

# Assessing the Value of Serving in an Army Service Component Command as a Broadening Assignment

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*Broadening (Institutional/Enterprise) – [infantry] officers experience diverse areas of responsibility. These are the assignments where the Army gains from the officer's experiences and returns him to the Institutional force to help build and train the next generation of leaders or sends him to lead a staff section in a Joint or ASCC HQs.*

—Lt. Col. Patrick Harkins

**B**roadening assignments provide key developmental experiences to officers as they continue to serve in our Army in different levels of responsibilities. The “muddy boots culture” of purely tactical experiences for career advancement has been recognized as wholly inadequate in providing sufficient broadening experience to deal with the complexities of an ever-changing operational environment.<sup>1</sup> A better mixture of broadening assignments is needed to help prepare officers for the different types of roles and responsibilities characteristic of the more complex security challenges they will face.

As I write this, I am reminded of the words expressed by Dr. Tim Hentschel during my time at the Command and General Staff College about whom gets assigned to a broadening assignment with an Army service component command (ASCC). Like most infantryman, there was a certain degree of self-denial that it would not be me, some other poor infantryman would get this assignment. Even though the research shows the need for broadening experiences, the embedded on-the-ground culture of infantrymen and other branches still fosters some reticence toward broadening experiences that take time away from service with field units.<sup>2</sup> Having said that about my initial reaction, my experience as a staff officer with an ASCC has not been what I had imagined it to be. There is more to this assignment than I expected that indeed is broadening in terms of insight and practical experience.

Putting careful effort into determining the types of broadening assignments that provide officers with opportunities to learn and grow as professionals means focusing on what will best prepare them for future assignments along their career paths. There is no “one size fits all” to





**Previous page:** Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter (*center*) departs the Baghdad International Airport 18 April 2016. Carter announced the next phase of the fight against the Islamic State during a troop talk in Baghdad that included addressing the requirement for detailed land-component participation in training and support to Iraqi ground forces. (Photo by Sr. Master Sgt. Adrian Cadiz, U.S. Air Force)

the developmental methodology. As a result, it is important to gauge the effects of different broadening assignments to determine their value in providing officers with the right developmental experiences. To that end, the intended purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the experiences and impact of an ASCC assignment on career development so that readers may develop a better sense of both its utility as a broadening experience and as an opportunity to learn how to better manage staff resources at the ASCC level.

## What Is an ASCC?

What an ASCC is most widely known for is that it works to provide access to the region or operational environment, to acquire basing privileges, and to obtain overflight authorizations to allow U.S. forces to execute their missions in theater. However, it does significantly more than that. Prior to my assignment to an ASCC, previous assignments and participation in exercises gave me limited insight on what an ASCC did but not enough to fully understand the whole gamut of its responsibilities.

The breadth and depth of the roles and responsibilities of an ASCC are remarkable. Army Regulation 10-87, *Army Commands, Army Service Component Commands, and Direct Reporting Units*, defines ASCCs as operational-level organizations that serve as the primary Army components for combatant commanders throughout the different geographical commands.<sup>3</sup> In practice, an ASCC is primarily responsible to the secretary of the Army for the administration and support of Army forces assigned or attached to combatant commands. However, depending on its designation, an ASCC has the flexibility to perform myriad tasks that support the combatant commander to set conditions throughout an area of operations. As such, an ASCC can provide an array of options for the combatant commander to achieve desired end states.<sup>4</sup> For example, the ASCC supporting U.S. Central Command retains operational control of Army forces via the delegation of Central Command

leadership. In this capacity, it performs Army support to other services as well as Department of Defense-specified executive agencies.<sup>5</sup> In addition, an ASCC can be designated by the combatant commander to perform duties as a joint forces land component command or joint task force as contingencies arise.<sup>6</sup>

