

# NCOs test the latest Army equipment

Operational Test Command NCOs ensure Soldiers get the best

BY JENNIFER MATTSON NCO Journal

When Soldiers sign for and receive equipment, many don't realize the extent to which that equipment has been tested to meet the Army's stringent standards.

"I didn't know anything about how the Army got equipment," said Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Carbon, an Avenger Air Defense System crewmember with the U.S. Army Operational Test Command. "I thought they just went out and bought stuff. But it's this huge testing arena that ensures we get the best piece of equipment for our Soldiers."

Carbon said he is a subject-matter expert during tests the Army uses to decide whether a piece of air defense artillery equipment is ready for the battlefield.

The process to decide whether any item is ready or needs updating is overseen by the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command.

Command Sgt. Maj. Allen Fritzsching, the command sergeant major of ATEC, to which OTC reports, said the process of testing equipment is extensive. It starts as ATEC receives equipment and tests it within controlled environments, then tests it in combat-like scenarios.

"After it's been tested at our test ranges and by our engineers and by all our great folks, we transfer that piece of equipment to Operational Test Command," Fritzsching said. "They put it in the hands of Soldiers using various scenarios that replicate how that piece of equipment will be used by units in our Army. They get the feedback from the Soldiers, they combine that information with the information from our test centers and developmental testing, and that information goes to the Army Evaluation Center, which writes the final report for our senior leaders and decision-makers to make a decision on the fielding of that equipment."

Operational Test Command is where NCOs give the equipment to Soldiers to use it as they would on the battlefield. OTC's unique mission has NCOs conduct a variety of tests and sends them downrange to listen to Soldiers' issues with the equipment. OTC is one of the last stops a new or upgraded piece of equipment will go through before being passed to Soldiers in-theater.

NCOs who work at OTC are responsible for the final tests these systems undergo, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Bobb, the former command sergeant major for OTC.

"Once it gets to an operational test, it's almost ready to be fielded," Bobb said. "Once we get that piece of equipment, we'll go out and break it. We'll take it out to the environment that replicates what the piece of equipment is going to be fielded into. We'll take it through the bumps and bruises, and treat it the same way as it's designed to work. We'll give it to an actual unit that has probably deployed, and they'll take it out and use it. We'll then collect data from them and see how it operates."

Finding NCOs to fill slots at OTC is often a challenge, Bobb said. OTC needs Soldiers who have deployed and are proficient in their military occupational specialty.

◀ Sgt. 1st Class George Parrott (left), a research, development, test and evaluation NCO with the Maneuver Test Directorate, U.S. Army Operational Test Command, brings body armor to a Soldier on the fire/direction control team. The mortar platoon was participating in an operational test of the Accelerated Precision Mortar Initiative cartridge at Fort Bliss, Texas. PHOTO COURTESY OF OPERATIONAL TEST COMMAND



► Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Carbon (left) conducts an interview with a 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Soldier who was participating in the operational test of the Handheld Manpack Small Form Fit radio system during a network integration exercise at Fort Bliss. PHOTO BY DENNIS MCELVEEN

“When we recruit our noncommissioned officers, we make sure that they have a combat background experience,” Bobb said. “Their background experience is very important to the testing of that piece of equipment. That NCO has more knowledge and experience to provide the best input.”

NCOs are the subject-matter experts, depending on their backgrounds, on how the equipment might be used downrange. They are also responsible for running gunnery tables and for ensuring the ranges aren’t affecting the results of the test, Bobb said.

“What we do is make sure the Army sets down a standard, and the product needs to meet that standard,” Carbon said. “We conduct the test and record it as accurately as possible. We then provide that information to the individuals who make the choices.”

Master Sgt. Jay High, a satellite microwave systems chief with OTC, said NCOs act as unbiased observers to ensure the Soldiers on the ground are getting the best equipment.

“We are the independent testers of the Army,” High said. “When the Army Test and Evaluation Command has something, we don’t care if it’s good or bad — we don’t have stock in any company.

“We just want the best product in the hands of my battle buddies who are out there — who will be using that equipment when it matters the most.”

Network Integration Exercises are a series of semi-annual tests, in which three Army commands, including ATEC and OTC, place emerging systems in the hands of Soldiers and conduct combat-like scenarios. NIEs allow the Army to save money by deploying multiple systems and observing how they work together early on in the acquisition process. Where five separate tests could cost the Army more, the Army streamlines the process by integrating the systems to save on resources, manpower and costs, Bobb said.

OTC also conducts limited-user tests, which are designed for systems and equipment that are particular to one function or MOS.

These short scenarios allow for a simple test — mostly used for systems that are already fielded but require a software update, Bobb said.

In addition, customer tests allow units to request certain equipment or upgrades from the Army. OTC NCOs will then conduct the necessary tests to ensure that equipment is up to the Army’s standard.

Master Sgt. Travis Wheat, a research, development and test NCO for the U.S. Army Evaluation Command, which falls under ATEC, said AEC conducts rapid fielding initia-



tives, which works to put the latest equipment into the warfighters’ hands as fast as possible.

“The expertise that the NCO Corps provides to ATEC provides a better product to our Soldiers,” Wheat said. “Everything we do on a daily basis is seen on the battlefield immediately. The improvements we make save lives. Every day we’re doing something that’s helping the warrior.”

OTC, as part of ATEC’s mission, deploys NCOs overseas to ensure that the equipment that was rapidly fielded is working the way it was designed to.

High recently deployed to Afghanistan with this mission and was the NCO in charge at ATEC’s forward operating site. With 14 people — NCOs, officers and a civilian — High assisted in evaluating 35 systems over a six-month period. The team members attach to deployed units and collect assessments on the equipment in-theater. They then write the test report, which is looked at by one-, two- and three-star generals who decide whether a piece of equipment is needed or requires an upgrade.

“We take the voice of the individual Soldier all the way to the highest levels of the Army — to the decision-makers,” High said. “If we have an assessment that only needs 10 or 12 people’s input, it makes that individual Soldier’s input and voice very important.”

Though the process of testing equipment is complex and often takes about a year to learn, NCOs at ATEC and OTC say they will see their efforts when they go back to the operational Army.

“I have deployed, and I’ve seen this process work,” Carbon said. “I work to provide Soldiers for years to come with reliable and proven equipment.

“I’ll see these products again; my Soldiers will use these products later in their career.”

**“We just want the best product in the hands of my battle buddies who are out there — who will be using that equipment when it matters the most.”**

— MASTER SGT. JAY HIGH