

We Are Missing Opportunities to Build Sustained, Total Force Readiness inside Brigade Combat Teams

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Building readiness to fight and to win in large-scale combat operations is the Army's number one priority, and the Army's combat training centers (CTCs) are the crucible where the capabilities of the Army's primary fighting formations, brigade combat teams (BCTs), are tested. The train-up for and execution of a CTC rotation is how a BCT is made ready for combat; funding, personnel, training time, and priority for training resources all funnel to BCTs to allow commanders to certify their units from squad through battalion levels. Once CTC training is complete, the unit is deemed ready for worldwide deployment. In fact, one could argue that the CTC rotation is the primary way the Army builds BCT readiness.

There is, however, a gap in the Army's approach to building BCT readiness that needs further emphasis. That gap lies in the hundreds of echelons-above-brigade (EAB) enablers that are task-organized to a BCT both at the CTC and when deployed to combat. These units, which in total amount to an entire additional battalion (over five hundred soldiers) of combat power, are prepared for deployment individually by their EAB battalions and brigades but have *no habitual relationships* with the BCTs they will support. BCTs and their attached enablers meet at the CTC, train together for a month, and then scatter across the United States to their parent units. The BCT does not build readiness with its enablers ahead of the CTC, nor does it sustain them during the post-CTC period when the likelihood of deployment to crisis or contingency is highest.

This article highlights the challenges posed by the current approach to integrating enablers into BCTs, identifies steps BCTs can take now, and offers institutional recommendations for *formal, regional* alignment of enablers from across the Total Force with BCTs and

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divisions. This alignment *must* be anchored to CTC rotations and should take into account units identified as deploying together in contingency plans. With habitual relationships in place and the CTC as a shared crucible experience, leaders can build and sustain BCT and enabler readiness.

The Training Center Experience for BCTs and Their Enablers

BCT commanders and their staffs devote themselves to building readiness for decisive action ahead of a CTC rotation. Training glide paths are carefully managed, pre-CTC gates are met, and mission command nodes are validated, among other actions. Divisions certify their BCTs on decisive action tasks and rigorously

manage the unit's equipment, personnel, and maintenance status to ensure the BCT can make the most of its once-every-two-year (or five-year in the case of National Guard BCTs) crucible experience. By the time vehicles are rolling onto the trains before a unit's trip to the training center, the organic units in a BCT are prepared to task-organize and execute their missions.

Then the EAB enablers show up. Converging on the BCT in the few days before the beginning of a rotation at the training center itself, units varying in size from team to platoon to company arrive with a set of capabilities and requirements that may or may not be fully understood. They come from across the United States and in large numbers (often twenty or more separate organizations). It is not uncommon for a platoon- or company-size element from one coast to support a BCT stationed on the opposite coast, thousands of miles away. Moreover, they come from across the Total Force. Since 75 percent of the Army's enablers reside in the Army Reserve or National Guard, it is likely that the BCT task force will engage in decisive action that has elements within it from every component of the Army.¹

While BCT leadership is generally notified of enablers that they will receive as many as six months ahead

of time, multiple factors combine to make meaningful integration into the BCT incomplete at best. With enabling units scattered across the United States, there is no opportunity to train together. The best that can often be managed are teleconferences to track movement timelines and maintenance, and maybe a shared planning opportunity ahead of the rotation itself. Because the active, National Guard, and Army Reserve units that attend the CTC together likely have no habitual relationship with each other or the BCT they support, getting to know all of the faces and names of the leadership during the reception, staging, onward movement, and integration phase of the CTC can be a challenge.

The experience for the attached enablers is no less jarring. Because EAB enablers are trained and certified on their specialty capabilities separately from maneuver formations, they are oftentimes unfamiliar with the BCT's standard operating procedures and have likely not had

Soldiers from Company A, 116th Brigade Engineer Battalion, position their M1150 Assault Breacher Vehicle 12 June 2019 during a live-fire training exercise at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by Cpl. Alisha Grezlik, U.S. Army)



the opportunity to integrate into a maneuver element. They have different equipment and communications systems than the BCT into which they integrate, and depending upon their training glide path, they may be at a lower level of readiness than the BCT they support. BCT staff sections lack experience planning for enabler utilization, and the maneuver platoons, companies, and battalions in the BCT have little to no experience using them. Additionally, the maintenance and support requirements associated with enabler equipment, like

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the M113 armored personnel carrier and assault vehicle launch bridge, are often completely different than that of the BCT they may be tasked to support. Nevertheless, maintenance and support is the BCT’s responsibility.

