



M1A2 Abrams tanks patrol the countryside during exercises at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Photo courtesy of JRTC, U.S. Army)

How Has the Joint Readiness Training Center Changed to Adapt to Large-Scale Combat Operations?

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With zero illumination and near 100 percent humidity on an oppressively hot summer night, sound travels well. The sound of oncoming BMP infantry fighting vehicles and T-80 tanks clamoring west on Artillery Road contrasts with the soldiers' fatigue; the audible signature closes on the defenders as they drift in and out of consciousness. Then, in a few desperate moments, the Arianan armor column appears, and a crescendo of antitank fire distorts the command radio net's situation reports and fire coordination. These few decisive moments of integrated arms characterize the brigade combat team's (BCT) defense, and the success or failure of its platoons and companies are the down-trace results of BCT fights: creating depth, executing integrated information collection and joint fires, and sustaining the force for the anticipated fight.

Unlike Task Force Smith from the early days of the Korean War, infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs) come to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) well-prepared, well-

equipped, and well-trained for the decisive-action training environment (DATE), and they have the distinct advantage of being able to learn and improve from training rather than combat. In *America's First Battles, 1776–1965*, editors Charles E. Heller

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and William A. Stofft present a collection of essays examining the preparedness of America's Army to fight the first major combat events of its wars from the America Revolution to the Vietnam War.¹ The doctrine, tactics, training, and overall preparedness of U.S. Army forces at the onset of major combat operations often resulted in battlefield defeat or costly victories that stimulated a need to adapt and to prevail in the midst of conflict. As the demands of the Army's IBCTs have shifted from stability and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations toward preparation for large-scale combat operations (LSCO), the JRTC has adapted to prepare them for the known, suspected, and likely environments in which they must fight and win.

When he took over as the chief of staff of the Army in August 2015, Gen. Mark Milley established readiness as the Army's number one priority and specifically messaged that the ability of units to "fight tonight" on little to no notice against a peer threat in LSCO is the necessary benchmark.² Though Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, does not explicitly define the term LSCO, for this article we will assume what our doctrine implies: LSCO is that in which an IBCT is but one contributor to a multidivision land operation, fighting as part of a joint force. A recent example, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, illustrates explicitly that IBCTs are important components of a much grander campaign that may include multiple division headquarters operating as maneuver forces.

The JRTC makes the fight for the fictional country of Atropia each IBCT's "first battle," an opportunity to test itself in a crucible experience approaching combat to stimulate the growth needed for greater combat readiness. The JRTC trains the Army's IBCTs to fight and win in LSCO by meeting the U.S. Army Forces Command and Training and Doctrine Command guidance on combat training centers. This article, however, focuses on three specific ways the JRTC provides a crucible experience that meets the chief of staff of the Army's intent. First, JRTC DATE rotations allow units to experience and learn from failure. Second, training at the JRTC helps IBCTs challenge assumptions and break the expectations its leaders have learned over the last couple of decades of COIN. And third, the JRTC construct provides scalable, flexible scenarios that create uncertainty while optimizing an IBCT's training objectives.

Failure as a Stimulus

While the BCT's Shadow unmanned aircraft system observes elsewhere, a mounted scout section unpreparedly encounters a mined wire obstacle on the far side of a blind curve and is destroyed within moments by 30 mm fire from two defending BMP-2s. Scouts intended for dismounted missions with Javelin antitank missiles lie dead in the back of their trucks. Without an artillery battery in direct support, without a low enough coordinating altitude for responsive troop mortar fires, and without sufficient mobility assets available to breach the obstacle, hours pass without progress toward the troop's reconnaissance objective; the squadron is fixed by an enemy it can neither bypass nor defeat.

JRTC comprises about 220 thousand acres of training land in north central Louisiana—much of it the same ground Gen. George Marshall used for the Louisiana Maneuvers of 1940–1941. Today's JRTC retains its heritage in relation to the Louisiana Maneuvers through the Operations Group tenet: "JRTC is the premiere crucible training experience. We prepare units to fight and win in the most complex environments. We are inspiring professionals; trusted and respected."³ Recent JRTC DATE rotations have been exercises with both multiple successes as well as multiple failures, not unlike the Louisiana Maneuvers. Well-led units demonstrate small-unit proficiency and lethality but still struggle with fourteen days of full immersion and the enormous complexity of moving and sustaining an IBCT in restricted terrain. Integrating the effects of a task-organized IBCT is daunting; IBCTs rarely get it quite right against a capable and determined opposing force that gives no quarter and requires a unit to mass effects to achieve success.

