

Letters

Dear Editor,

When the U.S. Army enlarged the 11B (basic infantry) career field by abolishing the 11H (heavy weapons / motorized) and 11M (mechanized) military-occupation specialty (MOS) codes in 2001, its reasoning was that 11H and 11M noncommissioned officers (NCOs) lacked career opportunities as the U.S. Army shrank from 18 divisions in 1990 to 10 divisions by 2001. Of the eight divisions inactivated, five were mechanized. To the Army's credit, this reasoning was sound, logical and in the best interests of Soldiers; career opportunities for infantrymen who could serve in infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) units such as 10th Mountain Division and 82nd Airborne Division were far greater at higher ranks than Soldiers who were confined to the Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV). Our experience and reliance on light forces in Afghanistan and Iraq during the next decade seemed to further prove the Army had made the right decision at the right time.

Twenty years later, it is time to revisit the underlying assumptions that guided this decision. While the amount of armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) is even smaller than it was in 2001, institutional training and memory have atrophied faster than the reduction in force. Also, the Army is in the process of converting select brigades back to the ABCT and has already inactivated the fourth brigade of all its divisions, many of which were light organizations. Therefore, it is time to bring back specialization within the Infantry Branch – the 11M MOS for Soldiers on the BFV and 11S for Soldiers on the Stryker family of vehicles.

Yes, what's old is what's new again. But that isn't a bad thing. History and international relations are a repetitive cycle, and fiscal realities dictate that we can only focus on certain things at a time. The time has come again for the Army to focus on large-scale combat operations (LSCO) and the near-peer threat. We do this by focusing our attention on heavy mechanized forces.

Splitting Strykers and Bradleys into distinct MOSs offers four distinct advantages. First, it guarantees leader proficiency in the platform in which they become a section or squad leader, or a platoon sergeant. Second, it improves morale by allowing our NCOs more control over their careers, duty stations and assignments. No longer will units deal with a disgruntled sergeant first class who was sent to a unit equipped with a platform they're not proficient in. Third, it increases collective knowledge on the system to offset the limited number of master gunners that can be trained every year. Finally, giving the platforms their own MOS codes shows that the Army values mechanized-infantry forces and encourages our best and brightest to specialize, rather than separate, after their first enlistment if they did not enjoy being a light infantryman.

For both new MOSs, Soldiers would join the Army as 11B infantryman. They would serve their first three years in the Army much like they do now – serving as dismounts in Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCT) and ABCT units, or as regular members of line squads in IBCTs. Thus, every infantryman in the U.S. Army would have a common-experience background and know whether or not the dismounted-infantry life is something they want to continue doing. Upon reaching the rank of specialist (or two years after they graduated advanced individual training, whichever came first), they would be presented with three options – end-term-of-service after their first enlistment and remain an 11B; cross-train to 11B or 11S and become a vehicle driver; or choose to re-enlist and remain an 11B. Soldiers selecting the 11M or 11S career field would be then sent to a three-week course to certify them in their new MOS.

Upon completing the course, Soldiers would return to their units (if already assigned to SBCT or ABCT formations) or move to an appropriate installation. As specialists, they would serve as vehicle drivers or gunners. As they rose in rank, they would become vehicle commanders, section sergeants and platoon sergeants. Their knowledge of the platform would never truly equalize that of a school-trained master gunner; however, their years of experience and repeated exposure to gunnery would offset the challenge.

Soldiers who elected to remain as 11B infantryman would follow the same path but with some modifications. They would still serve as dismounted fire team and squad leaders in ABCT, IBCT and SBCT units, but they would serve additional squad leader time in IBCTs prior to becoming platoon sergeants in an IBCT. Furthermore, they'd be the Army's subject-matter experts on using mine-resistant ambush protection (MRAP), humvee and Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTVs) for motorized-infantry operations. This way, by devoting the Army's IBCTs to the MRAP, humvee

and JLTV platforms, the Army could retain a high-low force mix for LSCO and low-intensity counter-insurgency conflicts.

As the Army struggles with building proficiency in its mechanized and armored forces, it needs to accept the value specialization has. The first, most tangible way it can do this is offer a new career field to Soldiers who have completed two years of service as dismounted infantrymen and wish to become technical experts in a chosen platform.

CPT GEORGE W. RUNKLE IV
III Corps command historian
Fort Hood, TX

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team

JLTV – Joint Light Tactical Vehicle

LSCO – large-scale combat operations

MOS – military-occupation specialty

MRAP – mine-resistant ambush protected

NCO – noncommissioned officer

SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team