

Building the Maneuver Center of Excellence: A Tanker's Perspective

by LTG (R) Thomas S. James Jr.

I had long heard of the "Spirit of Benning" when I received word I would become the first Armor commandant to spend my entire tour of duty at the newly relocated Armor School there in June 2011.

A career tanker, I knew I was headed to hallowed ground synonymous with infantry imagery:

- The flashing night lights of the jump towers.
- The historic streets where the resolute spouses of 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, delivered death notices after the hell that was Ia Drang.
- COL Ralph Puckett, that legend of a Ranger who, even at age 94, still embodies the charge to "Follow Me." (Puckett recently was notified he would receive the Medal of Honor for his actions in the Korean War; what he and his 50 Rangers did on Hill 205 more than 70 years ago was nothing short of incredible, repelling an entire night of armed assaults after China's unexpected full-scale entry into the war.)

My first stop upon arrival at Fort Benning was the National Infantry Museum, where I walked the "Last 100 Yards," a gut punch of a journey through some of the most significant battles in American military history ranging from Antietam Creek to Afghanistan.

It occurred to me then – as it would often in the coming year – that the American foot Soldier is a unique and special breed of warrior. But so, too, is the American tanker, those mighty mounted warriors who comprise just 4 percent of the force but a full 40 percent of our combat power.

I believed then, as I do now, that – together – these American Soldiers are unbeatable.

A synergistic maneuver force – strategically responsive and dominant across the entire spectrum of operations – ultimately results in a fighting team greater than the sum of its parts. This truth would hit me every time I walked into the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) at McGinnis-Wickam Hall, named for one young beloved Medal of Honor recipient from each branch. One of the highlights of my career would be escorting CPL Jerry Wickam's spouse and son (Jerry Jr.) during the ceremony to dedicate this great maneuver hall in his honor. His name will forever be etched in the masonry of this great facility alongside SPC Ross McGinnis, a great infantry hero.

As we moved toward that day when the Trooper of the Plains and Iron Mike would stand side by side on one of the nation's most historic Army posts, another truth became abundantly clear: our Army will never again fight as anything but a combined-arms team.

Building the team

That summer of 2011 was all about building the team.

MG Robert Brown, then commander of MCoE, and CSM James Hardy provided outstanding leadership to the Infantry School commandant Walt Piatt, the Capabilities Development and Integration Directorate director Don Sando, and me. The plan was simple yet lofty: kill all the stereotypes that separate our branches; identify and create interoperability; and build consensus among stakeholders. "One Team, One Fight" had to become more than a flashy saying. Our charge was to create an unbreakable synergy between two branches long accustomed to seeing themselves as competitive.

Then, as now, the operating environment was in flux. The nature and location of conflicts remain unpredictable and include a broad spectrum of new threats. Rogue actors and near-peer competitors demand that America fields a force that is strategically responsive and dominant across the entire spectrum of operations. In the solution space of modern warfare, it is inconceivable not to meld the doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel and facilities of the two branches that own fire and movement in close contact.

As we focused on building modular, combined-arms maneuver teams with a high degree of integration between infantry and armor forces, it was essential to determine which branches would own what roles within the maneuver construct.

Our strengths were clear. The infantry excelled at physical fitness, dismounted action, airborne and air assault. Armor and Cavalry strengths were platform gunnery and fire control, maintenance, reconnaissance and security. At platoon and below, we would be branch-specific in our training. At company and above, the modern battlefield demanded we be maneuver-centric.

Yet even as we built the world's premier maneuver center, deepening the ties between armor and infantry, we realized how essential it was to preserve our individual histories and to appreciate the unique capabilities and differences that make each branch so successful and lethal.

We tried a combined ball for example – unsuccessfully. Our traditions were too different; our pride in lineage too particular. We may bleed a common crimson but we still loved our light infantry blue and Armor yellow. So the infantry kept their annual Doughboy Dinner; Armor held firm to their Saint George.

Our Armor artifacts came to Benning looking for a home. I often joked with my infantry brothers that the post wouldn't have room for our Armor Museum anyway – it'd take a massive space to depict "the last 3,000 meters!" Today we occupy a bay in the National Infantry Museum and built an Armor Training Support Facility to house our museum's rolling stock.

Win at point of contact

The great Armor leader LTG George Patton once said, "Americans play to win." Our current Army Chief of Staff has distilled that same sentiment into two words: "Winning matters."