One way the JRTC is adapting to train our IBCTs is by presenting them with large-scale problems, resourced as closely as possible to combat conditions, and allowing them to own not only their successes but also their failures. Gone are the combat outposts and replicated forward operating bases. There are no situational training lanes teaching companies, platoons, or individuals the latest COIN techniques. Because of the crucible experience, the environmental conditions, and the tremendously well-equipped hybrid enemy threat, IBCTs leave with an appreciation and with ownership of the adjustments that make them better prepared than a home-station event can achieve. They also leave with well-earned confidence about their readiness for future challenges.

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The outstanding performance of 3rd Infantry Division (3ID) and the 101st Airborne Division (101st) at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 is an excellent example of ready Army units enabling the joint force to achieve victory. . . . This readiness was not developed quickly, it was built long before these units ever crossed the line of departure and was key to their success. *Due to the many years of combined arms maneuver preparation and training these units conducted, 3ID and the 101st succeeded in dismantling a larger army, achieving their objectives with minimal casualties, and doing so with a speed many thought impossible.*

—Gen. Mark A. Milley,
U.S. Army

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Army Readiness Guidance, Calendar Year 2016–17



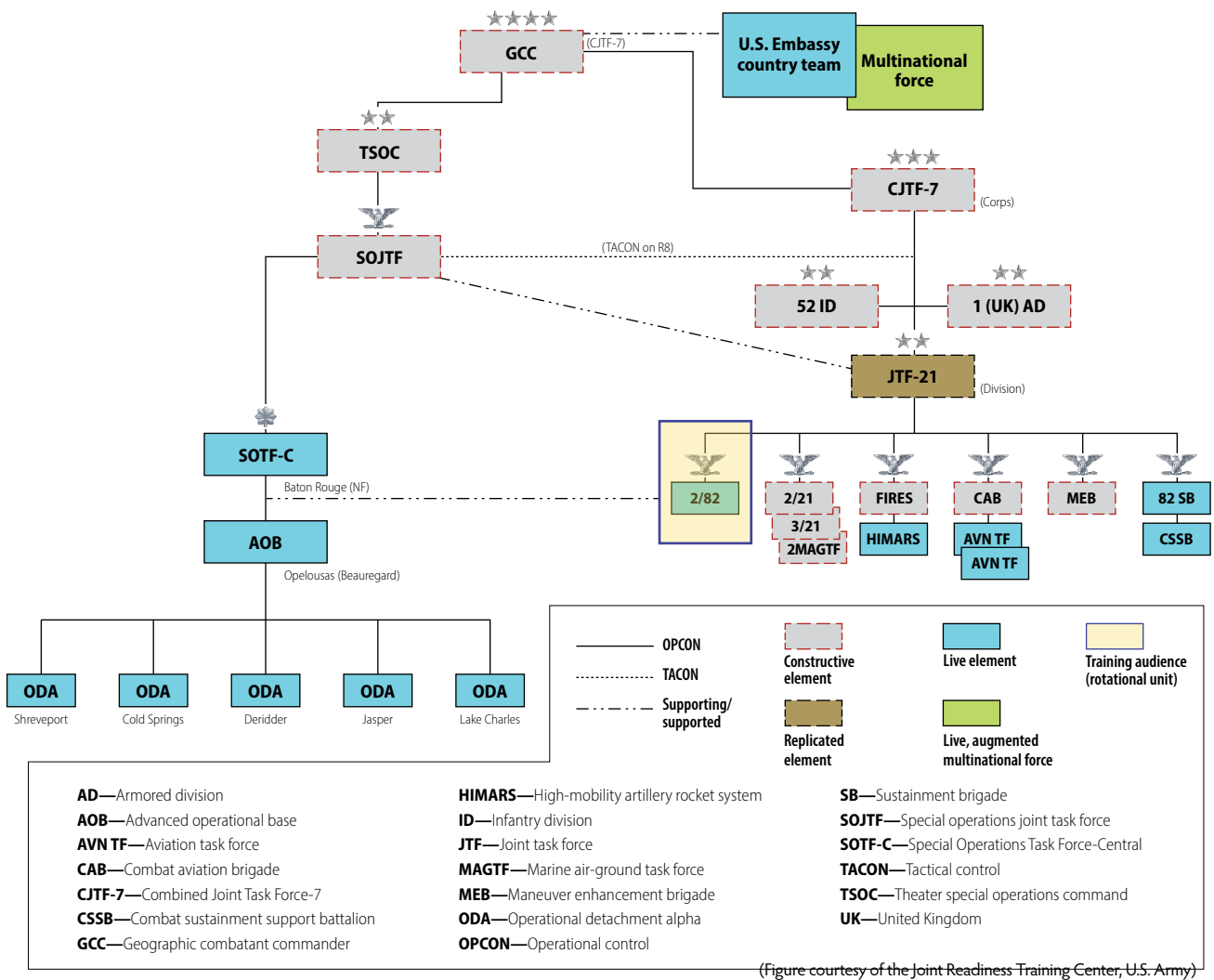
What IBCTs often learn through failure in the maneuver box is the difficulty of terrain management and movement control; few appreciate that a light IBCT's modified table of organization and equipment of rolling stock stretches over 18.5 kilometers when spaced at 20 meter intervals. Most have not been conditioned to expect that, although a brigade support area takes up more than twenty acres, it can be largely concealed in open forest and survive against a determined and capable enemy. Fewer still have an appreciation for the need to position command posts incrementally for short periods of time and plan surge periods of no more than twenty-four to forty-eight hours to sustain mission command functions and also survive.

