

The Path Ahead

By COL Charles D. Allen

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Following the success of Operation Desert Storm, the Army proceeded with its drawdown in the 1990s. The “end of history” required restationing forces from Germany and restructuring the force in the continental United States. I was part of V Corps staff when it worked force reductions in Germany and then served as battalion executive officer (XO) for a direct support Field Artillery battalion in Baumholder for my branch qualification assignment as a major. That battalion—2nd Battalion, 29th Field Artillery Regiment—subsequently redeployed with its maneuver brigade to then-Fort Lewis, Wash., in 1994.

The Army’s restructuring plan included reducing the number of Field Artillery units that were integral to AirLand Battle. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and dismantling of the Soviet Union and its threat to Western Europe, the AirLand Battle force structure, deemed no longer necessary, was too expensive to maintain.

The implementation of post-Cold War national policy objectives and a new national military strategy followed me to Fort Lewis. After completing an assignment as battalion XO for the redesignated unit and promotion to lieutenant colonel, I became the XO of the only Field Artillery brigade at Fort Lewis (210th FA Bde., also a unit redeployed from Germany). There was another unique aspect: The brigade had one subordinate 175 mm artillery battalion that was scheduled to be disbanded. When I reported to brigade headquarters in January 1995, the HQ was administering the last Army Training and Evaluation Program certification to the battalion, which was within six months of its E-date (effective date of closure, that is, an authorized structure with no personnel or equipment).

The brigade HQ was in a curious position: fully staffed with commander and functional elements of personnel,

intelligence, operation (including fire direction and radar), and logistics, with no organic units to command and control. The brigade commander embraced every mission and task from I Corps HQ as an opportunity to exercise staff procedures. This included supporting firefighting operations in Montana and serving as executive agent for Reserve Officers’ Training Corps summer camp at Fort Lewis.

As the senior Field Artillery commander, he fought to gain assignments of officers from the brigade and battalion to the two direct support units on post. You can imagine, however, that those direct support commanders sought to groom and place their own officers into vital positions as battery commanders and primary battalion staff officers rather than bring in outsiders. As the Field Artillery brigade HQ was itself disbanded in 1996, a remnant of it was assigned to I Corps staff as part of the active component-reserve component bridge, where I was the senior active duty officer.

So began the exodus of junior officers from the branch and the Army. Before the brigade cased its colors, the brigade S-1, a captain, had left the service to go to graduate school and start a civilian career. In addition, three officers in the S-3 section (a Field Artillery captain and first lieutenant, and the chemical corps lieutenant) applied and were accepted to the Special Forces Qualification Course.

I do not know if these officers were the best and brightest in the Army, but I do know they were intelligent, dedicated to doing their best under ambiguous conditions and intent on continuing to serve the Army. Nevertheless, the Army they joined and the branch they chose changed. That small band of junior officers clearly saw in 1995 what three brigade combat team commanders later in 2008 called a dead branch walking. Seeing

that, they also chose to walk.

In 2011, the Army Profession Campaign gathered a great deal of information about the cohorts of junior leaders (officers and NCOs) and their perceptions of the profession of arms at large. As one would expect, many of the Army’s emerging leaders have copious amounts of tactical and operational experience but limited expertise in the core skills of their basic branches. They see clearly that the Army is in an era of transition and turmoil. They are well aware that current fiscal debates will have substantial implications for uniformed and civilian members alike. They see that the Army is about to embark on significant force structure changes and force reductions. The question is whether these talented leaders of untold potential see a path ahead for themselves in their branches or in the Army. If not, they—possibly among our best and brightest—may walk a different path. □

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