The brigade engineer battalion (BEB) is the unit within the BCT charged to integrate and ensure the proper utilization of the enablers flowing into the BCT. While BEB commanders and their staffs understand that integrating and effectively utilizing enablers is their decisive operation, these units are already responsible for ensuring that enablers organic to the brigade are properly utilized. Because the BEB more than doubles in size during a CTC rotation to a task force that generally numbers between 1,000 and 1,200 soldiers and at least twenty subordinate units, keeping track of all the enablers in the BCT area of operations becomes a significant challenge, let alone managing the effective integration of enablers into units with which they have never trained.

Although success in integrating and utilizing enablers varies from unit to unit, it is possible to identify a number of systemic issues, as cataloged by observer-controller teams in CTC rotation after CTC rotation that impact BCT success:

- Brigade and maneuver battalion staffs struggle when planning for enabler utilization due to a lack of familiarity with enabler capabilities and limitations.
- Enablers are often improperly used or left in the rear area by maneuver units, due largely to a lack of familiarity with proper enabler utilization and a lack of personal relationships between maneuver leaders and the enablers supporting them.
- Perhaps most importantly, maneuver units often culminate prior to accomplishing their assigned missions because the right enabling capabilities (whether engineer, chemical, military intelligence, military police, signal, or civil affairs) are either not present or not utilized effectively at a decisive point in the operation.

While these lessons are cataloged in after action reviews and enabler integration is written in to post-CTC standard operating procedures at all levels, once the trains are loaded again, the BCT returns to its home station and the enablers scatter across the United States to theirs. The shared readiness accrued through having a BCT train with and learn from the enablers it received for the CTC dissipates, and units return to their stovepiped training glide paths.

The Impacts

Including enabler units in the BCT formation is ineffective unless their capabilities are understood by the decision-makers responsible for their employment, namely the company- to brigade-level maneuver commanders and planners. For example, decisive action rotations at the National Training Center (NTC) regularly involve chemical attacks of persistent or non-persistent agents against rotational units that require establishment of a thorough decontamination point. BCTs may have up to four types of chemical platoons attached to their BCT to accomplish this mission. However, typically, the BCT has trained with at most one of these formation types during home-station preparation. Thus, maneuver planners and logisticians have little understanding of how long a deliberate decontamination mission takes or what resources must be in place to conduct the operation.

Because home-station relationships between EAB enablers and BCTs are informal, inclusion of EAB enablers into BCT training is episodic and often personality based. For one set of commanders, EAB enabler integration might be a priority, while the next set may



have a different approach. The net effect of the lack of formality regarding home-station relationships is that organic units tend to train organically, and EAB units train in their EAB stovepipe. The units do not truly train the way they would fight at a CTC or in combat until they participate in a CTC rotation.

While the enabler units and the BCTs benefit from training together at the CTC, there is an opportunity cost to building relationships with enablers through a crucible experience like NTC and then dissolving the team. Moreover, since BCTs tend to train organic at home station, there is a steep learning curve at CTCs that deprives the maneuver battalions, the BEB, and the brigade staff of training opportunities to refine their integration and utilization of enablers.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a long-term deficit in BCT and maneuver force awareness of EAB enabler requirements and shortcomings. Because they do not train together, the difference in capabilities such as mobility, communications, and training is simply not a priority in division and corps training guidance for the BCT. BCT commanders register that there is an issue when at a CTC, but this recedes to the background

A soldier from the 44th Chemical Company sprays water on another soldier who was exposed to a simulated chemical agent at a field decontamination station 13 March 2019 during a training rotation at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by Clemens Gaines, 20th CBRNE Command Public Affairs)

quickly upon redeployment to home station and focus shifts back to organic BCT training.

Challenges to Enabler Integration

If enabler integration is such an issue, why are enablers not habitually aligned with BCTs already? This is a fair question to ask, given the challenges detailed above, regarding why the Army continues to manage enablers in the way it does.

