

Engagement Criteria: Thoughts on Armor, Cavalry in 2020s Interwar Period

by LTC Josh Suthoff

Large-scale combat operations (LSCO) are continuing to evolve at a rapid pace. To maintain relevance, Armor officers must continue to adapt. More important than the platforms from which we fight, Armor officers must be positioned and ready to lead in the future conflict. We cannot afford to train for past combat scenarios where air and logistical overmatch was guaranteed. The next conflict will not be an Operation Iraqi Freedom invasion or Operation Desert Storm repeat. It will be a conflict where winning in the opening engagement will be decisive.

Will Armor officers be positioned to lead in the next conflict? Recent promotion and command selection boards have all shown a downturn for the Armor Branch. We must reverse this trend as a branch and build the right leaders for the future.

Armor officers are the original masters of chaos. It is awe-inspiring when you consider the level of responsibility and firepower that Armor officers lead and synchronize. From a combined-arms battalion (CAB) unleashing its direct-fire power to a troop engaging with both organic and Joint fires, the available combat power and its synchronization is impressive. Starting with the Armor Basic Officer Leader Course and throughout follow-on courses, we teach Armor officers to synchronize all warfighting functions and anticipate transitions across huge swaths of battlespace.

Therefore Armor officers are in high demand at the Army-enterprise level and for nominative assignments because of our ability to frame the battlefield and build teams across warfighting functions. LSCO remains the primary mission for the U.S. Army, and Armor is purpose-built and trained for this task. With that said, Armor officers must still fight to maintain their competitiveness and relevancy across the Army. We must maintain our edge with LSCO, but also increase our experience in ongoing lower-intensity conflicts and U.S. military organizations that lead U.S. efforts in these conflicts.

First, a few myths

Myth: Armor officers do not perform well outside of armored brigade combat teams (ABCT). *False.* The truth is that Armor officers, especially majors, perform well at the brigade level in Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCT) and infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs). This selection speaks to the problem-solving and organizational leadership that Armor officers bring to the fight.

Only 25 percent of the Armor officers selected for tactical battalion command in fiscal year (FY) 2022 have served exclusively in ABCTs. The other selected officers served in SBCTs or IBCTs once or multiple times. The FY21 tactical centralized selection list (CSL) population with exclusive ABCT experience trended closer to 50 percent. In Stryker and light-infantry formations an Armor officer can stay above the competitive fray of multiple infantry officers and also provide the commander a different point of view and mental construct. Armor officers bring the positive attributes expected in these type of formations but must also be ready to physically perform in these BCT types.

The concern for officers is when they remain in those types of formations for multiple assignments. Would these same officers succeed if assigned to an ABCT? The friction for progression becomes more apparent for officers who serve in these formations for squadron command. For example, officers who have served only in IBCT squadrons would need very strong files to compete against their infantry peers for command of an IBCT, should they choose to compete for that type of BCT. Conversely, it is hard to justify slating a highly specialized officer into formations where they have limited skills and experience.

Myth: Armor officers must specialize in a BCT type to be successful. *Depends on the officer.* Specialization vs. generalization is something the Armor Branch has periodically changed its position on. The current position is that officers should serve in the BCT for which they have a passion. "Turret time" or forced slating of officers to an ABCT is not the right way to manage talent, and the Armor Branch halted the practice before the introduction of the Army Talent-Alignment Process (ATAP).

However, I would argue that broadening in other BCTs will ultimately develop a better officer for the BCT in which they have the passion to serve. Recent battalion CSL results appear to show that officers with at least some varied BCT experience will perform better than highly specialized peers.

Figure 1 conceptualizes how officers perform and what skills they develop in each BCT type. The traits, skills and experiences learned are not concrete or all-inclusive but provide a picture of key areas. For example, officers serving in IBCTs will likely plan more vertical operations (airborne, air movement) than officers serving in an ABCT. Officers in SBCTs will be exposed to a level of maintenance and sustainment that will provide them a better footing if their next assignment is an ABCT. Not all officers are created equal, and the generalization crosscut shows the risk when moving from different BCT types, especially opposite spectrums like A to I or vice versa.

