United States Army Operational Test Command Podcast: The History of OTC

(Intro Music)

Interviewer [0:14]: Welcome to the United States Army Operational Test Command Podcast Series. The Operational Test Command has an interesting and storied history. In this episode, I talk to Mr. Phil Riley, longtime OTC employee and military test plans analyst in the G3, about the history of OTC.

(Music Interlude)

Interviewer [1:01]: Okay, so we're going to talk a little bit about the Operational Test Command's history. Now, how long have you been working here at OTC?

Phil Riley [1:08]: I've been here twice. I was assigned here on active duty from the spring of 1971, and I retired from active duty in March of 1978. I came back to work as a temporary GS-5 in October of 1980. I got my current position in the G3 in May of 1982 and I've been working in the same position ever since.

Interviewer [1:49]: So just tell me, when you came here, it wasn't Operational Test Command. What was the name of the organization? How did it start? And just tell me what you know about the history.

Phil Riley [2:00]: This was Project MÄSTER when I had gotten here in 1971. Project MÄSTER was created in October of 1969, created specifically for the testing of surveillance, target acquisition, and night observation devices and pieces of equipment. At the time, the command was organized, the Chief of Staff of the Army, then-General William Westmoreland had said this is the most important organization other than operations in Vietnam. Started out as any organization, very, very small, but grew rapidly.

The first test, as I understand it, the organization was created in October of 1969. The first test was conducted in March of 1970. And it was testing primarily of these surveillance, target acquisition, night observation devices. The acronym was STANO.

The command grew. At the time I had gotten here, it was still growing. At one time, as I recollect, there were enough field-grade officers assigned to the command that we could have had enough positions to field a division. For example, there were 11 full-colonel, O-6s, assigned to the command. A great number of lieutenant colonels and majors. There were a couple of specialties we didn't have, like Chaplain or doctor, but all of the combat arms, combat support, combat service support, we pretty well could have covered with field-grade officers. Now the one thing the command did not have was low-grade enlisted personnel. Very, very few privates and specialists. Very, very few

second lieutenants. So it was mostly more senior company-grade officers, field-grade officers, and more senior enlisted personnel—E6, 7, 8, and Command Sergeant Major.

[5:19] Let me go through the steps. It was organized as Project MÄSTER: Mobile Army Sensor System Test, Evaluation, and Review, in October of 1969. In 1971, it was changed from Project MÄSTER to Headquarters MÄSTER. At this time, the commander of the organization was dual-hatted because this was the commander of III Corps and Fort Hood. At that time, Lieutenant General Beverly Powell. The deputy commander, Major General, was General Norton. He's one of the two general officers that I did not work for personally. I have worked for every other general officer except for him and Major General Todd.

When he had left, I believe General Senff became the deputy commander, subsequently promoted to Lieutenant General, became commander of III Corps and Fort Hood. So the organization was made permanent in about 1971 when it transitioned from Project MÄSTER to Headquarters MÄSTER.

[6:52] In the early 70s, the Army reorganized how the Army was structured. Within the continental United States, there was one major command, CONARC (Continental Army Command). This was separated, and that's when Forces Command and TRADOC were created. TRADOC to have command of the schools and centers, Forces Command to have command of the organizations and the installations that support them. TRADOC had Fort Sill, Fort Benning, etc. Forces Command was command of Fort Hood, Fort Campbell, Fort Bragg, and organizations like that.

We were still, at the time that this separation was made, we—MÄSTER—was still under the command of the Commanding General, III Corps. And so we were a Forces Command organization. Shortly thereafter, a decision was made that we would transition from Forces Command to TRADOC, and we became the TCATA: TRADOC Combined Arms Test Activity. And we stayed TCATA as long as we were any organization. And that was in 1974-75 roughly. And so we stayed there until 1987 when TEXCOM was created and our organization then assumed command of the former TRADOC test boards. And they became TEXCOM test boards, redesignated as test directorates.

Interviewer [9:00]: And then eventually it became the Operational Test Command assigned to the Army Test and Evaluation Command.

Phil Riley [9:07]: Yes.

