

We Hear You, but You're Wrong

In Response to "We Hear You!"

Lt. Col. Matthew L. Jamison, U.S. Army

As a sitting battalion commander, I frequently engage with our battery commanders about articles of interest focusing on the air defense branch or impacting our Army more generally. Recently, one of our commanders introduced me to the *Military Review* article "We Hear You!" and we broadly discussed the issue of junior officer retention during a commanders' huddle.¹ The overall consensus was that we are missing the mark if we say to our junior officers, "We hear you, but you're wrong" and focus on reframing their thinking instead of what the Army can, or perhaps should, do differently. Though it is too early for me to effectively reflect on battalion command, I can provide some anecdotal evidence from my tenure that may be informative to the larger issue of retaining our best and brightest.

We have several talented junior officers who are considering or are fully committed to separating from the U.S. Army when their obligation is up. From discussions with them and additional observations, I will focus on two primary issues, operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and spouse or significant other careers and professional demands. Additionally, I will provide my own thoughts on the validity of the Army requirements sine wave, introduced in the article to demonstrate the peaks and valleys of "busyness" throughout officer careers.

The Air Defense Artillery branch has maintained a high OPTEMPO for quite a few years although our commitments to ground fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan waned.² This has led to more deployments for air defenders, less time with families in garrison,

and a general increase in quality-of-life concerns. The Army has undertaken a concerted effort to address this, standing up a "Health of the ADA Force" task force and



Capt. Marquis R. Morris, commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, salutes Lt. Col. Lutaya M. Hanony, commander of the 58th Brigade Engineer Battalion, during a company change of command ceremony 31 August 2022 in Zagor, Poland. (Photo by Capt. Tobiasz Cukale, U.S. Army)

We Hear You!

Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr., U.S. Army
Lt. Col. Michael Soyka, U.S. Army
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In recent months, there have been several articles published regarding junior officer dissatisfaction that should have caused many to pause.³ To the young captains who are not sure about their desire

to command again, or who are disappointed with Captains Career Course (CCC) professional military education (PME), or those responding to surveys to explain the reasons they and many of their peers are

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Matthew Jamison's article "We Hear You, but You're Wrong: In Response to 'We Hear You!'" provides an alternative view of the problems with junior officer retention from what is discussed in "We Hear You!" by Lt. Gen. Milford Beagle Jr. et al. Read the original article online at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/we-hear-you/>.

offering leader emphasis at the highest levels to address the concerns of soldiers operating at the tactical level.

While our commitments have begun to lessen in the Middle East, they have grown in eastern Europe and seem likely to do so in the Asia-Pacific, where our national strategy is primarily focused. In my organization, this manifested in the short-notice assumption of a contingency mission for our Patriot forces, which we were later relieved of to deploy to U.S. Central Command five months earlier than originally planned. Simultaneously, our Avenger unit rapidly deployed to Poland to support the 82nd Airborne Division. Our experiences over the past two decades and the current management of deployments suggest the Air Defense Artillery OPTEMPO is unlikely to change in the near future.³

As a battery commander, it is often expected—if unspoken—that your spouse, particularly if you are a male, will serve as your family readiness group leader. In our case, my wife worked full time but understood the importance of my commitment, particularly during key developmental assignments (e.g., in command or in a critical staff assignment). She was always ready to support me in whatever I asked. She only stopped working full time when the Army assigned me overseas.

At present, my observations suggest that more spouses are fully committed to professional education or to the advancement of professional careers, and that the Army is “winning” in fewer of these cases. Given the context, this probably should not come as a surprise. Many of the traits that make good junior officers—confidence, ambition, good communication—make them likely to attract similarly ambitious partners. In several cases, I have observed junior officers who were apart from their spouses for initial training, served a one-year assignment to Korea, arrived at Fort Bragg during a deployment train up, and then deployed for ten months. Their spouses were either in school or engaged in their own professional work outside of North Carolina.

Do senior leaders really think that facilitating certification transfers, providing classes through Army Community Services, or providing low-skill on-post jobs will get spouses to uproot every couple of years? Or, that they will want to move if their military partners are deploying constantly? These officers want to serve, but they also recognize that they have other opportunities to serve the Nation without spending their career apart from their family or choosing their career at their spouse’s expense.