The first part of the answer is tied to the Army's approach to building deployable units tailored to match the requirements of a given crisis or contingency. Training enablers separately and attaching them to BCTs prior to a CTC or deployment is intended to (1) ensure that low-density enablers are effectively trained at home station, (2) allow for flexible

distribution of EAB capabilities to BCTs based on mission requirements, and (3) facilitate integration of Army Reserve and National Guard units into BCTs in accordance with the Army's Total Force Policy.²

Unlike the divisional structure that preceded it, the Army's modular-force sizing construct relies on the ability of the BCT to receive, integrate, and utilize enablers. Even with the Army's BCT 2020 force redesign decision to include a third maneuver battalion and to stand up BEBs with additional enabling capabilities, the force design for BCTs deliberately did not include all enabling capabilities that would be required in decisive action.³

The second part of the answer is tied to the availability of enablers themselves and their readiness timelines. With 75 percent of the Army's enabling units, whether maneuver support or sustainment in the Army Reserve and the National Guard, enablers are physically spread across the United States. Moreover, Reserve and National Guard units generate readiness on a five-year model, with a CTC and follow-on deployment occurring in the fourth or fifth year of a given unit's readiness cycle. This means that of the total pool of enabling capabilities in the Total Force, only a portion of the Reserve or National Guard capability is available at a given time.

Another factor hampering habitual alignment is the challenge of forecasting readiness and availability of a multitude of small, deployable enabler units. Unlike BCTs, EAB units are deployable down to the company, platoon, and often team levels. Because they deploy independently, within a single EAB battalion, there can be multiple units at different levels of readiness.

The way that Forces Command (FORSCOM) and CTC planners build rotations also impacts the problem. CTCs generally identify the enabler requirements for a given rotation about two years out from execution. Neither the CTC nor FORSCOM currently have a requirement to regionally align enablers to BCTs, so they do not. When one adds in unforecasted requirements at CTCs, like a chemical-focused rotation requiring augmentation of additional chemical units to a BCT on short notice, the actual sourcing of enablers to a BCT's

Soldiers from Company A, 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, dig an antitank ditch to turn enemy mounted forces into the primary defensive engagement area 20 April 2018 at Fort Irwin, California. (Photo courtesy of the National Training Center Operations Group Maneuver Support Training Team)



CTC rotation becomes a shell game where available, ready units are tasked rather than those units that might be able to train with a BCT at home station or deploy with them on a contingency operation.

The final and maybe most important factor is inertia. Because enablers have not been habitually aligned, and are assigned to CTCs and deployed based on who is ready at a given time, the readiness cycles of units in a given area are not aligned. Changing to a new approach would require sustained institutional energy and forecasting years out from CTC execution in the case of Army Reserve and National Guard units. This sort of shift would require hard work and senior leader emphasis, and it would need to start with the maneuver commanders at a brigade, division, and corps levels who drive the Army's readiness discussion.

What Units Can Do Now to Improve Enabler Integration

BCTs and their subordinate battalions must recognize that they will fight as a task force with EAB enablers, whether at a CTC or while deployed. These enabler units are not last-minute add-ons. They provide capabilities the maneuver element does not have organically by design, and which are required for mission accomplishment.

Commanders, understanding this fact, must drive education within their staffs and subordinate commands on enabler capabilities, limitations, and support requirements. Units should plan for the use of enablers during staff exercises and command-post exercises at all levels. Developing a standard enabler task organization for both the offense and the defense (see figure 1, page 36), building doctrinal templates for enabler employment (see figure 2, page 37), and rehearsing battle drills for enabler-intensive operations are all important steps BCTs can take to build proficiency with enablers, speed up planning, and ensure shared understanding with subordinate units.

Maneuver leaders from brigade to platoon level need repetition at both planning for and utilizing enablers before they arrive at a CTC. The wrong time to start figuring out how to use enablers such as engineers, chemical, civil affairs, and explosive ordnance disposal is when they show up immediately prior to mission execution. Importantly, the BEB also needs practice repetitions at integrating and then providing mission command for enablers from outside the BCT—the more, the better.

