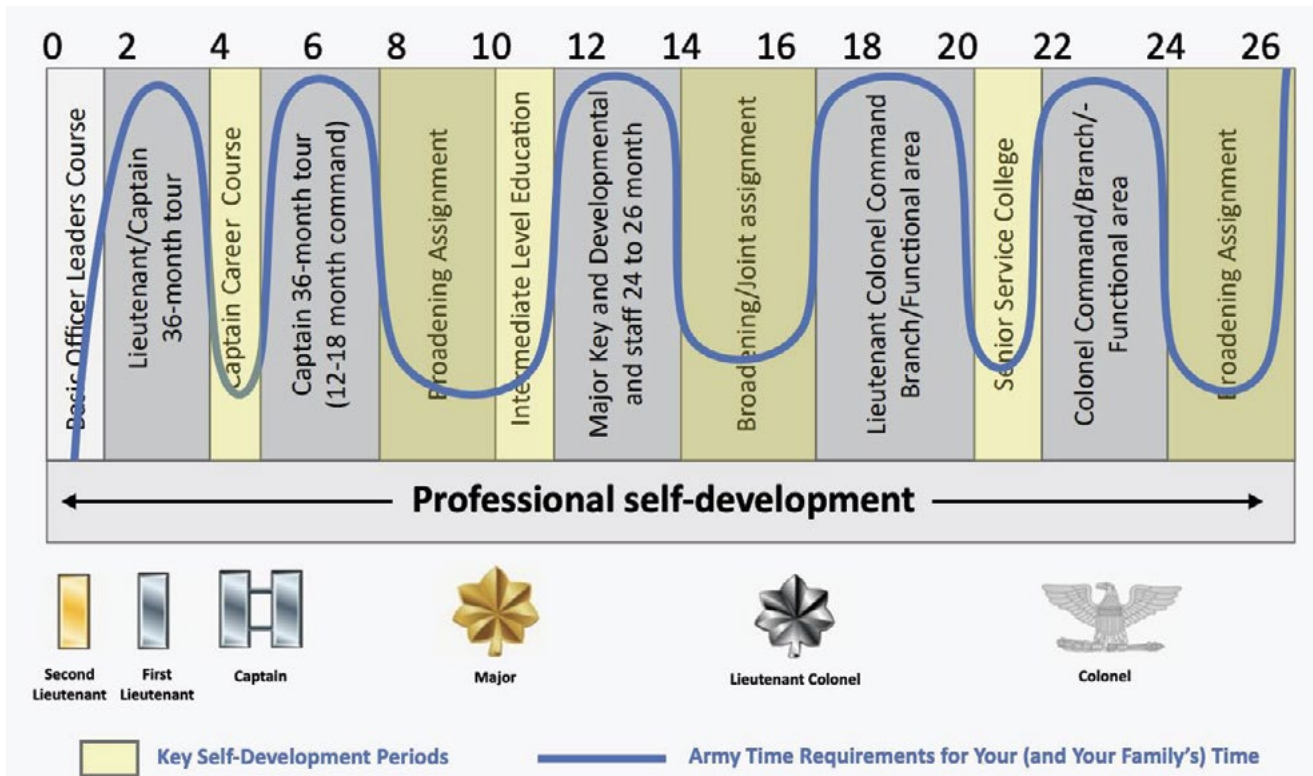




A child follows a soldier from the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, on 5 July 2018 at the Silas L. Copeland Arrival/Departure Airfield Control Group facility, Fort Bliss, Texas. Soldiers returned to Fort Bliss from Kuwait following an almost yearlong deployment in support of Operation Spartan Shield. Prolonged family separations caused by increasing numbers and lengths of deployments is among the major causes of dissatisfaction among soldiers considering careers in the Army that leadership must address when considering how to reshape the Total Army experience. (Photo by David Poe, U.S. Army)

A Call to Modernize the Army Experience

Capt. Christopher H. Slininger, U.S. Army



(Figure from Milford Beagle Jr. et al., "We Hear You!" [2023])

