



Report from Armor Branch

A Branch Chief's After-Action Report:

Managing Career Progression In a Smaller, Higher Tempo Army

by Colonel Mark Hertling

I learned a lot about the personnel business during my two years serving at Armor Branch; but more importantly, I learned a lot about the people who make up our force. I will primarily focus on three elements: what's going on in each of the grade plates, lieutenants through colonel; two new programs in the personnel arena; and finally, some comments concerning professionalism in the Armor Force. Interspersed will be recommendations concerning other issues, but the majority of comments will address generalities versus the intricacies of personnel administration.

Since the Army began downsizing in the early '90s, Armor has taken significantly more cuts than other branches. While the rest of the Army was reduced by about a third, we were losing over 40 percent of our Armor and Cavalry operational flags. We were once one of the largest branches; today, we are the third smallest combat arm (Special Forces and Air Defense Artillery are smaller). Without debating either the disadvantages of these reductions or how our size may influence the major warfighting capabilities of our Army in the future, the repercussions of these reductions for each of the grade plates — second lieutenant through colonel (and beyond) — is noteworthy. For example, without as many Armor and Cavalry units, the opportunities for command and branch qualification — learning the trade and serving in

the jobs that attracted most of us to Armor — are reduced. In 1990, Armor had 30 brigade-level commands; today we have 16. That same year, we had 91 tank battalions or cavalry squadron commands with nearly 200 branch-qualifying positions for majors; we have 47 battalion-level commands and only about 90 positions for majors in 1997. During Desert Storm, Armor had 422 company or troop command opportunities for our captains, but today we only have 239 guidons.

Knowing this, we face a very precise challenge: with a smaller force and the same requirements (some would say we have more requirements, due to TDA structural overhead, AC/RC requirements and a growing joint bill), we must continue to access the best people; we must efficiently manage careers to secure the professional development they need and which will contribute to the combat readiness of the force; and we must ensure that Armor is represented at the correct level in assignments that make a difference. Here are some examples of how that is done at the different grades:

Lieutenants. Maintaining a solid young Armor officer corps is essential to the health of the branch. Lieutenants are truly those at the point of the spear; therefore, how they are brought into our culture is critical. To access the right Armor lieutenants, we need the right role

models at the various ROTC programs and at West Point. With strong Armor captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels assigned to these institutions, we ensure the Armor view is established early in those who will chose our branch and who will lead Armor units on the future battlefield. In most instances, all those assigned to train and influence these future Armor officers combine exceptional tactical experiences with strong scholastic backgrounds, and these individuals have done exceedingly well at getting some of the best and brightest young men interested in our branch. Statistics over the last three years have shown a strong accession rate for Armor from Cadet Command, with Armor consistently ranking in the top three preferences at the majority of schools. Additionally, over the last two years, Armor has been one of the top two combat arms of choice (the other being aviation) during branch selection at the Military Academy. The result is heartening: the best cadets in ROTC and USMA are making Armor their first choice, and the officers assigned to those programs to "recruit" for our branch through their example are making the big difference in Armor receiving the very best of the new breed.

However, there is a down side in the area of accessions: minority cadets are not choosing Armor at the rate we would like. We started some initiatives to im-

prove this shortfall, and in fact there has been slight progress in increasing our numbers during the last few years. But frankly, we just do not currently have enough minority officers to act as role models and mentors. Specifically, we do not have the ability to assign Armor officers in the numbers we would like to the various ROTC programs and USMA that would provide us with a stronger recruiting base so that African-American and Hispanic-American cadets chose Armor. So, until this situation improves, we must depend on ensuring a good experience for those minority cadets attending Cadet Troop Leader Training and during the ROTC/West Point Summer programs at Fort Knox and Fort Lewis.

Accessions are important, but professional development is where we grow our lieutenants. There are three programs that influence the development of our young officers that many may not know about: 1LT to Korea, Branch Mix Advance Courses, and Tank-Cav Roundout.

