

# It's Time for a True Regimental System

by Colonel Guy C. Swan III

Many who have chosen to be professional soldiers have remained on active duty partly because of the kinship felt with the units in which they served. Each of us has been assigned to a unit that we wished we could serve with for our entire careers. It's one of the intangibles that keeps us in the service in an era of competing (and often more lucrative) financial compensation packages in the civilian world. The notion of being part of a committed team is a strong motivator and something that's nearly impossible to replicate in civilian life.

As our Army embarks on its aggressive transformation campaign, we must capitalize on unique aspects of military life that have special appeal to soldiers and can't be duplicated anywhere else at any price. Exploiting these niches is vital if we are to attract and retain the quality professionals needed to man the kind of force envisioned by the Army's senior leaders. One way to do this is to re-look the regimental system and build one in which soldiers spend the bulk of their careers assigned to a particular organization. Enabling soldiers across the force to develop deep personal and professional bonds with comrades and with the history and traditions of their units is a benefit that far outweighs mere monetary rewards. Sure, pay and benefits are important to all soldiers, but let's face it, we will never reach parity with civilian counterparts. We need something more.

**The Changing Strategic Environment.** One of the factors driving the Army's transformation process is the recognition that we are likely to face a myriad of military missions across the spectrum of conflict in coming decades. Virtually all missions will be executed in a come-as-you-are fashion. Whether it's responding to a small-scale contingency mission or winning a major theater war, the Army has set in place extremely challenging deployment timelines that can only be met by highly trained and ready units. With goals of deploying a brigade combat team anywhere in the world in 96 hours and up to 5 divisions in 30 days, there will be no time for extensive train-up periods to mitigate the personnel turbulence that has plagued the Army for decades. Leaders will find themselves taking their units into more and more unpredictable environments where individual soldier actions and small unit operations will have strategic significance. These missions will demand soldier self-discipline and unit cohesion on a scale never before seen. Further, soldiers will be deployed frequently to places where it may be difficult to understand the reasons they are there, or what national interests are at stake. Stability like that found in a regimental system is rapidly becoming a necessity for combat effectiveness. Only organizations that have strong unit identities will be able to function in these potentially ambiguous strategic (and tactical) situations.

Clearly, unit cohesion is one benefit of implementing a regimental system, but stabilizing soldiers assigned to the regiment provides a host of other benefits to the Army. For example, modernization efforts would be significantly streamlined. Eliminating personnel turbulence could actually speed the integration of and training on new systems. Further, it would ease the management of soldiers who have received special training or skills — for example, no more problems tracking digitized soldiers who PCS to non-digitized units.

Operational tempo equity would be enhanced because deployments, both to peace operations and wartime missions, could be distributed more equitably among units. No longer would we have the individual soldier who deploys for six months to Haiti with the 10th Mountain Division, then is reassigned to the 1st Infantry Division only to deploy again immediately for another 180 days to Bosnia. Unit deployments would help us get a grip on this quality-of-life and retention sore point. Restationing an entire unit, while disruptive for a short period, would be preferable to the recurring disruption that units face with 10-15% quarterly personnel turnover. Clearly, standing war plans and CONPLANs would be affected by unit rotations. But the Army already routinely adjusts and substitutes units in CINC war plans today to account for modernization initiatives and peacekeeping missions. The point is that deployment predictability at the individual soldier level would be enhanced by a regimentally driven rotation plan.

**Evolving Army Structure.** Now that we are making a conscious shift to brigade combat teams as the focal point of our Army's future, the time is perfect to capture the history of the great regiments that have served the Army for so long. Divisions will still retain their planning and warfighting roles, but underpinning the division would be a strong "regimental combat team" structure. We are already doing this in great units like the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, where the regimental structure has already been captured by the historic parachute infantry outfits. Other units, like the armored cavalry regiments, also have similar strong regimental identities — we need to capitalize on this now.

Another measurable benefit of long-term identification with a particular unit is the promotion of "elite" professionalism within the unit. Outfits like today's special operations units — the 75th Ranger Regiment, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, and the Special Forces — take full advantage of their uniqueness as a combat multiplier and take their heritage seriously, focusing on it during the reception and indoctrination of new soldiers and leaders. Soldiers in these units are made to feel part of an extraordinary group of warriors and are expected to meet standards and safeguard traditions. The Army has downsized to the point that we really need to ask the question — why not have all soldiers feel that their unit is an elite warfighting organization?

Discussions of regimental systems normally revolve around combat arms organizations. However, special branch/combat support branch/combat service support branch soldiers could also retain their regimental ties to the specialized branch corps (Judge Advocate General Corps, Signal Corps, Transportation Corps, Quartermaster Corps, etc.) much like other armies do. Specialists would then be detailed to combat units as required or serve in branch-specific units (corps signal battalion, military intelligence battalion, etc.).