Figure 1. Sine Wave of Army Requirements

Let Gen. Milford Beagle and his staff posted their article "We Hear You!" via a *Military Review* online exclusive in March 2023.¹ In the original article, the junior officers (JOs) discussed professional military education (PME), company command experience, and the prevalence of toxic leaders in the Army.² Each of these officers brought forth excellent points that were acknowledged in "We Hear You!" right before they were dismissed as an issue of perception. Beagle responded to these JOs by encouraging them to "reframe perceptions."³ The "reframing" mentioned in Beagle's article discusses the "sine wave of Army requirements" (see figure 1).⁴

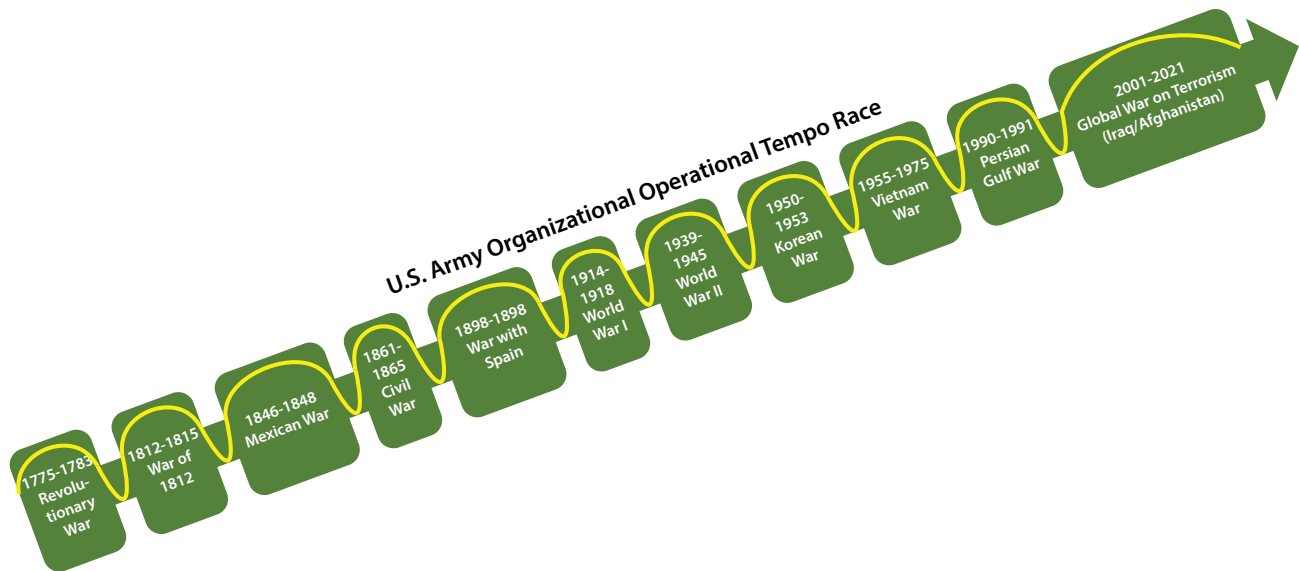
If you're looking at this, nodding your head, and thinking, yes, that is correct, that is the Army way, then you may be missing the point. Let us zoom out from the professional development model and take a quick snapshot of the U.S. Army's history (see figure 2).

Like our professional development model, the U.S. Army undergoes sine waves of increasing and decreasing operational tempo. However, as can be seen over the years, the operational tempo has been rising, with the downturns filled with smaller operations that are not

quite conflict levels. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the all-volunteer force, we must recognize that our force continues to operate in some capacity whether we are actively engaged in a declared conflict or not. Whether our force is competing or dealing with a crisis event, our soldiers are committed to protecting our Nation, our values, and our citizens' way of life every day. To win in our war for talent, we must modernize how we conduct professional development and take a holistic approach to retaining and recruiting our talent.

Gone are the days of "Army first; family when you get to it." Army spouses are now actively seeking purpose and fulfillment outside of their military ties. This is partly due to technological advances that allow them to pursue their careers and professional interests more easily. Having or being a great

Capt. Christopher H. Slininger, U.S. Army, is a military intelligence officer and former field artillery lieutenant. He has served in the Army for over nine years and has served from the platoon-level to the Headquarters, Department of the Army.