As many know, the normal tour length for most officers assigned to Korea is one year; the majority of 2LTs assigned to that theater leave just prior to their promotion. With a shortage of 1LTs, the specialty platoons and executive officer positions in this important area of operations had, in the past, gone unfilled. But a few years ago, Armor Branch began giving officers who had already completed a 24-month tour at a FORSCOM installation the opportunity to serve in these positions. By doing so, these officers moved directly into a key organizational slot in one of the armor units in Korea. They were also able to complete an overseas tour prior to attending the Advance Course (key, as the reduction of forces in Europe means a decreasing opportunity to serve overseas after attendance at the course). And, upon return from Korea, many of these officers provide up to a year service in the training base at Fort Knox prior to attending the Advance Course. This benefits the training units, as they receive the advantage of experience, and it further adds to the professional development of the officer. Bottom line: This is a great program.

Between 36-48 months of service, all officers are scheduled to attend their next round of professional military schooling. Attendance at the Advance Course has several requirements. Primarily, the officer must be in a promotable-to-captain status. Additionally, in early 1996, LTG Holder brought back the mixed advance course program. In this program, Armor is asked to send either one or two representatives to the Infantry, Field Artillery, ADA, Engineer, and

Aviation Advance Courses. While many volunteer to represent Armor at another course, the branch is always looking for recommendations from commanders as to who are the best candidates for this program. With the new and significant changes concerning the follow-on attendance at CAS3 from the Advance Course, the formal professional military education of each company grade officer is concluded during this break between the lieutenant and captain years.

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Finally, one of the programs that is a priority concerns the mixing of the armor and cavalry experiences of young officers; we attempt to avoid “single-tracking” in either armor or cavalry as we look to assign our officers. For example, there are many factors that determine follow-on assignments of officers out of the advance course (joint domicile concerns, operational requirements, overseas equity, type of unit, etc.), but Armor Branch pays particular attention to mixing experiences. If an officer had served in a Cavalry unit overseas while a lieutenant, Branch attempts to ensure a tank assignment in the continental United States as a captain. Similarly, if he had served with an Armor battalion in CONUS, Branch attempts to get him to a cavalry squadron (usually a tougher proposal, given the number of cavalry organizations in the force) either OCONUS or CONUS. Most in Armor Branch are supportive of this policy, but there are some in our ranks who disagree with the philosophy of using alternating assignments as a tool for professionally developing our young officers in the branch. In my view, they need to further analyze their rationale, as a single-track policy hurts our branch and stunts the professional growth of the officer.

Captains. The sheer number of requirements and the importance of the jobs held at the grade of captain make this the toughest grade to assign. During my two years at Armor Branch, we had tremendously talented captain assignment officers (AOs) working these assignments, even though their task was not

well understood, open to misinterpretation, and extremely difficult.

Principally, captains graduating from the Advance Course are assigned to locations where we know they can command soldiers as quickly as possible, and sometimes that does not coincide with the “desires” of the officer. Continuing the model discussed earlier, suppose there is an officer at the Advance Course who has just completed 40 months with a tank unit in Germany. During his interview with the assignment officer at the Advance Course, he states he wants to expand his professional development with an assignment to a cavalry unit, preferably the 3ACR at Fort Carson. However, a look at the charts for 3ACR (which the captain AOs manage at PERSCOM) shows the next troop command opening 16 months after the officer arrives. As an alternative, the 2ACR appears to have earlier opening command opportunities. Considering needs of the Army and professional development requirements, this assignment becomes a near-perfect fit — tank to cav, OCONUS to CONUS, allow for earliest possible command opportunity. Obviously, the only factor not considered is the officer’s desire for location, but meeting professional development and the needs of the Army are always the priority in assignment considerations.

One of the more misunderstood policies is the company command policy directed by the Chief of Staff of the Army. Because of the overwhelming need for branch-qualified captains, that policy states that officers should command for 18 (+/- six) months, a span considered essential for professional development, but a period within which battalion and brigade commanders have the flexibility to determine when that officer is prepared for other challenges, or when operational requirements might necessitate either early or later departure. Too many senior commanders focus only on the “18-month” requirement, attempting to plan company/troop changes of command to the day, when that was not the intent of the policy.