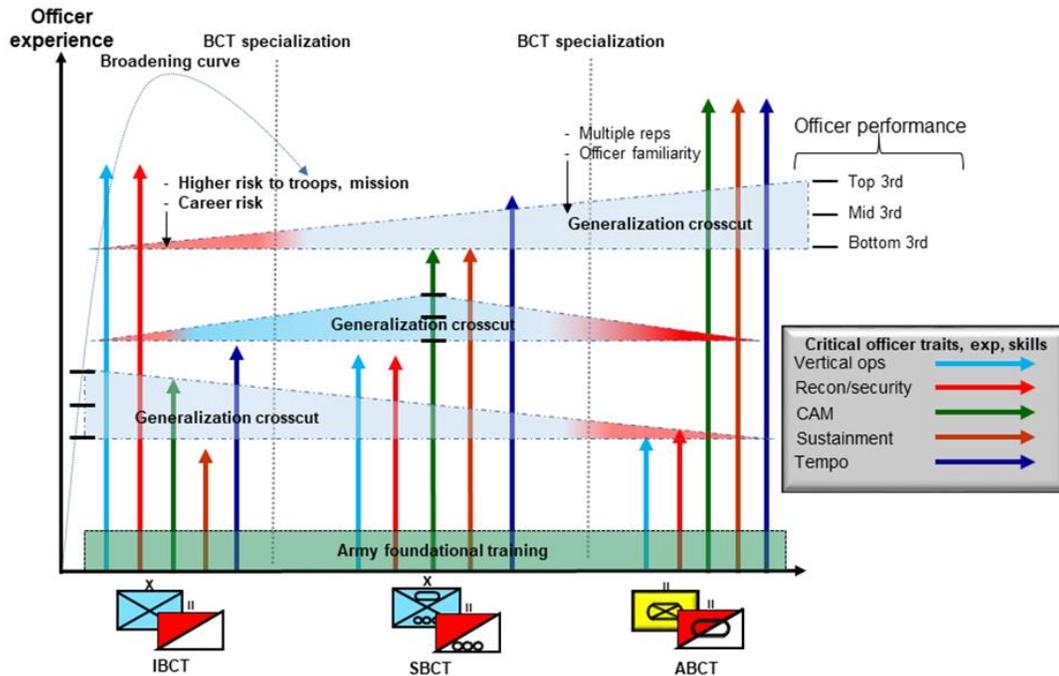


Figure 1. Specialization and generalization of Armor officers.

The broadening curve is worth more discussion. As the broadening curve depicts, multiple broadening assignments, especially enterprise or Joint, can create officers who are unfamiliar and out of touch with their base branch. BCT commanders need officers who are, first, tactically competent to lead in combat or plan realistic and efficient training; broadening remains secondary. Officers and their families need breaks from high-operational-tempo BCT assignments, but the type of broadening the Armor Branch and the Army supports need to be reassessed.

The broadening opportunities developed for Global War on Terrorism officers are not likely the best for developing LSCO proficient officers. Assignments to combat-training centers (CTCs) and centers of excellence can provide both family time and broaden an officer's understanding of LSCO, expose them to different tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), teach them best practices and enable them to reflect on applying this knowledge to past experiences.

Myth: Officers must get to a Joint assignment. *Sometimes true.* Most majors and lieutenant colonels believe their next broadening assignment must be to a Joint staff. Joint is required for general officers (GOs), and brigade slating guidance stresses the importance of seating Joint-qualified officers. Although officers should never decline an opportunity, it can be a waste of time and energy for officers who are not within the top 10 percent of their cohort to pursue a Joint assignment. First, the rating chain in a Joint staff can be unclear and potentially further weaken an officer's file. There is no guarantee that senior raters can or will provide the requisite "most qualified" reports to strengthen a file.