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. The Professional Development Model

Army spouse is invaluable and benefits the Army and the soldiers in innumerable ways. However, benefiting the Army in innumerable ways is not the end-all-be-all for many spouses. Many have, or want, careers of their own, which require an additional time commitment.

The Army cannot continue to require complicit adherence to a system that creates codependence on the system, benefits, and substance, creating a retention dilemma where individuals want to leave but feel trapped within the system. This creates ripple effects that lead to mental and physical health issues, taking some of the strongest citizens and making them dependent individuals. The Army and the Department of Defense cannot expect JOs of the millennial, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha demographics to trust this system and remain. At the very least, the Army must compromise on the time and energy demanded from its members.

I make a distinction here. There is a difference between an Army at war and an Army in garrison. When at war, everyone understands the sacrifices needed and are willing to put the Army first so their loved one has the best chance of coming home. However, this sacrifice should not extend to the Army's downward sine wave. JOs are asking for a better balance.

So, let us reexamine the Army profession sine wave and see what I mean by a better balance (see figure 3).

What I propose is a better balance. We all recognize that command will take more time at work than

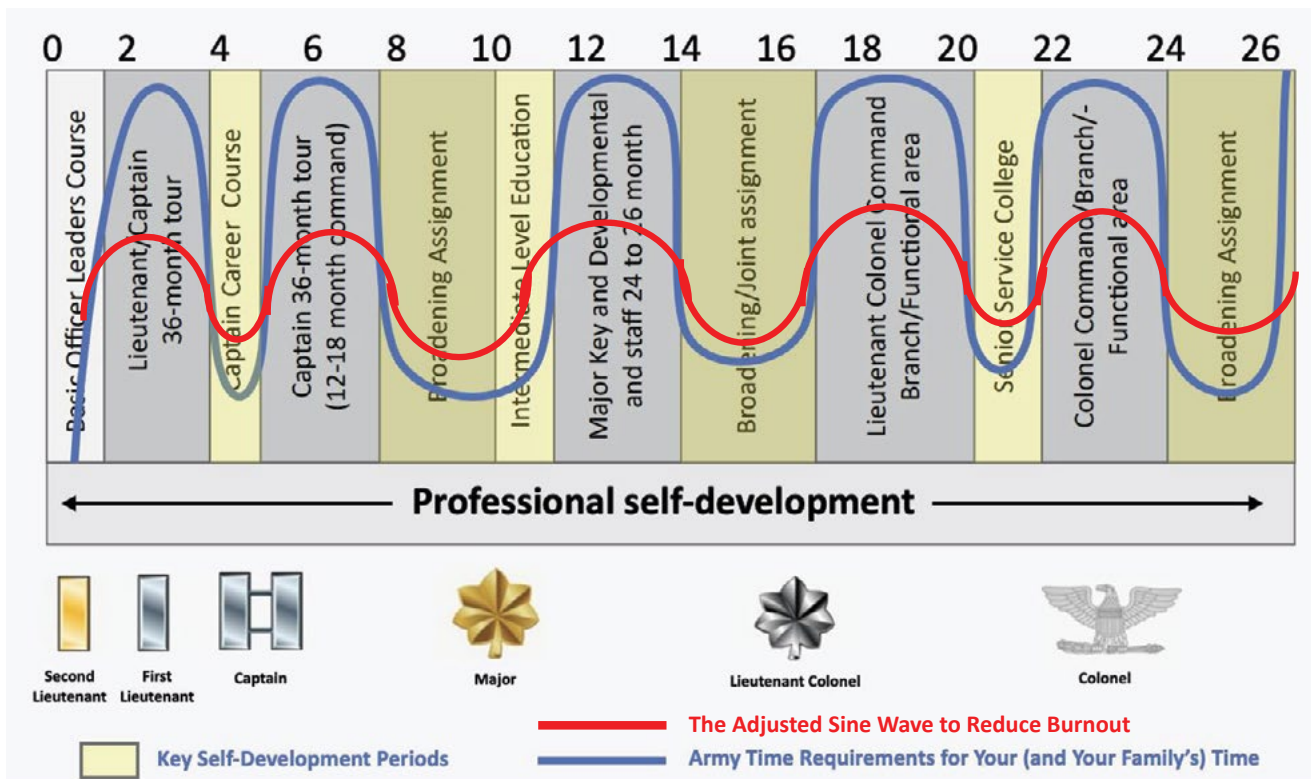
attending PME. However, if the Army can take action to reduce the spikes to create a more moderate sine wave, JOs will be more willing to stay and less likely to discourage future generations from joining.

