# Command Selection Reimagined

## Modern Solutions for the Army Reserve

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Amodern, user-friendly Command Preference Designator (CPD) is not just a convenience—it is a necessity for ensuring the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) places the right leaders in the right command billets to enhance operational readiness and leadership continuity. The CPD should provide critical leadership capabilities to theater army commanders during crises or conflicts. Unfortunately, the current model for matching aspiring battalion and brigade commanders with units—the CPD hosted by U.S. Army Human Resources Command (HRC)—suffers from significant shortcomings. These include almost no information about the command vacancy and an antiquated user interface (UI), which prevents officers from making fully informed decisions about their command preferences and adequately preparing their subordinates for similar opportunities. Between 2016 and 2020, 110 battalion command billets in the USAR went unfilled, underscoring systemic inefficiencies that weaken operational leadership and readiness.[1] Additionally, user feedback reveals widespread frustration with the opacity of the board evaluation process and the perceived misalignment between officer qualifications and assignments. These issues often lead to officers refusing assignments, opting out of the process, or reluctantly accepting roles with diminished motivation. Given that the Army offers Reserve Officers' Training Corps and West Point cadets options such as branch selection and first post assignments as part of the Career Satisfaction Program, it is reasonable to expect similar investments in UI improvements for the Army Reserve's command preference system.[2] Addressing user needs within the CPD is essential to enhance the alignment of officer skills with unit needs, increase confidence in the selection process, and sustain interest among aspiring commanders, ultimately strengthening the overall effectiveness of the USAR.

## Key Challenges with the Current CPD and Survey Findings

To understand the root causes of these inefficiencies and potential improvements, a survey was conducted among fifty current and former battalion and brigade commanders.[3] The survey revealed that users rate the current command preference interface poorly, with an average score of 36 out of 100. Additionally, 70 percent of respondents felt "not at all confident" or "marginally confident" about receiving one of their top preferences. One officer stated, "I honestly can only guess what the process is since I do not have a good understanding of the board process for USAR. I would love to find out how my file is evaluated so I can mentor other junior officers in my rank." Encouragingly, the majority of current commanders (88 percent of survey respondents) are willing to provide additional information about their unit to their successor to facilitate a better-informed decision and outcome for the USAR; however,

## Figure 1. Example CPD Screen Where Users Rank Their Unit Preferences

the process close date and not when the board is in session or when results may be expected—that is listed separately in the military personnel messages that may be buried in your email. Amidst any other personal and professional commitments, users may abandon the process, elect not to compete, forget to opt out, or rank only what is familiar to them.