Additionally, the CSA believes a select group of officers should be afforded the chance to command twice; the policy states that those “heavy” commands are limited to the headquarters unit within the battalion or squadron, and the division headquarters company. Additionally, the CSA says the total time in command will not exceed 24 months. Those selected for command of a second unit must be approved by the Branch Chief and the Combat Arms Division Chief at PERSCOM. The reason: ensure only those with the best files are afforded this

opportunity and prevent future career or timeline conflicts, especially with those heading toward functional area schooling or assignment.

Perhaps the toughest issue at the captain grade plate is the assignment of those who are branch qualified (BQ). With 239 guidons at the company level, and with command tours varying between 12 and 24 months, we found that we "produce" approximately 115-130 BQ captains per year. However, the Army's appetite for those who are now uniquely qualified is much larger. Observer/controllers at the various training centers, small group instructors at the service schools, West Point faculty, ROTC cadre, USAREC command, functional area assignments, and Acquisition Corps designations all need quality captains.

Since 1990, the initiation and growth of the Congressionally-mandated Active Component to Reserve Component (AC/RC) training program has drawn the most BQ captains. Armor has been a priority branch — we have now leveled-off with 154 officers in designated positions — because of the number of Armor units in the reserves. Our officers (and NCOs) assigned have done a magnificent job improving the readiness of the Reserve Component, and the great majority assigned have reported positive experiences. But even though assignment to the program has provided both professional development and improved readiness, Armor Branch and the Armor Center worked hand-in-hand to provide rationale — to the highest level of the Army — to reduce the manpower requirements of the AC/RC program. It appears that is forthcoming.

Majors. Placing majors into branch qualifying positions is critical. However, the Military Education Level, 4 (MEL-4) distribution requirements and the Officer Distribution Plan (ODP) both significantly influence the branch's ability to assign majors to the limited number of BQ positions now available in our Armor and Cavalry units.

Each year, between 45-50 Armor officers graduate from the Command and General Staff College, and the Major's AO distributes these officers according to needs of the Army and the officer's professional development requirements. Given that there are 93 S3/XO positions in the various TOE and TDA units in the Armor Force, and most majors are assigned to any given location for two years, BQ opportunities are quickly filled. Additionally, the demands of "fair-sharing" other commands with officers in the grade of major (various staffs,

TDA organizations, functional areas, AC/RC, etc.) under the ODP are such that officers who are not MEL-4 qualified — either through the resident or non-resident course — are assured of not being assigned to a unit in one of the desired BQ positions (since the ODP for non-troop units demand a fair share, and this subsequently impacts on the ODP at troop locations). For that reason, Armor Branch has repeatedly suggested that officers who have not been selected for the resident CGSC after the first look enroll and complete the non-resident instruction. While not guaranteeing an immediate assignment to a branch qualifying position, chances improve significantly.

Numerous officers whose performance at the major's grade indicate battalion command potential will receive offers for duty in joint headquarters after becoming branch qualified, for two reasons. Primarily, if the officer is eventually selected for battalion command, the major years are the most opportune time to receive joint qualification. Secondly, joint experience gained during the major years will allow the officer to receive later assignments in joint critical billets, those more senior assignments that require previous expertise in joint operations. The point is this: becoming "joint qualified," while necessary for reaching flag rank, is not a requirement for all officers. The AOs at Armor Branch are very selective in placing those with the most potential in these joint billets, and will discuss the rationale for such with each officer.

Lieutenant Colonel. LTCs who wear Armor brass are usually interested in only one thing: What is my potential for command? While understanding that command is considered by most to be the pinnacle of success — and it is that position most should strive toward — availability of these key positions in Armor is limited, and those who are selected are an extremely fortunate and privileged lot. Let me explain.

For the FY98 Command Board, Armor had 27 available commands. There was a total of 217 eligible for those limited number of opportunities, and 71 officers were considered for the first time. Of those eventually chosen, several were second-, third-, and one was a fourth-time select; in effect, all files received equal consideration. Being intimately familiar with all of the files, and knowing most of the officers selected, it is my opinion that we have extremely capable and worthy officers scheduled to command our nation's soldiers in 1998. But I will also contend that we had a boatload of great officers not selected for com-

mand who will continue to serve the Army and the branch in other important areas. The issue boils down to numbers of flags available and the size of our force. The numbers for the odd-numbered fiscal years are even more restrictive; for FY99, there are a mere 19 armor battalions and cavalry squadrons opening.

