



Commandant's Note

MAJOR GENERAL CARL F. ERNST Chief of Infantry

Infantry at the Crossroads

This century began with Infantrymen serving as the most significant statement of American policy around the world, keeping uneasy peace in numerous locales at home and abroad, fighting low-intensity conflict in the Philippines, and engaging in coalition warfare—at times under MOUT conditions—during the Boxer Rebellion. As we prepare to enter the next century, the nation continues to call on her Infantry. Grunts still shoulder the responsibility for much of the Army's mission and will continue to do so for the immediate future. Though much has changed between scaling the walls of Peking to patrolling the streets of war torn Balkan towns, our culture remains timeless. We are the keepers of the Warrior Ethos. Our disposition and our very character must embody the mental and physical toughness required to dominate the personal and brutal close fight. This means the Infantry, more than any other branch, finds its focus and fundamental values completely on the individual Soldier. As we enter the third millennium, still at the tip of the bayonet, I believe we are at a crossroads. Together, we have some decisions to make about where to take the Infantry while staying true to our culture.

The ongoing reorganization efforts for the heavy force and the upcoming experiments to find the right modernization plan for the light forces certainly raise questions in all of us, and we want to be convinced we are doing the right thing for our Army. The complexity of modernization and the hectic pace of current operations could cloud our choices and cause us to take the wrong road. As simple as it sounds, I am convinced that keeping a steady eye on fundamentals and on our reason for being—the individual Soldier—will guide us

in our decisions. We here at the Infantry Center and School want to include you in these decisions on key issues. I would like to use this Commandant's Note to outline some of these issues for which we ask and value your input.

What is it we expect of the Infantryman of the future? We want a physically and mentally tough soldier who can ruck or ride anything to the fight and who, when he arrives, has an expected level of expertise in certain tasks and an expected level of expertise in the effective use of any number of common weapons and weapon systems. He is a Soldier who can dominate the close fight under a variety of conditions in any environment. To achieve this expectation, we have some issues to tackle.

Again, back to the fundamentals. The platoon is the basic building block of our force. The additional structure won in the reorganization of the heavy force, the 3x9 platoon, finally brings a robust and resilient rifle or maneuver element to heavy outfits. Now all Infantry platoons are organized with three squads plus an antitank capability and the ability to lay down a base of fire. The only differences among the five types of Infantry are in their mode of transport and the composition of their base of fire. The heavy platoon's base of fire are its Bradley fighting vehicles (BFVs). Airborne, Air Assault, Light, and Ranger Infantry, on the other hand, rely on weapons squads or machinegun teams for their base of fire. To be successful, our platoons must train with their three-squad maneuver element and base-of-fire element together, as a system. To this end, we offer options for the revision of training emphasis and doctrinal terminology. These options will be ex-

panded for the heavy force in an article in the next issue of Infantry and for the light force in the subsequent issue. I urge you to read these articles and tell us what you think.

Manning the platoon has always been a challenge. The percent of fill, the diversion of 11-series Soldiers to perform duties of unassigned low-density MOSs, and a variety of other reasons contribute to unmanned squads. Our Army currently has no forcing function to drive the manning of these squads. Vehicles and key weapons are crewed, low-density positions are filled, and POL trucks are manned, all with Grunts, but the maneuver elements remain weak, with essentially no tough incentive to reverse the process. Recognizing the needs of the force and keeping our eye on the horizon as we move toward the expectations of that future Infantryman, we have proposed redefining our readiness requirements in terms of training frequency for certain critical tasks and add teeth to readiness reporting for squad strength. What is the best way to define requirements and measure true readiness? No doubt a tough issue, but one we should take on. We would value your suggestions on this topic.

A first step in building this future Infantryman and developing his NCO leadership would be the convergence of the 11-series MOS. Consider no Bravo, Mike, or Hotel identifier for soldiers in the rank of Sergeant (E-5) and below. For Private through Sergeant, 72 percent of the Infantry force, every man would be a rifle Infantryman, potentially capable of trained proficiency in light and medium machineguns and light, medium, and heavy antiarmor weapons. It would open up tremendous assignment opportunities and eliminate promotion disparity. It also recognizes that our MOS structure is not robust enough due to downsizing. A Soldier, in his first six years of service, could conceivably go from Fort Drum, New York, to Germany, or from Fort Hood, Texas, to Airborne School at Fort Benning and volunteer for assignment to the 82d Air

borne Division. We are considering 11-C Soldiers exempt from this initiative because of their particularly unique skill requirements and the fact they can now be assigned to all five types of Infantry.

One option we are looking at closely would then have promotable sergeants entering the Basic NCO Course requesting a specific track—heavy or light—with follow-on assignments to that track for their staff sergeant through sergeant first class years. The strength of the force would remain with specialized NCO expertise in those critical positions of squad leader, Bradley commander, and platoon sergeant and key positions such as jumpmaster and master gunner. Those NCOs selected for master sergeant would then once again be eligible for assignment to any type of unit, assuming that they had experience in it.

Do not think for a moment we are trying to make “generic” Infantry. Each of the five types of Infantry, by virtue of their entry means or mobility, brings unique capabilities to the battlefield. It is actually a step back to a time not too long ago when all Infantrymen were riflemen first and 11Bs could be mechanized or one or more of the lighter types. But at squad level, in the close fight, there is commonality of purpose, requirements, and now structure. The MOS convergence discussion has been ongoing for well over five years, and now is the time to make the decision. I will put more details of this proposal in a message to commanders, and again, I ask for your input.

Any good Grunt knows a crossroads is a danger area. We approach this one with the same way a prudent and thoughtful Infantryman would: with reliance on our experience, training, a fair read of what is ahead, and, most importantly, our fellow Infantrymen, for the best way to cross. We want to decide on these key issues with some degree of consensus from the field, because the burden of implementing any decision will rest on you. We look forward to hearing from you over the coming months.