When confronted directly with the frustration or desynchronization of the IBCT, adaptation follows. The crucible approach at JRTC allows units to build on successes while thoroughly dissecting failures, and to experience firsthand the lessons that will prepare units and leaders to participate in LSCO. Normally, by the end of a fourteen-day rotation, units can handle the challenges of LSCO that seemed insurmountable on day one or two.

Soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, work their way through the live-fire portion of a recent training exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Photo courtesy of JRTC, U.S. Army)

Breaking Counterinsurgency Expectations

There are two types of plans at JRTC: those that have a chance to be successful and those that will not be successful. On this night, observer/coach trainers (OC/Ts) and senior observers from the chain of command anxiously await the fight to see whether the blue forces can pull off a victory. After moonset, the opposing forces probe, assessing defenses, overwhelming blue forces' fire mission processing times, and presenting multiple dilemmas, until culmination. Victims of their perspective of the last sixteen years, the BCT relies too much on precision rather than mass, and on positive control versus the procedural controls needed to enable the simultaneity of surface fires, close air support, and attack aviation to defeat enemy forces on a scale not encountered since Iraq in 2003. Centralizing control through a BCT headquarters at execution time and



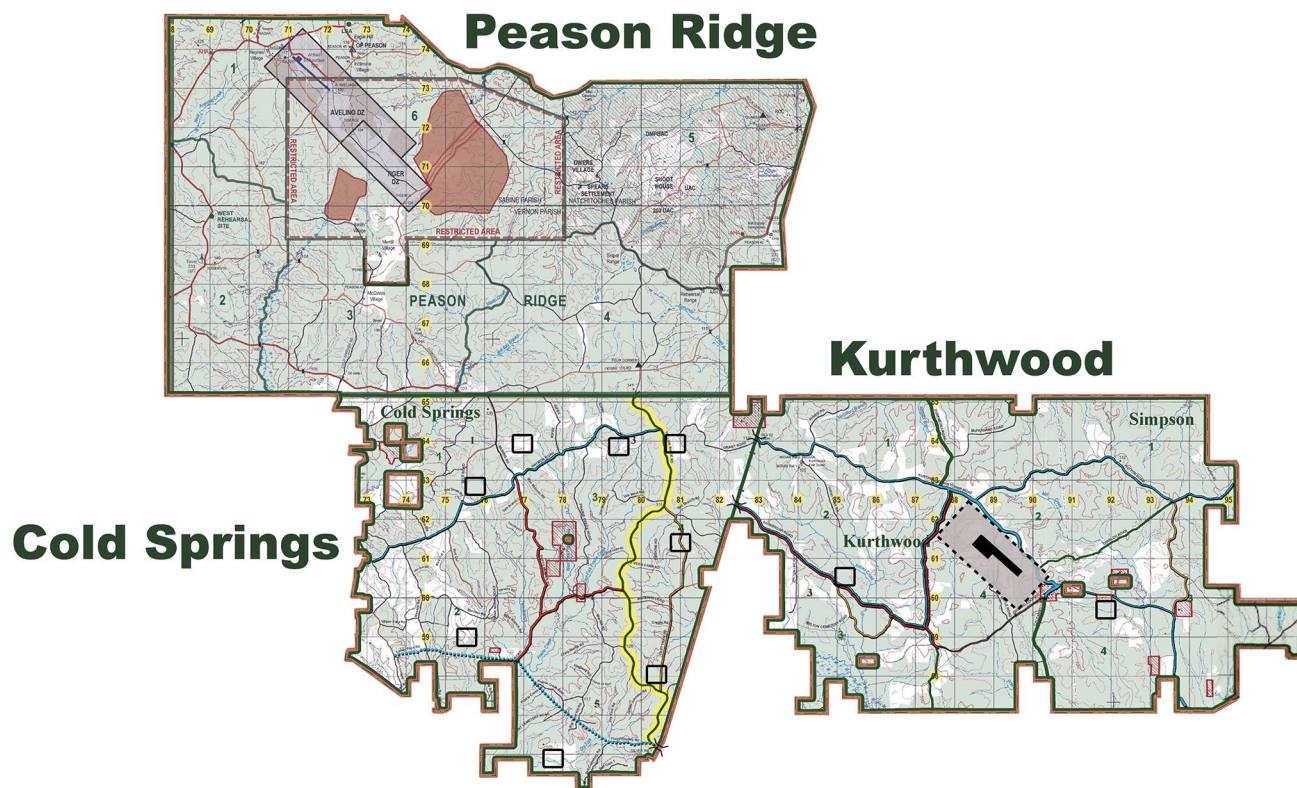
(Figure courtesy of the Joint Readiness Training Center, U.S. Army)

Figure 1. Recent Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) Exercise Force Structure

waiting to clear air and ground with each request will not produce the volume required for a win.