In addition to the UI, the content leaves a lot to be desired. Officers don't have enough information to make the best-informed decisions; 85 percent would like more information on each unit to feel more confident when rank their preferences. Currently, users see only the unit, primary change of command date, and command duration. Also, the system forces users to rank subcategories (e.g., engineer, combat arms, branch immaterial) first and then the relevant units after, restricting users from ranking the actual units regardless of subcategory. For example, an officer may prefer to be in a specific branch for their top choice but may prefer a combat arms unit for their second overall choice. Users would also like to know if the command vacancy is a TDA (Table of Distribution and Allowance) or MTOE (modified table of organization and equipment) unit, what is its mission, and what are the locations and dispersion of subordinate units.[6] Additionally, the current Inactive Duty Training Travel Reimbursement Program provides up to only $500 for round-trip reimbursement when soldiers commute more than 150 miles (one-way) from their home of record to their unit of assignment.[7] Not surprisingly, users tend to default to prioritizing commands in their branch and those closest to their home of record. Figure 2 shows how users ranked what is most important to them. It follows that branch-immaterial billets far away from home are likely more difficult to fill.
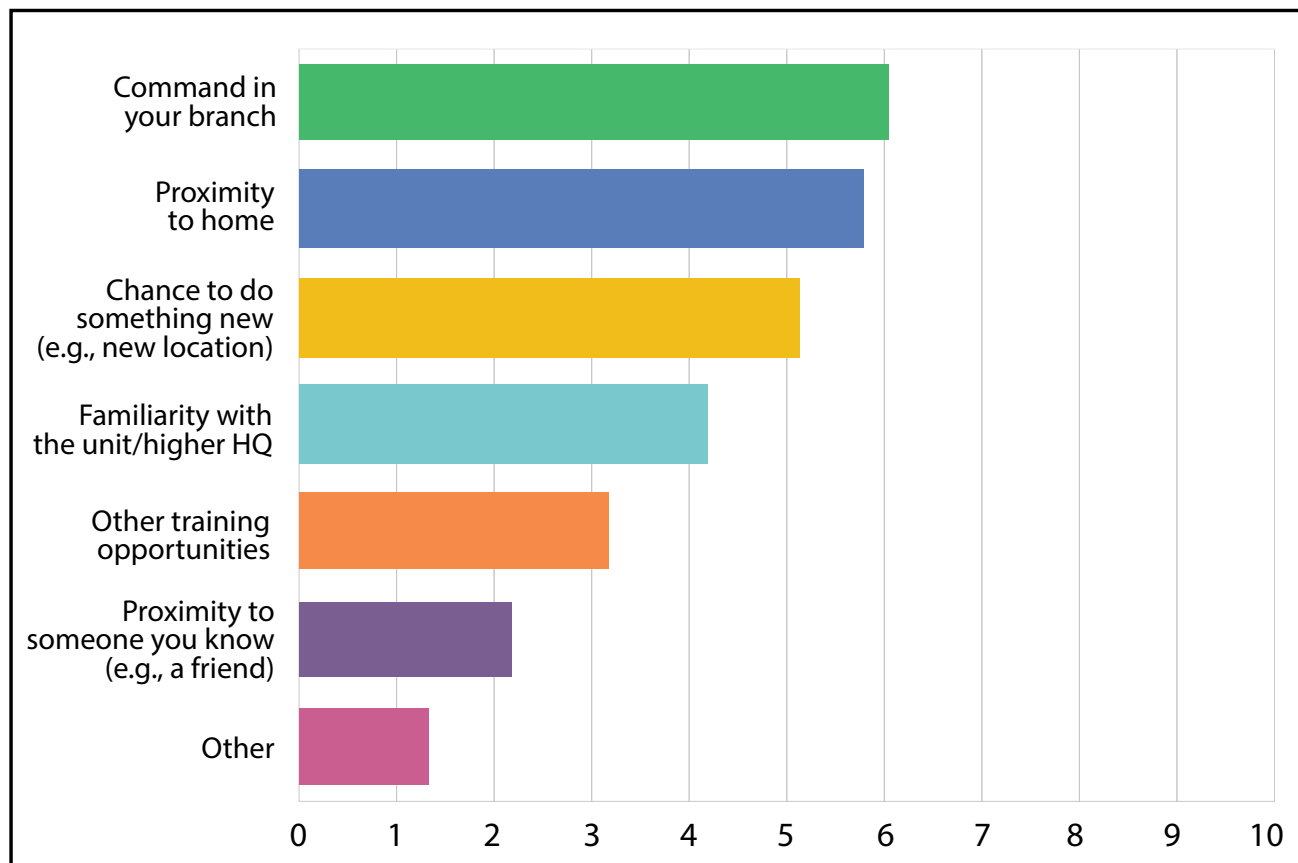
it is on the USAR itself to provide this information within the CPD.

The CPD's UI fails to meet modern design standards, adding unnecessary cognitive load to an already complex process. The tragic USS *John McCain* incident highlights how poor interface design can have dire consequences.[4] Additionally, the CPD does not pass accessibility standards as defined in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, such as text hierarchy, scattered alignment, and text that is not contrasted with its background to minimum contrast ratios (see figure 1).[5] Furthermore, the process for ranking unit preferences is cumbersome. The entire process is spread across ten to fourteen screens, depending on which subcategories the aspiring commander is eligible for, and it does not allow users to save progress and return later. This limitation forces officers to complete the process in one sitting, reducing opportunities to reflect on preferences or gather additional information. The CPD only lists

(Figure by author)

## Figure 2. User Ranking Preferences from the Survey

The system also lacks a modern analytical capability on competitiveness for each position. In a comparative example, job seekers on LinkedIn Premium can see what attributes employers value and how competitive you are for that job based on your education and skill set in addition to the locations of applicants and their education. In the CPD, you have no sense of placement in your peer group, and as a result, little to no confidence that you will get what you're asking for. You rank your preferences and don't hear anything back until the board results are released months later.

When officers decline their first command offer, it causes negative second-order effects across the Army Reserve. These include less time for knowledge transfer from the outgoing commander, leadership voids in units, additional stress on existing staff, and administrative costs for identifying secondary—and sometimes tertiary—candidates. Further, higher-level (e.g., brigade and division) commanders must work with HRC to fill their command positions, which is considerably more difficult than appointing an officer already within their ranks, if one exists. Thirty percent of officers surveyed stated that the position was offered to someone else before them.