Armor majors and lieutenant colonels must do some internal reflection and truly see themselves before pursuing a Joint assignment. Officers should talk to Armor Branch, mentors and their rating chain to truly understand their file strength and determine the best course of action for their next assignment. The best advice to give an inbound officer headed to a key and developmental position (KD) is that “broadening will work itself out.” While in KD, officers must focus on honing their organization leadership and maneuver competencies. Armor officers cannot lose track of the fact that broadening is doubled-edged. These assignments are designed for retention, but they also serve to develop future Army senior leaders.

As Figure 2 captures, post-major KD and battalion CSL assignments are likely the most critical moves a competitive officer will make. Decisions have to be made by an officer to increase or maintain competitiveness. If an officer wants to be competitive, he or she must consider other options besides the often-sought-after nominative and Joint positions.

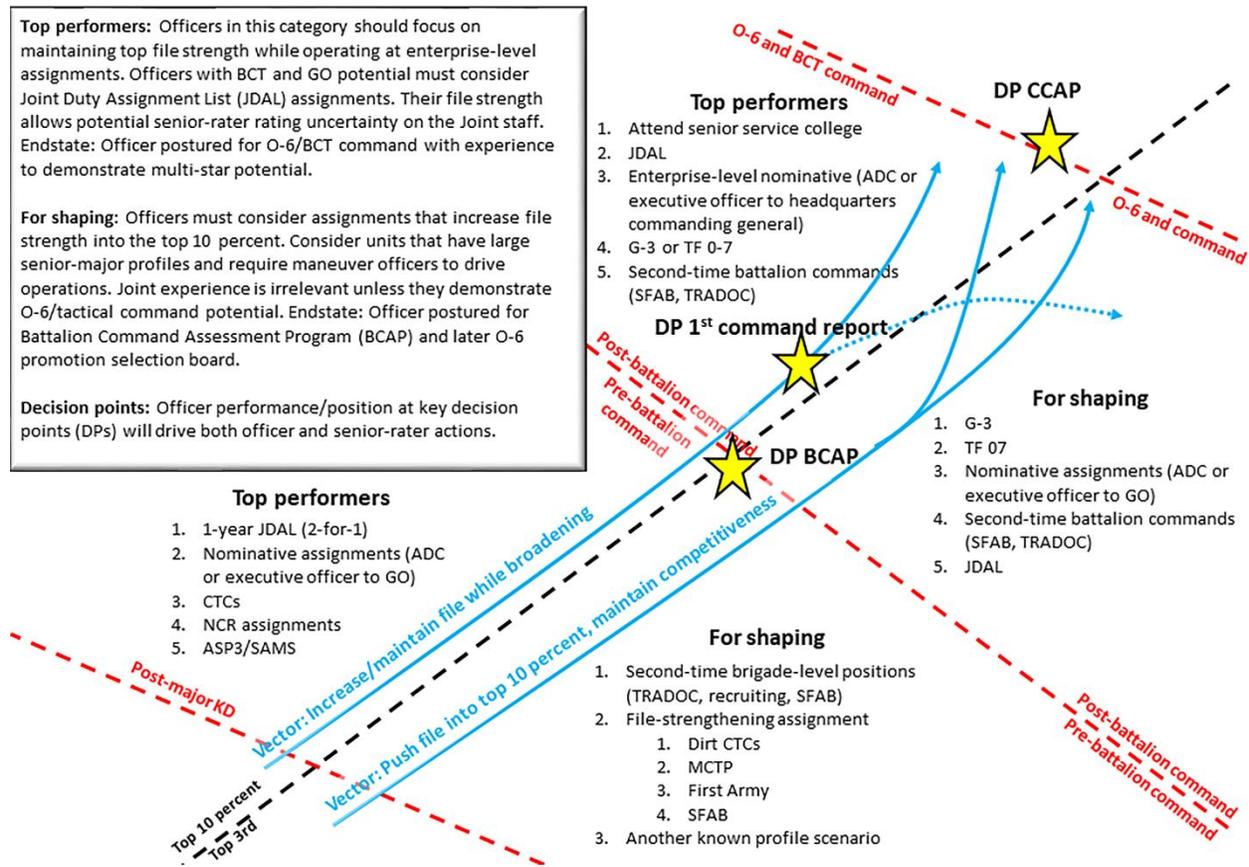


Figure 2. Assignment logic for majors and lieutenant colonels.

