

# The Big Benning Theory

**In a major realignment, the Army's armor and infantry schools merge to create a mega-base: the Maneuver Center of Excellence.**

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On Aug. 11, five M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks from the U.S. Army Armor School in Fort Knox, Ky., lumbered off train cars and headed up the new Fort Benning, Ga., tank trail, proof positive that a massive institutional and cultural undertaking begun in 2005 by the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission had become a reality.

In what seemed a wild departure from history, BRAC had directed the Army to combine armor training, long at Fort Knox, with infantry training at Fort Benning, the venerable "Home of the Infantry" that sprawls over 182,000 acres in Georgia and Alabama. Following a gargantuan construction and logistics phase, the unified training facilities are called the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE).

In the early days of BRAC, many feared the merger would be the clash of titans: two tradition-rich Army branches – each inordinately proud of its culture and prerogatives – at loggerheads over a universe of issues. But by the time the tankers broke the chains on the 70-ton battle tanks at the new MCoE, peace had broken out between the armor and the infantry.

**No Four-Letter Word.** The Army established Camp Benning in 1918 to train units heading to Europe, including tankers for close-infantry support. The base hung on after the armistice as a training facility, becoming a permanent infantry school in 1920, and was redesignated Fort Benning in 1923. The tank school moved to Camp Meade, Md., in 1927 but returned to Benning in 1932. In the 1940s, massive call-ups precipitated the expansion of Fort Benning to its current size. With the focus on infantry training, armor training moved to Fort Knox, where the mechanized cavalry's doctrine and training held sway for decades. Even without the tanks, by the 21st century more than 115,000 soldiers trained annually at Fort Benning, making an enormous impact on the regional economy.

But in 2002, the BRAC Commission announced that the military's domestic infrastructure was 25 percent too large. The commission directed it to consolidate into fewer but more efficient mega-bases. To avoid closure, many bases and surrounding communities clamored to make their case – including Fort Benning and Georgia-Alabama economic-development leaders.

"BRAC is not a four-letter word here," says retired Col. Gary A. Jones, executive vice president for military affairs at the Greater Columbus, Ga., Chamber of Commerce and the Valley Partnership Joint Development Authority. "BRAC is good." Jones spearheaded the regional economic development team's intricate planning and marketing strategy to save, and then expand, Fort Benning.

## The Big Benning Theory

The community's work paid dividends. In 2005, the BRAC Commission gave Fort Benning its greatest challenge: establish the Maneuver Center of Excellence. Officials estimate that at least 11,000 jobs will open up at Fort Benning as a result of BRAC, adding to the \$5.9 billion the base already contributes annually to the regional economy.

"People have looked at BRAC very positively because it's looked at through economic development," Jones says.

The MCoE is a daunting project. When the full expansion is complete, Army officials estimate Fort Benning will have undergone more than \$3.5 billion worth of construction. The base is now the biggest construction site in the southeastern United States, using 2.5 million tons of aggregate, with more concrete poured here than was used in the Hoover Dam. There are 6 million square feet of new buildings, and 3 million square feet of existing structures, to be renovated. There is major construction at 19 ranges and six training facilities, 140 miles of roads and trails, 13 new road-class bridges, new state-of-the-art physical training facilities, child-development centers and 2,000 new homes, with 2,000 more being renovated, all spread over 20,000 acres.

When complete, the Close Combat Tactical Trainers (CCTT) virtual training center will be the Army's largest. There, soldiers will climb into simulated Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs) and Abrams tanks for virtual warfare. "We can train leaders and then run exercises in role-playing," says Ken Mullins, chief of the G-3 Simulations Training Division. "The team can strap in, and the commander ... can watch his soldiers. Everything is like the real thing." Later, the team can assess its virtual combat on video monitors in a classroom. "If a guy dies, he learns from his experience," Mullins says.

Furthermore, the MCoE is a green project. Every construction proposal goes through a rigorous environmental-impact study. Construction and design emphasize natural lighting, recycled materials and high energy-efficiency standards, as well as tight controls on building chemicals that soldiers might breathe. Sustainable, low-impact plantings help reduce environmental damage. Even the base's endangered species benefit from the project. "You'll have a bunch of infantry come to a complete halt because of a woodpecker," says Fort Benning Public Affairs Specialist Sue Ulibarri. "There's a tortoise-relocation program."

And the massive transformation is going forward even as the base continues its core mission – a process Col. Jesse Ward, director of the Strategic Plans Office, calls "building the plane while we are flying it." When all of the armor school arrives by September, an additional 30,000 soldiers will be trained here – all told, approximately 52 percent of all new soldiers.

The whirlwind construction and logistics push required extensive team-building, which was naturally accompanied by tumultuous "exchanges of views." But in October 2009, the Maneuver Center of Excellence officially joined armor and infantry training together. These were momentous, emotional days for Fort Benning, which had long prided itself on its infantry connection.

## The Big Benning Theory

“On Oct. 22, 2009, when we rolled up the colors of the infantry center, there were some gasps in the crowd,” says MCoE’s commanding general, Maj. Gen. Michael Ferriter. “But we are way better because of it.”