To borrow a quote from a fictional character, “We all sign up to get to live a life of meager pay with the distinct possibility of dying.”⁵ Military officers sign up primarily because they feel called to do so, and many of them prefer to stay in the Army because of the intrinsic desire to serve and the reward of good leadership—*it’s up to the Army* not to lose soldiers to the private sector.

However, as a good staff officer and company commander, I know never to raise a problem without providing a solution. I have three solutions—one for PME, one for the Army experience, and one for leader development.

Modernizing PME—Total Soldier App

Field Manual 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, states, “Leaders develop through career-long synthesis of the training, education, and experiences acquired through opportunities in the institutional, operational, and self-development domains.”⁶ In a recent podcast episode on *From the Green Notebook*, Chief of the Defense Staff for Canada Gen. Wayne Eyre discussed the importance of continually updating one’s professional knowledge through reading and writing.⁷ As officers and leaders, we must constantly advance our



(Figure adapted by author)

Figure 3. The Army Profession Sine Wave

knowledge and capabilities, yet this can be difficult to do when faced with many areas to learn from and in. To balance the sine waves, the military must develop the capability to provide training and education to the force outside of PME.

Our current model of PME has manifested three critical issues. First, it does not educate professionals unless the individual takes it upon herself to learn and apply the concepts. Second, PME does not truly validate a soldier's mastery of the material. Third, the Army has created an environment of learn and dump instead of a continuous learning model.

I recommend that the Army evaluate the implementation of an app or web-based learning program (the Total Soldier app) that feeds microlearning courses toward the individual based on past lessons, current and future assignments, and identified knowledge gaps from superiors. Army University is an example of an organization moving in the right direction, but it needs more integration from the beginning. Modeling an app after the Salesforce Trailhead app is an example of getting microlearning to our JOs.⁸

In an Army app, the cadets at West Point and ROTC can start on a fundamental leadership path that provides additional leadership training, scenarios, and more to help them become better second lieutenants. Upon branching, the cadets can be provided with additional courses to help prepare them for the Basic Officer Leader Course. The JO attends the Basic Officer Leader Course and completes the required training for their branch. As the JO identifies the unit they are going to, they can add those additional learning paths for their units. For example, a JO who is branched field artillery and gets assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division can begin learning about the culture, the standards, the history, and -isms of the 82nd. Upon arrival and during their first days with the unit, the JO meets with their company and battalion commanders, who can review their learning path and assign additional courses (unit movement, range safety, Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention, voting, etc.) to their learning pathways to help develop their expertise. Meanwhile, in addition to these learning pathways, the JO takes courses that prepare them to be



1st Lt. Haley Steele, a preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) product manager, demonstrates a PMCS application developed by soldiers and civilians at the Army Software Factory for Gen. Ed Daly, commanding general of the U.S. Army Materiel Command, 2 February 2022. The hypothetical Total Soldier app proposed in this article would be similarly designed to modernize management of the Total Army personnel career experience. (Photo by Samantha Tyler, U.S. Army)

a platoon leader, executive officer, assistant operations officer, etc., while also having traditional PME courses held during common core assigned to them.

When the JO is complete with their time at their first duty station, they conduct PME (Captains Career Course, or CCC) via temporary duty travel en route to their next station. The CCC is reduced to the portions critical to learn in the classroom and through practical exercises by instructors. The JO is assigned additional learning pathways that prepare them for their follow-on assignment, and when the JO is complete with CCC, they arrive ready at their next duty station.

While this may sound like more effort on behalf of the JO, these microcourses are bite-sized and can be completed on their phone throughout the day, much like Duolingo does with languages.⁹ The result is a JO who continuously learns and grows at a sustainable pace.

An app-assisted PME system provides progress reports to raters and senior raters who can use these

for further development, developmental counseling, and recommendations for future assignments. It allows instructors at PME to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the incoming cohort. It will enable the instructors to tailor the PME session to address deficiencies of the cohort. Writ large, this allows TRADOC to identify common trends and where PME courses need to review and revise course programs of instruction to address common trends.