Senior raters must also do their part. Officers who show senior-level potential must have the applicable reports to compete against other branches for promotion and command selection. Clearly articulated reports with exclusive enumeration remain the easiest way to keep an officer with high potential in the command and promotion conversation.

Positioning branch

Going into the next 10 years, it is likely that the Armor Branch and its formations will be forced to justify its relevance in the Army. So how do we best position the branch?

Reinvestment of senior leaders in the ATAP process. If people are the Army’s No. 1 asset, senior raters and leaders must be involved in the assignment process. The biggest fallacy with the ATAP process is that the messaging disenfranchises the population it was designed to retain. All officers must understand two things when operating in the ATAP market: preference does not equal assignment of choice and the Army’s priority manning

guidance has not changed. This means high-priority units (like those at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA) will be manned first regardless of how unpopular the location or assignment is. The Army is not going to move a CTC to Eglin Air Force Base, FL, or Fort Carson, CO (two of the most-sought-after locations).

The ATAP algorithm output cannot be the mechanism that delivers an officer's assignment, and its result cannot be a surprise. Senior raters and raters need to steer officers to assignments that make sense through months of counseling and engagement. Officers coordinating with branch and their potential gaining/losing unit commands can help ensure a predictable market result and landing for an officer and his/her family. ATAP signals a culture shift from selfless service to a perceived transactional environment. We cannot lose officers to poor messaging, and we need to ensure the best officers fill priority assignments like instructor and observer/coach/trainer positions. Senior-leader involvement in assignment considerations is not wrong; it shows investment in the future.

Hardcode all squadron command positions. All reconnaissance and security squadrons need to be hardcoded commands for military-occupation specialty (MOS) 19As. The FY22 battalion CSL list will be the first time since 2005 that Armor officers compete internally for hardcoded command positions in CAB – Armor and Cavalry units within armor, Stryker and infantry brigades/battalions.

The internal category was a step in the right direction, but we should take it a step further. In an argument for a relative equal number of tactical commands, infantry retained the airborne-cavalry squadrons. If infantry wants more battalion command positions, they should argue for more infantry battalions. Restricting airborne-squadron commands to only 11A officers is a disservice to their higher headquarters and the MOS 19D trooper and junior officers who serve in those formations. The Army would not entertain this type of hardcoding outside of a branch if the formation was an artillery or sustainment battalion. If Armor is the subject-matter expert for reconnaissance and security (R&S) operations, our officers should command all battalions or squadrons with those assigned mission-essential tasks.

Armor Branch and senior leaders must continue to be involved in all developments to R&S and mounted warfare. As subject-matter experts for R&S and mounted formations, the Armor Branch needs to be the lead in developing the next generation of both vehicle and formations. The R&S squadrons will be the first in contact, and depending on the speed of war, potentially the only formation in contact. These formations need to be equipped accordingly for the future of warfare. The squadron must win or set the conditions for the supported division or corps to win the opening engagement of the next conflict.

The recent conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is not a revolution in military affairs, but it should serve as a warning for Armor officers to walk away from the hubris and narrow focus of the ABCT. The ABCT will quickly become the battleship of early World War II if we don't change course. Heavy and mounted formations could likely be overwhelmed in the tactical-assembly area by cheap enemy sensor-to-shooter solutions. We must reconsider how the ABCT arrives, and fights against and employs unmanned aerial systems (UAS), long-range fires and robots.