Like the Louisiana Maneuvers of 1940–1941, rotations at the JRTC present larger-scale movement and maneuver, and demand a higher concentration of combined arms integration than most units have practiced. No two rotations are exactly alike, but all typically involve a couple of IBCT-level attacks, at least one defense against a hybrid threat including motorized and armored forces, and an IBCT live-fire exercise that includes the maneuver of two cavalry troops and two infantry battalions with mortars,

organic artillery, attack aviation, and close air support as well as a deep fight that challenges the IBCT’s ability to link information collection and deep fires. Over fourteen days, the IBCT will reposition three to four times, executing anywhere from four to eight IBCT command post jumps. The IBCT is required to meet its tactical obligations as well as its collaboration requirements with the joint task force headquarters (JTF-21), a replicated two-star land component headquarters commanding five separate brigade equivalents. The IBCT must accomplish all this while integrating the efforts of eight or more battalion-, squadron-, or task-force-level formations and



(Figure courtesy of the Joint Readiness Training Center, U.S. Army)

Figure 2. Northern Training Area Development

numerous other enablers task-organized to the IBCT, often including international partners.

One expectation the JRTC helps an IBCT break is that unlike most IBCT's experiences of the past sixteen years, they are not the main effort, nor are they responsible for the decisive operation during any of their major combat operations—all are in support of adjacent units within the scenario. As a result, IBCTs cannot exclusively rely on supporting assets from division-or-above echelons. Nor can an IBCT execute on its own execution timelines; all of the IBCT's actions at the JRTC must be nested with the larger-scale scenario. For example, in figure 1 (on page 75) from a recent rotation, the IBCT, enablers, and adjacent special operations forces units are portrayed in blue for clarity. All other units at the JTF-21 level and below are replicated or built into the synthetic training environment via constructive simulation for perspective and context.