Modernize the Army Experience—True Talent Alignment

Not every officer is a leader. Not every officer should be a leader. It is time to remove key developmental (KD) position requirements.

People have talents, and the Army should appreciate that they have so many talented and intelligent officers who positively impact the Army. Instead, a JO is required to complete a staff assignment and command.

Then, they prepare to do it all again. The Army can decrease the volatility of the sine wave by allowing officers to be in positions that align with their knowledge, skills, abilities, and native genius.

Using the 35A (military intelligence officer) military occupational specialty as a model, 35As are expected to be intelligence analysts as well as leaders. Many captains are encouraged or informed that they will be a battalion S-2 (analyst) and then a company commander. Then, *if* there is enough time and support, maybe a broadening assignment.

Many officers know by the time they are captains whether they are leaders or analysts or which one they prefer. By strong-arming captains into both positions to ensure they are competitive for promotion to major, the military intelligence branch ensures the officer is operating under high stress in at least one job they likely do not enjoy, prefer, or thrive in for an extended period.

Removing KD will not create a shortage of officers at hard-to-fill locations because manning cycles still exist. It does create an environment for innovation to balance the location, job, and personnel—which is best left to the leadership on the ground and not at Human Resources Command.

Removing KD removes the backlog created by officers waiting in the queue to assume KD positions. This leads to officers being backlogged and stuck in other positions where they must “row hard to earn” their KD spot. While it is a privilege to command, the contradiction of the Army requiring officers to complete a job while making it a competition must end.

Building on the modernization of PME, leaders can identify incoming personnel who have self-identified as leaders versus staff through their app-based learning and tailor the individual to the correct unit at the right time. By no means should an officer arrive on station and immediately take command; there is great value in working on the staff and learning about the people, the organization, and the vision, but it does not need to be an extended period while the officer “competes” for a KD position that is time-on-station based, not merit-based.

Modernize the Leadership Experience—Army Junior Officer Council

Wait, isn't KD leadership? No, KD is just a job.

The Army faces a gap between general officers and JOs consisting of a vast ocean of field grade officers. To start developing these JOs to be the future leaders of the Army, they need mentorship.

Military Mentors define mentoring as “a long-term developmental relationship that is reciprocal, yet asymmetric.”¹⁰ Besides as an aide de camp, how can JOs get mentored by the stars? How can that relationship be reciprocal? Luckily, two proven venues enable reciprocal mentorship between senior and junior individuals.

First, the U.S. Air Force's auxiliary, the Civil Air Patrol, has been doing it for decades through its Cadet Advisory Council.¹¹ The Cadet Advisory Council (CAC) exists from the national to the local level of the Civil Air Patrol. The CAC is run by senior cadets at the national level and can see participants as young as twelve, and is advised by the senior members (adults) in the cadet program's track and by local adult commanders. Through CAC, cadets can raise issues, develop solutions, and interact with adult leaders across echelons. Having participated in CAC, this was an invaluable experience that broadened my perspective of issues and policies before I was even commissioned. As the primary homeland search and rescue organization can trust youth to be professional and interact with national-level leaders, the Army can trust JOs to interact with its senior leaders.

Second, the U.S. Navy recently enacted the Naval Junior Officer Counsel (NJOC).

The Naval Junior Officer Counsel (NJOC) is the *Navy's first management advisory group* officially endorsed by the Chief of Naval Personnel and Chief of Naval Research. A *cross-designator group of junior officers*, NJOC's mission is to *collect, refine and deliver recommendations to leadership*. In essence, NJOC is a platform for *senior leaders to access the ideas of younger generations to inform decision-making*. More importantly, the system is *designed to stimulate a culture that promotes constructive behavior and encourages junior officers to seek out guidance and perspective from those who came before them*. [Emphasis added by author]¹²

What do both organizations have in common? Senior leaders receive feedback, ideas, and recommendations from junior leaders.

The Army could establish an Army Junior Officer Council (AJOC) for O-1 to O-3 officers, chaired and run by JOs, advised by senior field grade and above officers (O-6 and higher), depending on the level of the council. The AJOC would allow JOs to contribute solutions or recommendations to the Army, provide Army senior leaders the ability to solicit feedback and provide mentorship to JOs, and create future general officers today that can better move the Army forward now and as field grade officers.