The character of war is on the cusp of fundamental change with future conflicts that are likely to be large-scale and highly lethal, unlike anything our Army has experienced since World War II. It is critically important, therefore, to develop technically competent and confident maneuver leaders (regardless of branch) who are grounded in leadership, display basic technical and tactical skill proficiency, are physically and mentally fit, and embody the Warrior ethos.

The heart of all this is small-unit leadership. It is at company and platoon level where our troops truly learn to lead and influence, where they hone the skills to take care of people, our Army's top priority. It is here they learn to transition from the classroom environment to the real-life mission of leading America's sons and daughters, sometimes into the crucible of ground combat. Both the Armor and Infantry Schools are masters at teaching this common tenet.

But our Armor School must continue to recognize the relevant and necessary differences between our branches, teaching and honing the skills unique to an armored trooper: the initial development of technical and tactical armor and reconnaissance skills, followed by a broad focus on mounted maneuver and combined-arms warfare as troopers progress through their careers.

From our earliest days, the purpose of the Armor Branch has been to move to a position of advantage and engage and destroy our enemy in close combat by fire and movement in concert with the actions of our infantry teammates. This means we must continue to teach and emphasize lethality and actions on contact as a combined-arms team. A great example is the Master Gunner School that develops talented noncommissioned officers to become masters of fire-control systems and, more importantly, to train our Armor crews to be lethal on the battlefield.

Fit for rigors of sustained ground combat

I believe unequivocally that co-locating our Armor School with the Infantry School at Fort Benning and forming the Maneuver Center was an incredibly important decision. Uniting the forces that close with and destroy the enemy in close combat was invaluable in creating an institution that develops leaders, systems and doctrine to win at the point of contact.

All of that has come to pass, empowered by cohesive teamwork.

By training in a dynamic combined-arms environment, ground troops come to appreciate the capability of tanks and infantry in the close fight. Armor Soldiers quickly realize the importance of dismounted infantry in executing maneuver.

The benefits of training as we will fight trumps everything. Our armor and infantry troops now cross-train as a matter of course. Culminating training events are almost never one-branch events; armor and infantry lieutenants and captains plan and execute as a team. All this creates better leaders with a complex understanding of all their maneuver assets and abilities in close combat. They speak a common maneuver language born of a common maneuver experience and doctrine.

Future fight

Co-locating our Armor School with the Infantry School at Fort Benning and forming MCoE is preparing our Army for the modern battlefield. As we modernize and prepare for multi-domain operations, there will always be a requirement to close with and destroy the enemy in close combat.

It is often said that the closer you get to direct fire contact, the less warfare changes. The MCoE will continue to play a critical role in developing Soldiers and leaders across the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel and facilities areas to master the fundamentals and win at the point of contact.

Patton would be the first to agree: In our business, winning matters!

LTG Thomas James, 46th Chief of Armor, has retired from the Army after last commanding First U.S. Army, Rock Island, IL. Previously he was deputy chief of staff for United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command, U.S. Forces Korea; plans officer, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, Aschaffenburg, Germany; company commander in both 66th and 68th Armor Regiments, Fort Carson, CO; aide de camp to the commanding general, 1st Armored Division, Bad Kreuznach, Germany; plans and training officer, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA; operations officer, 1st Battalion, 64th Armor and 2nd Brigade, Fort Stewart; operations and training officer, V Corps, Germany; commander, 1st Battalion, 37th Armor, Fort Riley, KS; plans officer, 1st Armored Division; chief of planning group, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Monroe, VA; commander, 4th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart; division chief of staff and deputy commander for maneuver, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart; deputy commanding general (maneuver), 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX; director, Mission Command Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS; deputy chief of staff for operations, plans and training, U.S. Army Forces Command, Fort Bragg, NC; commanding general, 7th Infantry Division, Fort Lewis, WA; and tank-platoon leader and executive officer, 37th Armor Regiment, Fort Riley. Deployments included Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn. His military schooling includes the Infantry Officer Advanced Course, Command and General Staff College, School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and National War College. LTG James holds masters' of science degrees from SAMS and the National Defense University. His awards and honors include the Army's Distinguished Service Medal, Bronze Star Medal (five awards), Legion of Merit (five awards), Meritorious Service Medal (three awards), Combat Action Badge, Parachutist Badge and Ranger Tab.

Acronym Quick-Scan

MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence

OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom

SAMS – School of Advanced Military Studies