However, two new initiatives will add to that number of command opportunities. The CSA recently approved a recommendation made by the OPMS XXI study group to add USAREC battalion commands to the command selection list (CSL). As with garrison and base support battalion commands, USAREC commands will be distributed among branches to level command opportunity; Armor should receive at least a few of these units. The CSA has, in effect, made clear the importance of selecting quality officers to command USAREC battalions and lead officers and NCOs in building tomorrow's Army. Additionally, the CSA has also approved a test program to place active component officers in command of National Guard battalions under the AC/RC program. This test will begin with two FY 98 commands (one Armor and one Field Artillery). By the time this article is published, the fortunate Armor officer who will command this great unit will have been chosen, and my belief (and hope) is that this program will expand.

But what about those not receiving the nod to command? I can honestly say that during my tenure at Branch, those officers who were not selected, but who "soldiered on" doing the tough jobs that keep our force viable, were some of the most professional. AC/RC battalion commanders, USAREC battalion commanders, ROTC PMSs, senior staff officers and joint warfighters serving tough tours in higher headquarters and in short tour areas, and others all continued to selflessly serve our force. Those who were not expert in some functional area knew their potential for further promotion was limited, but they all contributed to operational readiness and in most cases it was the Armor officers who — by their nature — remained the linchpin in most organizations.

Colonels. While I was assigned to PERSCOM as the Armor Branch Chief, I had very little influence on the assignment of Armor colonels; that was under the responsibility of Colonels Division, a separate directorate in the headquarters that managed the assignment of all Army colonels. But as I departed Armor Branch, the dissolution of the colonel's assignment branch within PERSCOM was nearing completion. In effect, the

plan was for all the various branches to regain the files of their O6s. While this was initially an administrative migraine for the new branch chief, LTC Joe Orr and his colonels' assignment officer now report this system has several advantages. Primarily, managing the colonels' assignments provides the branch the ability to seek the specific jobs that will contribute to the health of the branch while these officers also continue to serve the Army — there is a better match in getting the officer to the right job at the right place. This is a critical requirement in advantaging our Armor colonels for their further professional development; it helps them to reach the general officer level that will, in turn, advantage the force as a whole.

New Programs. While the majority of any Branch Chief's time is consumed ensuring the professional development and proper assignment of the force, several related issues concerning personnel management came to the forefront during my tenure in PERSCOM. Two of these new matters require some discussion: the new OER and the potential implications of the recently approved OPMS XXI study.

Within the last few months, many raters and senior raters have been busy completing close-out Officer Efficiency Reports, using the DA 67-8 for the final time. Those who know the history of that form are aware that it has served our Army well, lasting over 15 years, far exceeding all expectations and previous iterations of efficiency reports in staving off inflated ratings. But a few years ago, with the downsizing of the Army and a continuing rise in inflated ratings, that began to change, and a small team started on the design of a new efficiency report. Since May 1997, Mr. Jack Miller and the team charged with creating the new DA 67-9 have been thorough in marketing this newly designed form. They have sent briefing teams all over the world to ensure officers, raters, and senior raters have had the chance to ask all the pertinent questions and become familiar with the new rating system.

As the briefing teams completed their scheduled visits in early September, PERSCOM began using other tools to continue educating the Army on the new system. Unit training programs with CD-ROMs were mailed to all units. Senior leader training packets were sent to all general officers, and this initial distribution will be followed by more packets sent to major activities, field commanders, personnel service battalions, military personnel divisions and all installation video libraries. *The OER Guide*, DA

PAM 623-105, will be published as a "how-to" manual for the new evaluation system, and it will be distributed to all Army, joint and DOD activities. Additionally, the "OER Home Page" was established as a sub-directory of "PERSCOM On Line" in late August (www.perscom.army.mil). Certainly, the transition from the old OER to the new DA 67-9 has been the most advertised in the history of the form, and the training packets have been the most extensive.