The purpose of the AJOC would be to provide the Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), deputy chief of staff G-1 and vice chief of staff of the Army information regarding the interests and concerns specific to the active duty, Army Reserve, and National Guard junior officers. The primary scope of the AJOC would be Army culture, transformation, innovation, and leader development. Key to the success of the AJOC would be a coordinated effort at echelon from division to HQDA.

To achieve this, the AJOC must be appropriately echeloned by command (U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM), U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, U.S. Army Recruiting Command, U.S. Army National Guard, etc.). This would allow information to be communicated by both the AJOC and the senior advisors of the AJOC concurrently.

For example, the 1st Infantry Division (1ID), III Corps, FORSCOM, and HQDA established AJOC chapters advised by the 1ID, III Corps, and FORSCOM commanders and the HQDA G-1 and vice chief of staff of the Army. An idea or issue is developed at the 1ID level and is communicated through AJOC chapter leadership to the AJOC director. Concurrently, the same idea/issue is communicated through senior advisor channels. At each level, the AJOC chapter and senior advisor discuss the idea/issue, validate, and add to the recommendation from the 1ID AJOC. The HQDA AJOC receives the idea/issue and works with the G-1, vice chief of staff of the Army, or designated section to action the recommendation.

Benefits of this system include general officer mentorship to AJOC members at every level. This helps to create better junior officers, enable direct communication and feedback from the company level to the general officer level, create a culture of innovation and solution-oriented officers, and involve millennial and

Generation Z officers in making and seeing an impact on the Army.

The organization of each AJOC chapter may vary slightly; however, each chapter would have a director, deputy director, executive secretary, and chapter members. Participation in the AJOC would be entirely voluntary and should never be mandated or calculated in evaluation report decisions. The goal is to identify, develop, and mentor junior officers vested in the Army's sustained success and provide them with opportunities to be mentored by general officers.

A Glimpse into the Future

Here is what these recommendations *could* look like to a future junior officer. J. Snuffy feels the call to serve; he talks to his local Army ROTC recruiter and learns about the incredible ways our all-volunteer force serves our country. It is a no-brainer for Snuffy, and he decides to be all he can be through the Army. As a contracted cadet, his assistant professor of military science talks about the Total Soldier app everyone uses in the Army. This app tracks courses, education, and interests and enables the Army to align talent, individuals, and needs of the Army to achieve success on the battlefield and the soldier's career.

Cadet Snuffy uses this app during his time at college, supplementing his ROTC classes and building knowledge and understanding of power skills—those skills that enable leaders to be successful—such as coaching, conflict management, time management, resiliency, etc. These lessons blend into Snuffy's life and improve his ability to succeed in college, which motivates him to continue learning and applying these learned skills. Then, in the fall of his senior year, Snuffy finds out he has been branched into military intelligence but detailed to field artillery, precisely what he wanted!

The assistant professor of military science updates the profile to indicate the branching results. Snuffy now has access to courses that will help him learn about the three disciplines of field artillery: fire support, fire direction, and battery operations. These classes give Snuffy the confidence and understanding of how field artillery works. Then Snuffy finally commissions and becomes 2nd Lt. Snuffy. Snuffy gets to put his learned skills over the past four years to use while he works as a Gold Bar Recruiter at his university and continues developing his knowledge of the field artillery world.

With Gold Bar duty complete, Snuffy arrives at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and is ready to learn about call for fire, gunnery, and practicing employment of the battery during defensive and offensive operations. Since there is no common core, thanks to Total Soldier, the instructors at Fort Sill can focus on developing incredible leaders versed in various disciplines.

While at Fort Sill, Snuffy is assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Liberty, North Carolina. His small group instructor adds the duty location to his profile, and new courses are available for Snuffy to learn from. These include airborne operations, artillery raids, and M119A3 specifics. It also provides a path for learning about the 82nd, its history, values, and culture. By the time Snuffy arrives, he feels ready to contribute to the 82nd.