To provide a broader framework, I will use U.S. Army Central (USARCENT) as an example of a geographic ASCC to give a clearer picture of the depth and complexity of these types of organizations and the kinds of support they offer to combatant commanders. To understand the totality of what an ASCC does, the best place to start is by looking at the mission statement of an ASCC. A good mission statement will provide an accurate description of what an organization does. At present, USARCENT's mission statement reads, "USARCENT shapes the environment to improve access and interoperability, sets the theater to deter adversaries, and is prepared to transition to Phase I of contingency operations."<sup>7</sup> The mission statement is expansive because it reflects the span and complexities of tasks that an ASCC is directed to perform in its designated area of operations. The USARCENT mission statement has evolved over time and continues to evolve as the operational environment and the strategic focus of the combatant commander change. As such, ARCENT has adapted and adjusted its role in the performance of numerous operational and strategic tasks. For example, it has performed duties as both theater army and combined joint task force, and it continues in both those roles. Currently, USARCENT supports three main lines of effort: set the theater, shape the environment, and unified land operations. Prior to that, it served as a combined joint task force, Operation Iraqi Resolve, from October 2014 to September 2015.<sup>8</sup>

## Understanding Staff Work

The idea of being a staff officer is not very enticing. It feels extraneous to me as an infantry officer. But the level of satisfaction one gets from accomplishing a challenging task may well provide the same feeling of satisfaction one gets from service on the line. Though it was truly hard for me to feel and express pride in working as a staff officer, it does have its merit and value. Like any other significant work, meaning is found on the quality of the work done and on its impact on others. It took a shift in mindset on my part to appreciate the value of good staff work.



Most of my time during my tour of service as a staff officer with USARCENT was spent as a planner. I participated in three-star level exercises, multiple planning efforts, and working groups. My experience might be unique to my job description, but the work I have done is like that of most staff officers who work at USARCENT. As a planner, I routinely attended different meetings throughout the week. Most of my time was spent listening to briefings, providing staff input to planning efforts, participating in working groups, interacting with people, and sometimes previewing soon-to-be published new Army doctrine.

At first glance, this type of daily existence seems mundane. It even sounds morbid as I read back over this paragraph. This type of existence at face value would put off a lot of people—nobody that I know signed up to join the Army to do staff work. However, whether we like it or not, staff work is a part of what we do daily in the Army. As officers, a great deal of our time is spent doing the unenviable task of leading and participating in planning efforts. It took me some time to acquiesce to this inglorious task.

Being a planner requires knowing what information is critical to a planning effort or working group. This is

U.S. military logistics leaders and experts from across the Department of Defense discuss long-term logistics planning 6 April 2017 during the Joint Logistics Coordination Board at the U.S. Central Command forward headquarters at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar. The board was part of a week of planning conferences that included two separate sessions aimed at ensuring the joint logistics enterprise aligns efforts across the CENTCOM area of responsibility to maintain an effective readiness for both current and future operations. (Photo by Staff Sgt. R. Alex Durbin, U.S. Air Force)

not very easy, because sometimes you go into a planning effort blind or at least unaware of the requirements. Most often, operational planning teams and working groups do not provide an overview before starting. Not all working groups are created equal. Effective working groups and planning efforts are well led and organized. As a planner, you must

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understand the requirements one needs to provide that are relevant to the effort and others might not know in a planning effort. You must be knowledgeable of important data that are relevant to the operational planning team.

It is a common mistake to commence planning efforts or working groups without setting the right conditions. Plunging headlong into a task without sufficiently preparing participants with the appropriate base knowledge creates frustrations. It is a mistake in my mind to expect individuals to know something without providing the right references. Those who are new to the unit cannot be expected to know everything they need to know. New members of working groups must be provided an overview to help them understand key information. Teaching them where to access and acquire more information should enable them to catch up.

The demands of being a planner are various and difficult at times. What one does is time consuming and constantly changing. Work is never done. At times it feels like a thankless job, especially when one is caught unaware and not particularly prepared for what is asked in a meeting. Staff work is wrought with challenges, and one must be always be in the know of the new developments, which is not an easy chore. Sometimes people take one's work for granted, especially when things are going well. One gets little credit for the things that go well and a lot of anguish when things do not go well. It is almost Sisyphean at times.

## **What Could Be Done Better?**

To make the assignment in an ASCC a true broadening experience, there are ways to enhance these assignments. Officers would be more well-rounded if they rotated to different positions every year throughout their time. I think that this is doable with some innovation and willingness. It will benefit the Army a great deal by having officers who have well-rounded skills and experiences from working in an ASCC.

Maneuver company-grade officers who have not spent time in command should not be assigned to an ASCC. Their time to learn and master the basics is limited. Without company-grade field experience, they will have a knowledge gap that might be hard to overcome later on. Where staff experience is necessary, maneuver company-grade officers will be better served spending critical developmental time at echelons of command at the brigade level and below.