**Family Support.** Always a command challenge, family support is a built-in fact of regimental life. The regiment by its very nature becomes a family and fosters teamwork among family members. Long-term lasting relationships are a key quality-of-

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life benefit of the regiment. The result would be a reduction in the transient nature of our antiquated individual replacement system, a system that often leaves young military families feeling as though they must go it alone. Additionally, how many commanders and CSMs have been severely beaten by their chains of command over poor sponsorship programs? Again, the stability afforded by permanent assignment to a regimental unit would mitigate this problem significantly. Unit moves would enable families to help each other rather than suffer the individualized pain we all go through during a PCS move. I'm convinced that economies of scale could be realized for the Army if we conducted most personnel transfers as unit moves, rather than letting thousands of individual moving contracts.

**Maintenance of Training Standards.** Some might think that universal training standards would suffer if the Army went to a regimental system — some units would train well, while others would not. Training standards across the Army would be maintained through our proven CTC program, service schools, and joint exercises that emphasize common doctrinal approaches to warfighting. Maintenance of an Army-wide training base would continue to foster common training standards for soldiers entering the force. Likewise, professional military education would remain centralized and the regiment would decide who goes and when. But by keeping soldiers in their units for the majority of their careers, small units would be able to perfect SOPs and TTPs rather than always having to retrain at square one to account for a constantly changing personnel picture.

**Promotion and Advancement.** Contrary to what one might automatically think, upward mobility of soldiers and leaders would not be affected. Of course, the accountants will disagree, but I would suggest that leadership opportunities for enlisted soldiers and officers would remain strong. And based on current recruiting trends, perhaps it's appropriate to build into a new regimental system a means to allow some troopers who are not inclined to pursue leadership positions to remain in their current grade and duty position for extended periods. Why not let a junior enlisted tank driver or a mid-career NCO remain in position instead of forcing him or her into an up-or-out situation that drains expertise in key skill areas? A competitive scheme of upward mobility should be instituted that includes rigorous, standardized competency and performance testing regimes to identify the best leaders in the regiment using Army-wide standards. Then units would be led by those who are truly motivated to be leaders and are willing to meet the standards to do so.

One knock on how other armies execute their regimental system is the unfounded notion that soldiers are "marked" early in their regimental careers as either good soldiers or poor soldiers, which then dictates their standing within the unit for many years. The opposite is actually the fact. Soldiers joining a regiment for the bulk of their careers are more inclined to strive to be the best they can be to ensure that they make good impressions on leaders and, more importantly, on comrades within the regiment. Further, if we look at extended service in grade and duty position, we would ameliorate anxiety among troopers who feel obligated to compete in an up or out career pattern, thereby fostering higher levels of professionalism and expertise in critical duty positions. Similarly, the pride of ownership among troopers in the regiment is enhanced and fosters an overall upturn in individual and unit performance within "my regiment."

I have heard the argument that frequent personnel moves are actually a strength of the U.S. Army — new blood and all that — and that we need the turnover to get quality people into the unit. But we already have good people in our units. Downsizing

has eliminated the large majority of poor performers and left us with a cadre of solid leaders and good soldiers. We need to build on that. New people do bring new ideas and re-ignite things in a unit — true enough — but at a cost. The price of turbulence is much too high today in terms of unit readiness, quality of life, retention, etc. Under the regimental system, soldiers rotate in and out of units frequently to attend professional schools or to serve in other non-tactical assignments, thereby providing the "new (actually refreshed) blood" to the regiment.

**Other Army Requirements.** How will we fill all those nominative, non-troop duty assignments? This is easily handled by detailing officers and NCOs from the regiment to periodic assignments in the institutional or infrastructure side of the Army. AC/RC support, recruiting duty, observer/controller assignments, drill sergeant duty, service school instructor, or joint duty would be distributed by unit and factored into unit personnel management decisions, along with internal staff and command assignments. The bottom line here is that the unit's chain of command, not some large impersonal bureaucracy, makes these crucial manning calls in a manner that sustains day-to-day combat readiness.

Finally, in the spirit of the Army taking care of its own, a regimentally-based Army promotes lifelong associations. Strong ties with veterans is a healthy thing for the force and for the nation. Regimental affiliation would carry on long after active military service in an almost fraternal manner. The nomadic, transient Army of today undermines allegiance to the history and traditions of many great units. This can only be preserved through strong regimental attachments, not by soldiers who are just passing through. Anyone who has had the opportunity to meet and share stories with the World War II or Vietnam veterans who served in the same outfit can't help but be moved by the common experiences soldiers share across generations. You can't get that in civilian life at any salary.

Some will say the Army can only take so much change at once (medium weight brigades, 100% manning directives, OPMS XXI, EPMS XXI, etc.), and that's true. Certainly there are many details to be worked out to make this fundamental change in the way we do business — and there will be many naysayers. But when it comes to an issue that could have such a profound effect on the quality of our people and the readiness of our Army, nothing can be of higher priority. The time is right to rejuvenate the regimental system.

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