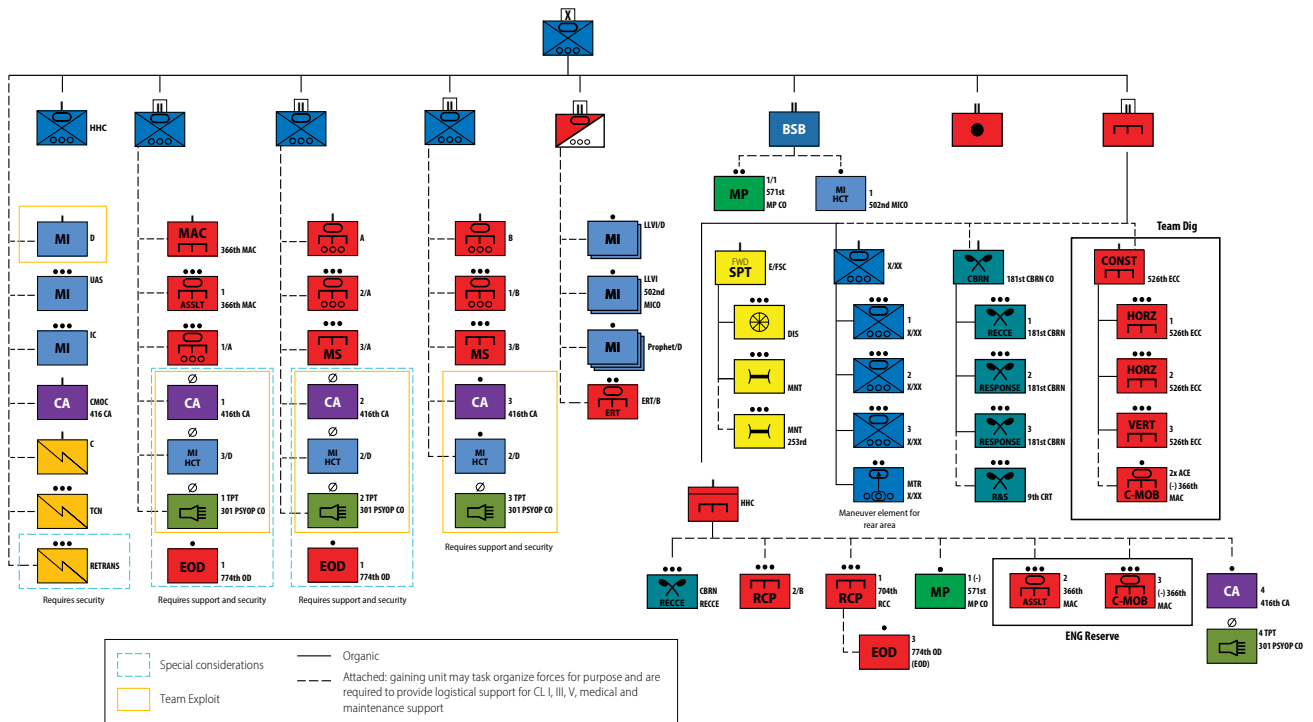
Given the reality that BCTs and their subordinate battalions will likely not be able to train with the enablers they will have before deploying to a CTC or during combat, there must be a deliberate system for building relationships with enablers and integrating them into the formation. While checklists can be helpful tools, units must treat enabler integration as a tactical task that must be practiced during home-station training. BCTs should reach out to enabler units at their home station, establish a rapport with them, and deliberately integrate their elements into the maneuver training glide path.

BCTs also need to own the readiness challenges of the enabler units they will get on relatively short notice and prepare for additional support requirements upon the arrival of those units. Each unit's equipment, communications capabilities, and training readiness will be different. In many cases, this means different maintenance and supply requirements that are not easily solved in the final days before mission execution. To minimize the friction caused by the arrival of multiple units with different support requirements and states of readiness, BCTs should reach out early and often to work out issues with their enablers well ahead of formal task organization. This is a best practice already encouraged by the CTCs.

Recommendations for Institutional Change

While the immediate steps highlighted above are necessary, they are insufficient. There is an overriding need to generate sustained, Total Force readiness at the BCT level. The below institutional recommendations can be phased in over time but must be formal in their implementation, anchored to CTC rotations, and messaged by senior Army leadership to truly have impact.