The IBCT may be the centerpiece training audience, but it does not represent a preponderance of the combat power. Further complicating things, nearly all actions during a DATE rotation are opposed, with

even sustainment forces finding themselves in routine contact with enemy forces. Maneuver is executed in terrain with few improved surface roads and even fewer open areas—conditions that do not allow massing of effects as happenstance.

Also different for most IBCTs' experiences is the application of the law of armed conflict and rules of engagement to a much more lethal environment. Proactive and liberal use of fires requires foresight both to resupply and to reposition frequently enough to avoid counterfire or ground attack. IBCTs are learning to "make artillery a logistics problem" as they become more comfortable pre-clearing and firing unobserved fires, firing frequent counterfire, and, firing high volumes of neutralization fires in support of maneuver into built-up areas out of tactical necessity. In Atropia, the noncombatant and civilian casualty cutoff value is rarely tested, and almost never even approached due to leader experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2009.⁴ The mass and responsiveness of fires required to get effects at JRTC requires centralized planning and clearly understood procedural controls supported by graphic control measures down



to the company level. That common understanding allows the decentralized execution required to enable mortars, IBCT artillery, attack weapons teams, and close air support employment with the simultaneity to affect multiple enemy formations at once.

A final COIN expectation the JRTC is helping IBCTs shed is a reliance on immediate sustainment, whether aerial medevac for all casualty situations or emergency resupply for unanticipated consumption of commodities. Unable to plan and predict due to no logistics reporting, the supporting combat support sustainment battalion (CSSB) routinely dedicates the majority of its resources toward emergency resupply of a specific commodity class to prevent the BCT's culmination. A logistical game of emergency resupply "whack-a-mole" plays out beginning on training day two in the box; as the CSSB delivers past-due class V, the immediate priority shifts to water resupply of the cavalry and infantry battalions. The singular focus on water resupply for nearly forty-eight hours, in turn, prevents the timely delivery of barrier material required to construct obstacle belts and develop engagement areas for the defense. Ultimately, a continuous

Engineers attached to the 41st Engineers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, build defensive positions in support of the units' training exercise at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Photo courtesy of JRTC, U. S. Army)

pattern of emergency resupply prevents the BCT from gaining and maintaining the initiative. In addition, units in the attack will commonly suffer hundreds of casualties, with the casualty rates of lead companies exceeding all medevac capacity available.

Units often learn that the greatest thing you can do to save a soldier's life is to win the gunfight, not call in a nine-line medevac. The most common impediment to evacuating casualties and equipment, and getting them back in the fight, is an inability to secure the wounded, the dead, and the unit's destroyed equipment. In much of the last sixteen years that step was taken for granted.

So, a way that JRTC is preparing IBCTs for LSCO is by demonstrating to IBCTs that many of the techniques adopted for the COIN fight in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past couple of decades are not effective on the decisive action battlefield.

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A Flexible Training Environment

The division commander surveys the room after looking up from his green notebook. Unsatisfied with the BCT's progress, he wonders aloud whether an emergency resupply push from a JTF asset like the CSSB, along with a twenty-four-hour delay, could provide the time and supplies needed to fully develop engagement areas and meet key training objectives. Despite the BCT's lack of foresight and time management, it has just solved its communications problems and issued an order; the training opportunity is too important to squander. Without hesitation, the COG agrees to the twenty-four-hour delay, setting the wheels in motion for a scenario change with impacts across the JRTC; JTF-21 headquarters, OC/Ts, role players, contracted support, and even the enemy approach immediately adjust.