Where staff service with an ASCC is deemed appropriate, leadership development programs should focus on bridging the knowledge gap required for such service and enhancing regional expertise. This will allow officers in ASCC broadening assignments to gain deeper understanding of the different countries in the region. Acquiring knowledge in these areas has multiple benefits. We are fortunate in USARCENT to have a dynamic leadership development program that enhances regional knowledge.

Time in theater will also provide valuable experience for officers. Working with partner nations through exercises and partnership programs benefits everyone. However, with constrained resources, such direct partnership opportunities might not be feasible on a large scale but are worth considering for their potential to enhance the broadening experience. Furthermore, immersion and real-world interaction with officers of partner nations would aid in developing personal relationships that could potentially deescalate future tensions arising among nations by leveraging personal connections with senior military officers of different nations that were formed while serving with U.S. officers in combined activities during their development years as relatively junior officers.

Balancing the requirements with risk when it comes to personnel must be done correctly. Sending the right individuals to broadening assignments and providing them with a range of experiences will enhance their professional growth, but filling the ranks of a unit with less than adequate personnel dooms the organization to mediocrity. It also causes frustration when individuals with the wrong background and experience struggle to perform a job. The two-levels-up-and-one-down methodology may not work well in an ASCC. The experience-level requirement cannot be filled by randomly assigning mere bodies.

## **Reflection on the Overall Value of the ASCC Assignment**

The breadth and depth of the responsibilities of an ASCC provides opportunities to expand one's knowledge of many different problem sets and potential solutions. Those aspiring to higher levels of responsibility will benefit from learning about the operational and strategic tasks an ASCC performs. Additionally, having proximity to general officers and seeing how they formulate visions and intent as well as make decisions offers lessons

in leadership that are hard to quantify. Seeing the challenges and requirements that a senior leader must contend with enables future senior leaders to prepare for those future demands. Therefore, the experience in an ASCC assignment forges a path toward greater depth of knowledge and skills that future senior leaders can use to create success.

It is very easy to lose sight of what is important. Sometimes we need a little reminder that we all have roles to play in the grand scheme of things. We cannot all be commanders; all of us must do staff work to enable commanders to make the best military decisions and provide the best military advice to strategic leaders. Getting it right has enormous consequences, as the recent experiences in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan demonstrate. The human and economic toll is very significant.

Doing your best everyday may not get its due reward, but the satisfaction of doing one's best and contributing to an important effort that makes a difference is reward enough, as it helps one achieve self-fulfillment. Self-satisfaction comes to the person in the arena who toils day in and day out to fulfill his or her obligation to a calling or job he or she feels is worthy of doing.<sup>9</sup>

In his book *Team of Teams*, Gen. Stanley McChrystal states that the role of senior leaders is no longer that of a heroic leader but rather that of an emphatic crafter of culture; a gardener.<sup>10</sup> If the role of future senior leaders is to be good crafters of cultures, then perhaps an assignment in an ASCC is worth it because it is a good training ground for developing the skills needed to become an effective gardener of organizational culture. ■

## Notes

**Epigraph.** Patrick Harkins, "Infantry Branch Chief 346 Remarks," *Infantry Branch Newsletter*, 3rd Quarter, 2016, 4.

1. Thomas D. Boccardi, *Polyester Culture: The U.S. Army's Aversion to Broadening Assignments*, U.S. Army War College Civilian Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2012), 2.

2. See, for example, Charles D. Costanza, *Broadening Leaders? Culture Change as the Cure*, U.S. Army War College Civilian Research Project (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2012), 4.

3. U.S. Army Regulation 10-87, *Army Commands, Army Service Component Commands, and Direct Reporting Units* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 4 September 2007), 5.

4. "Command Brief," U.S. Army Central portal, [https://portal.arcent.swa.army.mil/SitePages/USARCENT\\_Command%20Brief\\_ACB.aspx](https://portal.arcent.swa.army.mil/SitePages/USARCENT_Command%20Brief_ACB.aspx) (CAC required).

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in A Republic" (speech, Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910, accessed 28 July 2017, <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/trsorbonne-speech.html>).

10. Stanley McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Portfolio Penguin, 2015), 221.

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