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(Figure courtesy of the 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Joint Base Lewis-McChord)

Figure 1. Enabler Task Organization Example

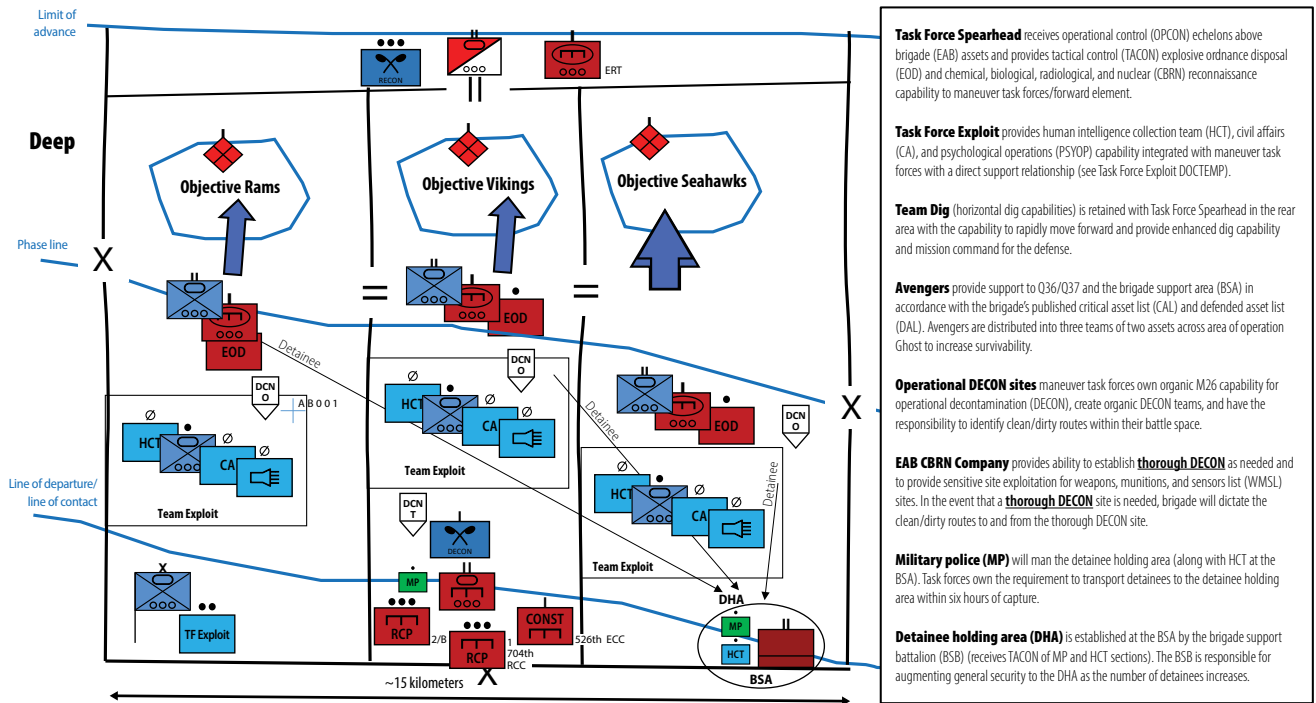
Identify the EAB enabler force's available pool, both active and reserve in a specific region, and formally align with BCTs for CTC rotations and deployments. Within a given region (the Pacific Northwest, for instance), there are typically sufficient active duty, National Guard, and Army Reserve enabler units to support BCT training, CTC rotations, and deployment to meet contingency plan requirements. The problem is that there are no formal relationships to drive them to align their training glide paths. Division- and corps-level staffs can and will align training to help the BCT integrate these key capabilities if they have the authority and the funding. It should be a requirement for FORSCOM and CTC planners to take into account regional alignment when conducting both CTC rotational planning and contingency planning. FORSCOM should also strongly consider requiring enablers to attend their aligned BCT's pre-CTC certification exercises.

Deliberately integrate enablers into organic BCT home-station training. Within the Active Component alone, there are typically sufficient enabling capabilities to allow BCTs to get multiple repetitions with the utilization of enablers. This is sometimes accomplished informally

but is seldom driven through higher guidance. Because EABs are typically corps assets, formal training guidance directing the integration of enablers into home-station training would have to come from that echelon. This could be standardized in the form of habitual relationships.

Align time-phased force deployment data construction for operation plans against regional Active Component and Reserve Component force pools. Once regional force pools are generated and units are building sustained readiness at the BCT level, the next logical step would be to align BCTs with the enablers against operation plans. This would also further cement and formalize relationships between BCTs and enablers in their regional pool.