Timing is a significant concern for USAR officers. Active Component officers typically have over a year to prepare for command, which allows them to address skill gaps and adjust their personal lives. In contrast, USAR officers have an average of only five months to prepare. Over half of the survey respondents stated they would appreciate additional time to prepare for the role, making time to attend the mandatory Battalion Brigade Pre-Command Course ahead of and not during command. Another officer stated, "We need to be notified at least twelve months out. We can't complete all of our pre-command required training (which is important) before taking command with the current selection/notification timeline." Further, officers
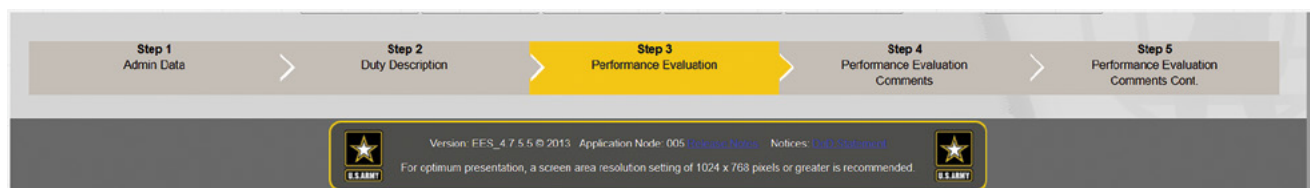
## Figure 3. Evaluation Entry System Progress Bar

want to see what vacancies open the following year so that they may opt out of the current board and elect to compete for a vacancy they are more interested in. For example, if they'd elect to compete for an engineer battalion that is closest and/or familiar to them the following year, they'd prefer to know that information ahead of time.

## Proposed Solutions and Expected Outcomes

Tracking progress throughout the process from initial notification to selection keeps officers engaged and appraised of status. A comparative example could be Domino's simple yet famed pizza tracker, which lets users know exactly where they are in the delivery pizza process.[8] Dominos' tracker has even inspired state governments in Missouri and Rhode Island to create more human-centered designs for their services.[9] Fortunately, the Army already employs successful examples of a simple process diagram: HRC's Evaluation Entry System also has a version of the "pizza tracker" that shows where users are during the evaluation creation process (see figure 3).[10] Ensuring consistent engagement throughout the command selection process is expected to reduce the rate of command refusals, thereby enhancing unit readiness and operational continuity.

Addressing these user experience (UX) challenges is essential to ensure more effective talent management. Several solutions could significantly enhance the CPD's usability and outcomes. At minimum, it should offer a modern and user-friendly interface, detailed vacancy information, and transparency throughout the process to enable the best outcomes. Extending preparation time for USAR officers to match their Active Component counterparts and analytics on competitiveness for positions would further enhance readiness.

The CPD could even be a place to come back to after results have been published, showing which unit an officer has been selected for and contact information for the unit so the officer can maximize the transfer of knowledge (see figure 4).

The number of screens could be reduced in half while providing much more information by adopting more modern UI features. Throughout the entire journey, the user should be reminded of key command selection list dates including the time they need to make their preferences, when the board is conducted, and when results may be expected. This may be articulated through a sequential process diagram inspired by the famed pizza tracker and familiar navigation with the Evaluation Entry System. The revised UI must include embedded links to relevant military personnel messages, thereby creating a more comprehensive UX.

The revised UI also must enable modern filtering and sorting of vacancies similar to shopping for a car on Autotrader. You could learn more about each unit and filter by several fields including primary change of command date, command duration in months, and distance from your home of record by simply entering a zip code. This functionality would enable officers to evaluate command opportunities based on key factors such as distance,

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(Figure by author)

## Figure 4. Proposed Low-Fidelity Prototype

duration, start date, unit type, and alignment with career progression goals. Officers may favor what is important to them, and that could be carried over to the following page where they can rank preferences by simply putting a number next to each saved vacancy.

Once the results are published, users could come back to the CPD tool to find contact information for the unit they were selected for—including incumbent commander, rater, and senior rater contact information—to get answers to questions and enable a longer

transfer of knowledge. For users that were not selected for a command, they may see that they are on the alternate list so they remain engaged with the process should another officer decline command and the position open.

## Conclusion

Despite financial constraints, investing in these improvements is essential as the current system's inefficiencies and negative impact on morale are costly. Considering the Army's budget is over $185 billion, a few hundred thousand dollars for a UX team to optimize the CPD is a rounding error.[11]

The inefficiencies within the CPD jeopardize the Army Reserve's ability to align officer qualifications with unit needs, creating leadership gaps and operational risks. Addressing these issues through a modernized CPD with a user-friendly interface, detailed vacancy information, and progress-tracking features will foster confidence in the process and improve leadership continuity.

To ensure readiness, HRC must urgently prioritize UX improvements and allocate resources for implementation. Investing in these enhancements will deliver long-term benefits, including fewer command refusals, improved knowledge transfer, and greater alignment of officer skills with unit needs, securing the Army Reserve's effectiveness for the future. ∎

## Notes

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