Snuffy arrives at Fort Liberty, in processes, and receives his battalion and battery assignment. Snuffy meets with his sponsor, who introduces him to the battalion commander. The battalion commander has reviewed Snuffy's learning profile and training history, knows in which battery he will serve, and provides a few stretch learning pathways to pursue before his semiannual counseling. Snuffy's sponsor takes him to the battery commander, who has also reviewed Snuffy's profile, can see the battalion commander's recommendations, and provides a few additional duty courses for Snuffy to learn from to help him achieve his tasks while assigned as a fire direction officer.

For the next year, Snuffy spends ten minutes daily on the Total Soldier app; this consistent microlearning enables him to learn and apply concepts slowly while a fire direction officer. Through quarterly counseling, Snuffy and his battery commander decided to move him to a fire support officer position. Since these skills can atrophy, Snuffy's Total Soldier app populates with refresher courses, enabling him to arrive ready to contribute to the fire support team. This cycle continues with stretch assignments, stretch goals, and continuous learning while Snuffy progresses to first lieutenant and then captain.

During this time, Snuffy learns from his battery commander about the Army junior officer council and decides to attend the meetings for his battalion. After a while, Snuffy chooses to develop himself further and runs for a position. His battery commander opens a new learning pathway for him, and he can learn how to run meetings, develop others, identify issues, and propose

ideas and recommendations. As part of the AJOC, he contributes to identifying an issue and writing a proposal to increase fitness competency across the division. Snuffy meets with the division AJOC and proposes the idea.

Through collaborating with other JOs and receiving mentorship from field grade officers, Snuffy refines his proposal and learns about functional areas in the Army—one of his mentors in the AJOC was in space operations (Functional Area [FA] 40). Snuffy has learned more about functional areas and is now interested in becoming an operations research/systems analyst (FA49).

While a first lieutenant, Snuffy receives a new learning pathway on Total Soldier to prepare him for the Military Intelligence Captains Career Course. These lessons include common core tasks such as reviewing the Uniformed Code of Military Justice, property accountability, etc., but also include lessons on intelligence preparation of the battlefield, intelligence disciplines (human, counter, signals, geo, etc.), and the role of the intelligence officer on staff.

Capt. Snuffy arrives at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, home of intelligence, ready to put into practice what he has learned about intelligence preparation of the battlespace and intelligence writ large. While reviewing his incoming cohort's learning reports, the course cadre identified difficulty with the class in understanding the third step—evaluate the threat. This enables the instructors to home in on this step and resolve the learning discrepancy.

During Snuffy's time at CCC, he works with his small group leader to help him evaluate his preferred career path in intelligence and how he can further his goal of becoming an FA49. The small group leader opens a new learning pathway that involves FA49 courses to help Snuffy learn more about the functional area and develop the skills needed.

As CCC ends, Snuffy and his family PCS to a new assignment at the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, where he continues to develop his intelligence professional skills while working in a position that enables him to practice FA49 skills. Snuffy does this through his position as a company commander at the National Security Agency. He also remains active in AJOC. While in command, he receives an invite from the FA49 branch, asking him to apply for the program and complete an initial assessment.

This happens because the learning pathway initiated and completed by Snuffy pushed an alert to FA49 recruiters, who then worked with Human Resources Command and monitored Snuffy's career path. Snuffy applies and is eligible to become an FA49 after completing a master's program in research analysis.

The FA49 branch sponsors Snuffy for attendance at Johns Hopkins University. Snuffy and his family are stabilized in the area for an additional two years while he completes the program. During this time, Snuffy continues to use Total Soldier to remain concurrent with doctrine and the knowledge needed for his intermediate level education—this includes learning about Army design methodology and the military decision-making process. Upon completion of his master's and his FA49

training, he can complete intermediate level education and return to the force a fully qualified FA49.

Maj. Snuffy enjoys his time with his family, but more importantly, enjoys contributing to the Army in a way that aligns with his talents and passions. Snuffy continues to pursue learning on the Total Soldier app, becoming a skilled professional and field grade officer. Snuffy also gives back to the Army by becoming an AJOC mentor and helps his local chapter of JOs develop and learn as professionals.

Can you hear us now? ■

The views of this article are the author's own and do not represent the U.S. Army or any unit or commander he has served, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

Notes

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