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The new OER form addresses all those shortcomings that needed "tweaking" in the old OER. The new form also has some very innovative characteristics that will improve on the old report. But its success will depend on the ability of leaders — officers who are rated, raters, and senior raters — to do the things they are supposed to do. Those who are supposed to counsel, train, and translate our culture to new officers must do so with vigor and dedication. Those who are charged with rating and senior rating officers must take the time for mentoring and educating subordinates as to what is expected of them. Everyone knows many paid lip service to our responsibilities during the life of the DA 67-8-1; we cannot afford to do the same under the new system.

But even before the new form was published and the briefing teams began their travels, I began receiving queries concerning the new system for the "block check." Specifically, some folks wanted to know what I thought about the new OER, and if I had figured out a way to "beat" the system. I told them that I believed the new OER was well-designed, that I could not see any way of "beating" the new block check system, and that the new form will allow senior raters to differentiate between those who they believed were their very best without disadvantaging the others. Additionally, I told those asking, the new OER had some other improved features — such as the section to comment on where the officer could best serve the Army and an expanded section to comment on potential, values, and professional competen-

cies — that would supplement the block check.

Having said that, will the new OER cause the majority of our officer corps to receive other than top block ratings? By design, yes. Will this, in the short term, cause anxiety and concern among officers who have always received top block reports? Absolutely, but unnecessarily so. Having seen mostly inflated OERs with top-block center of mass reports that did not help — and in many cases actually hurt — some of the very best in our ranks during my two years at PERSCOM, it is time for everyone to tell it like it should be told. The very design of this new form — which has myriad features by which to judge competence and potential and which levels the playing field throughout the Army — will not disadvantage anyone. It will, however, allow senior raters to differentiate between the very best and everyone else, and that will only help our officers have a more accurate feel for where they stand. The new OER is a good one, and it will be a winner.

OPMS XXI. In July 1996, General Reimer convened the Officer Professional Management System (OPMS) XXI Task Force to review and update the Army's way of conducting personnel management. In a nutshell, their purpose was to ensure OPMS would remain responsive to future challenges. During the last year of my tour at PERSCOM, all in Armor Branch were actively involved in providing information and sustaining dialogue with those on the task force. As with any task force gathering information, there were times when Armor (and other branches) was able to forward issues and these suggestions were incorporated in the plan, and there were times when the members of the task force did not accept our proposals. Regardless, the CSA approved the new concept in July 1997, and as of 1 October 1997, the OPMS Task Force began implementing the program.

OPMS XXI will change the details of how officers are managed, developed, and promoted. Specifically, there will be designations of "career fields" with distinct grouping of branches and functional areas that will reflect what the task force considered to be the needs of the Army today and into the future.

All Army Competitive Category Officers will be assigned a career field after selection for promotion to major. Additionally, several new functional areas will be created (and FA 54 and FA 41 will be eliminated) to address changing requirements in the Army of the 21st Century.

Officers will compete only with officers in similar career fields for promotion to lieutenant colonel and colonel. All officers promoted to major will undergo some type of resident MEL-4 education, and all officers selected to colonel will attend some type of resident MEL-1 course. While these are the primary concepts presented during the redesign, the intricacies of the details associated with each concept and the timeline for incorporation are still being developed by the members of the planning group. Obviously, the OPMS Task Force is coordinating its ongoing actions with those who will be charged to execute the new system, those who work assignment and professional development within PERSCOM (i.e., the branches).

A word of advice for all Armor officers: Stay acquainted with what is occurring as the OPMS XXI process moves forward, as career satisfaction will depend on making informed choices. The OPMS XXI Task Force has an excellent web page (www.army.mil/opms) with great information, and their public affairs effort is extensive. It is critical that all Armor officers know the influence that schools, assignments, chain of command counseling, comments on the new OER, career field designation, and functional area preferences will have on eventual career patterns and — most importantly — career field assignment and service to the nation. Do not let a short-term advantage potentially influence your long-range career desires.

In the May-June 1997 issue of this very magazine, *ARMOR*'s editor made an interesting commentary in his "Stand To" column concerning the system and culture we currently have for judging our officer corps. If something as simple as the official photograph has become a key discriminator for judging the quality of our officer corps, LTC Blakely seemed to be saying, then we're going to have problems bringing about the cultural change we need for our 21st Century Army.