In describing the ebb and flow of Army requirements over time, Lt. Gen. Beagle et al. say that “during times of command and during key developmental time, an officer will devote a significant amount of his or her time and physical and emotional energy to their career.”⁴ The suggestion is that an officer works hard in a key developmental job then “takes a knee” while working outside of the operational force.

The reality, however, is somewhat different. Our best officers are often given second commands or moved from one high OPTEMPO job to another (e.g., Army staff, joint assignments, or fellowships). While the weekend phone calls might cease and the officers may have more predictability, they are unlikely to be the one who can stay home when a child is sick or even take them to the bus stop. As the article states, this is a choice, but it is a nearly impossible one for an ambitious officer and a supportive spouse. As my wife repeatedly told me during a particularly challenging fellowship, I might as well have been deployed because it would have been easier.

As I tell my team, it is always better to recommend a solution than just lay out a problem, so what should we do? First, it is fundamentally important to find a way to increase predictability. While the Army continues to recommend a reduced requirement for overseas deployments, achieving this will require a whole-of-government approach rather than just a military solution. We need to build partner capacity across the inter-agency and in our allies and partners to lessen the requirements for our own forward deployments. In the meantime, recognizing the importance of our

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Blanchfield Army Community Hospital civilian employee Lara Pellum works as a medical laboratory scientist 18 January 2023 on Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Pellum, the wife of an Air Force veteran, returned to college at age thirty-seven to earn a specialized health sciences degree. The author asserts that more spouses are now fully committed to professional education or to the advancement of professional careers. (Photo by Maria Christina Yager)

mission given the nature of the current hot conflicts around the world, we need to emphasize early notification for unit deployments to enable soldiers and families to plan accordingly.

Second, the Army needs to find a way to match highly skilled spouses with high-skill jobs. According to the Department of the Interior, military spouses “face a 25 percent unemployment rate and a 25 percent wage gap compared to their civilian counterparts ... [and] frequent relocation is often a barrier to finding and maintaining a rewarding career. The inability of spouses to obtain and retain fulfilling employment as

they relocate with the military compromises the quality of life of military families and the readiness of the military force.”⁵ The Department of Defense has 950,000 civilian employees. I am hard pressed to think that we cannot find a better way to match spouses to good jobs than rolling the dice with USAJOBS. This is first and foremost a quality-of-life concern for our families and will directly impact junior officer retention.

Third, the Army is absolutely moving in the right direction with talent management, giving officers more direct involvement in the assignment process. However, critical to this process is the mentorship and guidance provided by direct leadership at the battery and battalion level. Gone are the days when an assignment officer reviews their file and attempts to make the best match for their professional development.

It remains to be seen whether continued changes in talent management will increase junior officer retention, but I believe they will be unsuccessful unless accompanied by changes to predictability and spouse quality of life.

To be clear, I love the Army and have thoroughly enjoyed serving for the last twenty years. We should be proud enough of our mission and confident enough about how we develop leaders to have an honest and open dialogue about ways to make service more family-friendly without just telling our junior officers that their thoughts and concerns are simply wrong. ■

Notes

1. Milford H. Beagle Jr. et al., “We Hear You!,” *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 27 March 2023, accessed 10 April 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/we-hear-you/>.

2. Kyle Rempfer, “Got to Fix That’: Some Unit Ops Tempos Higher than Peaks of Afghan, Iraq Wars, Army Chief Says,” *Army Times* (website), 2 October 2020, accessed 10 April 2023, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/10/02/got-to-fix-that-some-unit-ops-tempos-higher-than-peaks-of-afghan-iraq-wars-army-chief-says/>. I’ve chosen to focus on the Air Defense Artillery

branch here as I cannot speak to the current operational tempo in other branches.

3. Air defense deployments are often directed by the Secretary of Defense Orders Book, which is a briefing that routes orders to the secretary of defense for approval.

4. Beagle et al., “We Hear You!”

5. “Military Spouse Employment Partnership,” U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed 10 April 2023, <https://www.doi.gov/veterans/msep>.