The JRTC is also adapting to help units better prepare for LSCO by providing a flexible training environment with the best resources to meet any IBCT training objectives. No two rotations are alike, with each tailored to the training units. The recent addition of 42,000 acres of training area, which complements the 38,000-acre Peason Ridge Training Area and the nearly 130,000-acre Fullerton Box gives the commander of the Operations Group tremendous flexibility in scenario design. The commander, with an understanding of the Forces Command commander's intent and a division commander's training objectives, intensively controls the scenario through multiple means. Influence levers include a peerless opposing force, a higher headquarters cell, a wider synthetic scenario, special operations forces, adjacent units, role players who provide context to the towns and villages of Atropia, and a network of OC/Ts. The control and responsiveness engendered allow the commander of the Operations Group to increase or reduce pressure on the IBCT across its echelons and warfighting functions to expose weaknesses, reinforce training objectives, and create multiple dilemmas to get the most out of the fourteen-day crucible training event.

Senior OC/Ts, along with the senior trainer (typically the division commander or deputy commanding general) and the exercise control cell, confer twice daily to compare an IBCT's progress, make recommendations, and adjust the scenario for optimal training value. The reviews often result in changes to the training scenario within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours that are fully resourced to help an IBCT meet its anticipated obligations to a land component commander on a future battlefield. Recent scenarios have included two near-simultaneous airborne assaults in the execution of joint forced-entry operations, the training of a Stryker BCT in January 2016, the inclusion of two separate Army aviation task forces supporting both the joint task force and the IBCT, and the training of the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade in advance of its inaugural deployment.

JRTC 2025—Evolving and Relevant

The JRTC is not done evolving; much more remains to be done to provide every IBCT the best training available. Much like the IBCTs that rotate through the Joint Readiness Training Center ten or eleven times per year, the JRTC is imperfect, self-aware, and in a state of constant change and improvement. The JRTC 2025 concept includes increases of usable maneuver space through more road networks, landing zones, and positioning areas in newly acquired Simpson, Kurthwood, and Cold Springs training areas (see figure 2, page 76). Plans are underway to expand the live-fire exercise to incorporate all three of an IBCT's maneuver battalions operating in concert. The way ahead includes concepts for a fully-integrated, digital tactical network to host instrumentation, communications, and force-on-force adjudication.

These changes will not only make training better within an IBCT but also will provide more opportunity for broader live fires and more comprehensive maneuver operations needed to prepare our IBCTs and future leaders for LSCO. Within the next couple of years, JRTC will complete two more battalion/squadron live-fire exercise lanes and will increase the coalition partner participation in rotations to battalions from the current level of company participation. When combined with the aviation,

mechanized, or Stryker company team augmentation, or the frequently apportioned companies of engineer, chemical, military police, and civil affairs enablers, the future DATE rotation will frequently include more than six thousand soldiers, over thirty aircraft, and over one thousand ground vehicles all operating in concert.

Conclusion

The JRTC has changed its scenario design, expanded its training area—both real and synthetic—and reversed the decade-plus trend toward company and battalion situational training lanes. It has deliberately identified ways to train the IBCT echelon fights so that our IBCTs can integrate immediately and win in LSCO. By providing units a crucible training experience and allowing them to examine failure as well as success, by helping units break COIN expectations and challenge perspectives gained over the past sixteen years, and by embracing flexible and responsive scenario design, the JRTC continues to evolve to better prepare IBCTs for LSCO. Though much remains to be done, the JRTC will continue to provide what our Army's IBCTs need to deploy worldwide on short notice, integrate with a division of other land component headquarters, and fight and win immediately as part of the joint force against any threat. ■

Notes

1. Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles, 1776–1965* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

2. Gen. Mark A. Milley, "39th Chief of Staff Initial Message to the Army," Army.mil, 1 September 2015, accessed 19 June 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/154803/39th_Chief_of_Staff_Initial_Message_to_the_Army; Chief of Staff of the Army, Memorandum for All Army Leaders, "Army Readiness Guidance, Calendar Year 2016–17,"

20 January 2016, accessed 19 June 2018, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/standto/docs/army_readiness_guidance.pdf.

3. Operations Group, Joint Readiness Training Center (website), last modified 4 June 2018, accessed 19 June 2018, <http://www.jrtc-polk.army.mil/ops/>.

4. The noncombatant casualty cutoff value is the designated number of civilian casualties a unit can inflict during a military operation without seeking approval from higher headquarters.