To an extent, I concur with LTC Blakely's assertion. However, the official photograph is only an indicator of an officer's professionalism, pride, and attention to detail. The same is true of the quality of his entire file, the correctness of his officer record brief (ORB) and his eagerness to do the things — duty well-performed, required, or additional institutional professional development — believed to be necessary characteristics for the leaders of our nation's soldiers. Having said that, none of these things — not even something as seemingly trivial as an impeccable official photograph — will take care of itself.

We are all taught from commissioning that we are "our own best personnel managers." From my experience, this boils down to two requirements: take care of the details, and serve well in whatever duty assigned. I would like to address these two requirements in more detail.

Taking care of administration is relatively simple. First of all — probably much to the chagrin of LTC Blakely and others — I would suggest that everyone ensure they have a current official photograph that shows your professionalism and your pride in service to the country. Wear a good looking uniform, ensure all your awards and decorations are straight and are in accordance with the regulations, and have a friend (or preferably a meticulous NCO) check it out before sending it to Armor Branch. I know this is surprising to our warriors out there, but we have seen a lot of strange things in the area of official photographs. For example, close to 50 percent of our 1LTs going before the promotion board for captain in 1997 did not have an official photo. Some of our major's — who had great files — going before the LTC board last year still had black and white 1LT photos as their most recent. Additionally, many who only get their photos updated before promotion boards do not understand they are sometimes used for things other than these boards (like nominations for assignments). I have a few stories about Armor officers who did not get a great job because they could not get us an updated photo on time.

Just as important, ensure your Officer Record Brief paints the correct picture of your career progression; these, too, are used both in promotion boards and in assignment considerations. Ask for a copy of your OER microfiche to ensure all your reports are appropriately filed and in sequence. Finally, when completing your DA 67-9-1 (and related forms under the new OER system), do more than just copy the form handed down by the officer who served in the position before you. Remember that the majority of those who sit on promotion and command boards are not of our branch, so they must have a complete picture of the demands associated with any Armor or Cavalry assignment. By the way, I believe that our leadership should become a little more involved in "checking" the details" for their subordinates in all of these administrative areas.

Now, serving and doing your duty in whatever assignment you receive is another requirement that I believe needs discussion within our ranks. On several occasions during my tenure as Branch

Chief, I received phone calls from individuals who wanted to know what they "should do next to help their promotion potential" or to complain that an assignment was not "good for their career." I was always interested in what they thought their promotion potential currently was, or why they thought the particular assignment they were in line for was not good for their career. I received some interesting replies.

The point is this: ambition is a great thing in a professional soldier, as long as the ambition is linked to talent and preparation and is directed at serving the nation. As the branch chief, there were occasions when I saw officers blinded by ambition alone, and that is not a good thing for our force or our profession. As I said earlier in the article, there are many requirements for Armor officers. During the two years I served at Armor Branch, I never saw one that did not contribute significantly in some way to serving our nation. All are important, and if performed well, all will contribute in some way to further professional development. No job — in and of itself — will serve as a detriment to promotion or career advancement. Armor officers need to continue to focus on how to do well in whatever assignment they are given, not what that next assignment is.

Another interesting phenomena I observed was an increasing occurrence — especially at the more junior ranks — of officers asking for "help" in the assignment process. When not satisfied with an assignment or a location, or in attempting to gain an advantage before an assignment is even offered, a growing percentage of our force is requesting senior officer influence and involvement in the assignment process. In my view, this is totally unprofessional and shows a lack of honesty and trust. As long as selfless service to nation — and not personal gain — remains the primary reason our Army exists, those wearing the Armor brass must lead the way in stomping out this type of careerism.

This article has been a long one, and it only touches on some of the demanding issues addressed during the two years I served at Armor Branch. In tackling many of the challenges during that time, I learned a lot — sometimes more than I wanted to know! But the best education I received came every day talking to the great Armor and Cavalry officers who make up our force. They are preparing for the day when they are asked to fight for our nation, because they know that when Armor and Cavalry are on the ground, America means business!