Interviewer [9:07]: And that Army Test and Evaluation Command purpose is to combine all the testing entities—the evaluation, the testing, the operational, and the developmental—under one organization.

Phil Riley [9:20]: Yes.

Interviewer [9:21]: What are some of the biggest things that have evolved on the testing side, from your time here? What are the biggest changes you've seen in the actual testing atmosphere that Operational Test Command conducts?

Phil Riley [9:34]: That's a hard question for me to answer because I am a staff officer, and I support the test directorates. And so I am not directly involved in conducting testing. The job that I have, I support every test that the command conducts. I watch every test and I ensure that they get the resources that they need to have, external to the organization, to conduct their tests. A test is a test is a test. And I've been doing this for, you know, over 20 years. And so my work, in the area that I have, has changed very, very little.

We had our first little glitch in test support in 1990-1991 with Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield when the forces in the Continental United States were deployed into the Far East. At that time, most of the organizations were deployed. We had very few tactical organizations, division-size and below, that were left in CONUS for that period of time. And so we had to prioritize the tests that we had to ensure that the most important were supported because other ones were delayed or put off or not done at all. And then after everybody came back at the end of Desert Storm and Desert Shield, we sort of went back to business as usual.

And then that changed following 9/11, when then when forces were deployed into Afghanistan and into the CENTCOM area of operations, we have had to work very, very closely with Forces Command to get the tests that we need to have done supported because they have very little flexibility. There are just a certain number of organizations available in CONUS to support our testing. Now, most of our testing is done in the continental United States. Program managers are required to field organizations with the equipment that's going to be tested, and it's exceedingly difficult for them to go somewhere else other than the continental United States in order to get their test supported. So the big change here in the last five or six years has been our ability to be flexible, to be able to go where the organization is located and do testing at their home station.

We have not had any tests not be supported. We have had to delay testing. A very good example of this is the Stryker Mobile Gun System. The organization that was initially tabbed to be the support unit was subsequently designated as one of the surge brigades. And so because of the higher commitment of that effort, they were no longer available to support our test. We were supposed to start testing in January of that year. That unit was no longer available. So what the Army had done is shifted the requirement from that brigade to another brigade that was based up in Alaska. That organization sent the player personnel TDY from Alaska to Fort Hood. And the reason they did that is because there was a requirement for a heavy opposing forces. Had to have tanks, had to have Bradleys, had to have heavy forces to be the opposing force. And we were able to cludge an OPFOR out of remnants here at Fort Hood, and so that test was conducted at Fort Hood. The test had to be delayed six to eight months.

Interviewer [16:01]: So one of your big responsibilities in your position is trying to find—troubleshooting. Trying to find the different ways to adjust to the situations that are presented because, obviously, especially now with the Army at war, things change.

Phil Riley [16:21]: Oh yes. And, and we have a previously, we used to have a requirement to have everything fully coordinated six to eight months in advance. With the Army's requirement for rapid fielding, rapid initiatives, we have initiated test planning within just two or three months of when the test is going to be executed. And we have been able to work with Forces Command and TRADOC in very short periods of time. Don't do it all the time, but when there is a valid requirement, then the rest of the Army has come through and supported us in the things that we have done.

Interviewer [17:15]: One final question that I have is, as far as the future, what do you see the future of operational testing, in your opinion?

Phil Riley [17:25]: The requirement for operational testing is valid, and it is very significant. Operational testers ensure that the piece of equipment that is going to be fielded to the Army does the work that it is supposed to do and that the soldiers can use it. And our biggest challenge is going to be to fight to get the resources that we need to have in order to continue this mission because it is a vital mission. There are a couple of occasions back in World War II that I can think of where things were not tested, and the warfighters wound up with pieces of equipment that were not effective, that were not suitable, and were not able to do the job. And as a result, some organizations took tremendous losses because they depended upon the equipment and the equipment could not support them.

(Outro Music)

Interviewer [19:16]: That concludes this episode of the United States Army Operational Test Command Podcast Series. If you enjoyed this episode, please visit https://atec.army.mil/operational-evaluation-command/ to download more podcasts. Thanks for listening.

(Music Fades Out)