Refocus Active Component-Reserve Component partnership on the BCT task force in decisive action. More formal BCT-enabler unit relationships present an important opportunity. Currently, Active-Reserve partnerships are predominantly focused at the BCT or EAB level. While it is valuable to build relationships with a potential adjacent unit, it is probably more important for a BCT to integrate Reserve Component-enabling capabilities that will be inside the BCT task force when it fights.



(Figure courtesy of the 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Joint Base Lewis-McChord)

Figure 2. Doctrinal Template Example

Formalize the relationship between BEBs within each BCT and habitually partnered units. The BEB can and should remain the focal point for enabler integration into the BCT and can take the lead for enforcing the Total Force partnership program down to the lowest echelons. BEB commanders should be responsible for maintaining relationships with the Reserve Component units they will deploy with to either execute a CTC or fight and for coordinating their integration into BCT training.

Nest enablers into BCT modernization strategies. As the Army aggressively modernizes to meet the challenge posed by near-peer adversaries, BCTs should both train and modernize *with the enablers they will have attached to them*. A significant equipping gap already exists between BCTs and enabling formations, which if unaddressed during the Army’s modernization process, will only widen. The overall performance of a BCT in combat should not be adversely impacted because its enablers are operating on outdated mission command systems and moving in platforms that are unable to match the pace of combat operations. Aligning BCT and attached enabler training and modernization would be

consistent with the Army’s doctrine on training, which states that “units train to fight and win as cohesive and effective teams” under “challenging and realistic conditions that closely replicate an operational environment.”⁴

Conclusion

The Army trains and certifies maneuver units at every level because it recognizes that fundamentally, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. A trained BCT is more than simply a group of trained battalions. Instead, it is an integrated team that is capable of task-organizing for purpose and fluidly executing both anticipated and unanticipated missions.

A trained BCT that is ready for decisive action is likewise more than the trained organic unit with a bunch of task-organized enablers that were trained separately and attached to the BCT immediately prior to executing the mission. For the team to operate effectively together, it must be able to task-organize at echelon and incorporate enablers throughout the entire training glide path.

Maintaining the current approach to enabler integration risks repeating the hard lessons learned at every CTC rotation during the opening days of a future

conflict. When that occurs, the cost will be soldiers' lives rather than wasted time and suboptimal training. By establishing formal, regional BCT-enabler unit

relationships anchored on CTC rotations, the Army can build sustained Total Force readiness focused on the BCT; it is worth the effort. ■

Notes

1. Analysis for this statistic was conducted by the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. For engineers alone, based on 2019 updates to Engineer Tables of Distribution and Allowances, 50 percent of the engineer force structure resides in the National Guard, with 25 percent in the U.S. Army Reserve and only 25 percent in the active component. For many maneuver support capabilities, the percentage is even higher. For example, 82 percent of civil affairs and military information support operations units reside in the Army Reserve.

2. John M. McHugh, Memorandum to Principal Officials of Headquarters, Department of the Army, "Army Directive 2012-08 (Army Total

Force Policy)," 4 September 2012, accessed 25 October 2019, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ad2012_08.pdf.

3. Mark F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020" (report, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2019), accessed 25 October 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-army>.

4. Army Doctrinal Publication 7-0, *Training* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 2012 [obsolete]), para. 1-4 and 1-5.

Congratulations on your retirement, Linda!



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rs. Linda Darnell, editorial assistant for *Military Review*, is retiring in May 2020 from the Army Civilian Corps after serving on Fort Leavenworth for more than twenty-five years. She previously worked in the Civilian Personnel Office; Combat Training Center Directorate; Combined Arms Services Staff School (CAS3); the Army Knowledge Network Directorate; and the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobility, and Security.

While serving at *Military Review*, Mrs. Darnell was relentless not only in her pursuit of excellence in the discharge of her assigned duties as a key staff figure but also in promoting a warm, congenial, and professional work environment that was second to none. In May 2014, she was awarded the

prestigious U.S. Federal Government Excellence in Public Service award for her many contributions. However, when asked what she would wish to be remembered as her legacy, she confided that she does not wish to be remembered merely as an efficient and supportive staff colleague but rather as a "mother" figure who diligently sought to ensure that everyone within the circumference of her influence was remembered, loved, and cared for.

She departs as a treasured and respected member of the *Military Review* team who has been regarded for the last eleven years as truly indispensable. We will miss Linda very much, and we wish her and her husband, Tom, a long and happy retirement.