The idea that our cumbersome vehicles and command-and-control infrastructure will survive contact or be rapidly replaced is flawed. The Iranian shoot-down (June 20, 2019) of a U.S. RQ-4A Global Hawk UAS is a perfect example of why the Army needs manned R&S formations and all-weather scouts. Overly complex vehicles, aerial platforms and communication systems will not fare well in the arc of the enemy's anti-access, anti-denial systems. As the mobile protected firepower platform is tested and incorporated into IBCTs, Armor officers and noncommissioned officers must be in the lead to ensure it is done correctly. If we don't fight to show the relevancy of Armor and R&S in all BCTS, we will be quickly relegated to the niche-enabler corner.

Broaden Armor officers in Special-Operations Forces (SOF) and low-intensity conflict. To keep Armor officers relevant, we must look for broadening opportunities that expose them to the ongoing low-intensity conflicts by serving in SOF or involved commands. Synchronizing and planning operations in low-intensity conflict is not the same as LSCO, but it is a real-world scenario with real and deadly results, something that will never be replicated at a CTC.

In recent years, the Armor Branch has supported junior officers serving within 75th Ranger Regiment. Armor officers should not command these battalions, but broadening experiences learned there can bring valuable experience back to Armor formations and is in line with the Abrams Charter.¹ Supporting this type of broadening also shows a wider audience what an Armor officer can bring to a fight.

We should also consider allowing Special Forces officers who were once branched Armor back into the force after successful completion of detachment command. An officer with varied experience, including both heavy and SOF, could be a powerful asset.

Build a selective regiment. Another great way to retain talent and hone the mission-essential-task-list skills for Armor is to have a selective regiment. Like SOF or Ranger forces, it makes sense for the branch to have a regiment where it can train leaders and develop TTPs for the greater Armor force. The monumental task of providing an R&S formation to a corps commander in the event of LSCO cannot be left to whichever BCT is randomly assigned the mission at the Army Synchronization and Resourcing Conference.

During the 2017 R&S excursion, 1st SBCT/4th Infantry Division spent months on educational and experiential training before the culminating CTC event.² R&S operations are complex operations that require multiple iterations by professionals to ensure we get the operation right in the event of war. A selective unit would build esprit de corps and naturally draw talented and motivated officers. Officers, who upon completing their tour, could return to share their knowledge with other Armor formations.

Armor and R&S warfare is a mentality based on training and experience and not defined by a specific platform. Armor Branch's strength must be rooted in the capability and competence of its officers, but it must be relevant and applicable. LSCO in the future will not look the same as it does today or in the past, and leaders of the branch must be aware and fight to implement changes to maintain relevancy.

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Notes

¹ LTC Kent T. Woods, "Leaders trained in the Ranger battalions should return to the conventional Army to pass on their experience and expertise," **Rangers Lead the Way: The Vision of General Creighton W. Abrams**, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a415822.pdf>.

² COL Curt Taylor and MAJ Joe Byerly, "Fighting for Information in a Complex World – Lessons from the Army's First Reconnaissance and Security Brigade Combat Team," **Reconnaissance and Security Brigade Combat Team Excursion Newsletter**, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, May 2018, <https://call2.army.mil/docs/doc17682/18-19.pdf>.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
ADC – aide-de-camp
ASP3 – Advanced Strategic Studies Program
ATAP – Army Talent-Alignment Process
BCAP – Battalion Command Assessment Program
BCT – brigade combat team
CAB – combined-arms battalion
CAM – combined-arms maneuver
CCAP – Colonel Command Assessment Program
CSL – centralized selection list
CTC – combat-training center
DP – decision point
FY – fiscal year
GO – general officer

IBCT – infantry brigade combat team
JDAL – Joint Duty Assignment List
KD – key and developmental position
LSCO – large-scale combat operations
MCTP – Mission Command Training Program
MOS – military-occupation specialty
NCR – National Capitol Region
R&S – reconnaissance and security
SAMS – School of Advanced Military Studies
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team
SFAB – security-force assistance brigade
SOF – Special-Operations Forces
TF – task force
TRADOC – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command
TTP – tactics, techniques and procedures
UAS – unmanned aerial system