efficient.