Army Secretary John McHugh called the consolidation a “huge muscle movement,” saying the end result “is going to be something that is incredibly beneficial to soldiers and the experiences they’ll eventually have out in the battlefield. They’ll be able to train the way they’re going to fight.”

**“It’s Going to Be Noisy.”** Still, infantry and armor first had to resolve their differences and concerns, and even to celebrate the lessons they could learn from one another. “Within the Army, there are tribes,” explains Col. Theodore Martin, commandant of the U.S. Army Armor School, in his Fort Benning office with its vintage wooden commander’s chair, photos of his infantry officer father and his black 10th Cavalry Stetson still powdered with dust from Iraq. “We’re armored warriors. We live a different lifestyle. It’s important for me to maintain the armor traditions.”

Armor and infantry training had been stovepiped prior to the MCoE, but Martin points out the similarities between the two branches. “In the Army, we live by the warrior ethos,” he says. “We’re more alike than we are different. We’re brothers – like twins.” He lists the infantry’s best practices that he intends to inculcate into armor training, including increased physical training. As for armor’s contribution, he notes the infantry’s increased enthusiasm for the CCTT virtual training that armor extensively uses. “We draw on the strengths of each other.”

Martin also touts the advantages of the MCoE to the armor school, including new motor stables, barracks, headquarters and training facilities. “We had good digs at Fort Knox. We’re going to have world-class digs here at Fort Benning. My trepidation has been replaced by bounding enthusiasm. Armor wins big with the MCoE.”

Outside, a boom cannot be ignored – a salute battery – and Martin smiles. “We’re noisy. It’s going to be noisy. It’s the sound of freedom.”

Col. Bryan Owens, Fort Benning’s infantry commandant, also talks about the synergy the newly combined armor and infantry training will bring, particularly in the era of asymmetrical warfare, when armor may be dismounted. “It allows us to cross-fertilize,” he says, citing the infantry’s more intense physical training, facility with hand-to-hand combat and deep planning cycles that come from infantrymen having to hump their supplies. “Our brothers in the armor can learn from that.”

Owens says there were challenges to the merger, including the Fort Benning site itself. BRAC looked at the base’s sheer size but neglected to fully assess the terrain needed for armor training, which necessitated some reconfiguration and expansion. The leadership had to resolve the potential risks of having large armor in proximity to foot soldiers. And armor and infantry had to negotiate the cultural differences between the two often-squabbling branches, which played out at a variety of levels. “We’ve had some great debates on recon courses,” Owens says. “That was a rather heated, parochial discussion. We’ve educated each other.”

## The Big Benning Theory

But like Martin, Owens sees the advantages of a combined MCoE at Fort Benning. “This is a better fighting force,” he says. In welcoming armor to the former “Home of the Infantry,” he also alludes to Fort Benning’s history with tanks, which began in the 1930s. Pointing toward the ground, Owens says, grinning, “The armor started here at Fort Benning, but moved to Fort Knox in the ’40s. They’re coming home.”

**What Has and Hasn’t Changed.** The not-so-distant explosions go off like thunder, and through billowing clouds of smoke, a squad of riflemen sprints forward, weapons at the ready. A stentorian voice enumerates the past heroism and courage of the 19th Infantry Regiment as a crowd of loved ones in the grandstand strains to see their soldiers. Drill sergeants in their campaign hats bark commands, and the Charlie and Delta companies of the 2nd Battalion of the 19th Infantry Regiment march onto the field. The band plays martial music, and Lt. Col. Tom Sheehan, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, 198th Infantry, speaks of enduring valor in this era of persistent conflict.

This is yet another “Turning Blue” ceremony for Fort Benning infantry-school graduates – 316 people from around the world who arrived as ordinary civilians only a few months earlier. After basic and infantry training, they are now part of a formation, an organization, a company of soldiers.

The process begins at Day Zero in the new 575,000-square-foot reception center, led by Lt. Col. Mary Martin, commander, 30th Adjutant General Battalion, 192nd Infantry Brigade. Here the new soldiers are shorn, uniformed, inspected, and launched on their journey into the warrior ethos. Midway through the process, a line of bald, bewildered young men, incongruously clad in new uniforms and their old sneakers, can be seen awaiting their next station. They are among the 17,100 new soldiers training on an average day at Fort Benning. This is the familiar territory of the new soldier in basic and infantry training: harried, harassed and challenged to join the proud ranks of the U.S. Army. “Soldier-ization,” the drill sergeants call it.

Retired sergeant majors and members of American Legion Post 267 in Columbus, Ga., Vickie Dikes, Eddie Robinson and Hazel Taylor have over eight decades of Army service between them. Taylor and Robinson have both served as drill sergeants. They’ve seen the changes in the Army – and Fort Benning – going back to when many of the buildings were still wooden World War II-era structures. They talk about the changes in infantry training needed for the younger generation of soldiers. “Back then,” Dikes says about her training days, “there was discipline. You didn’t question anything. Now they think they know everything.”

Taylor agrees, “It’s a new Army. They will question.”

With some humor, the sergeant majors explain the restraints on modern drill sergeants: “They’re not supposed to use profanity,” Robinson chuckles.

The retired sergeant majors laud the Family Care Plan and other reforms that have improved the lives of female troops, who now constitute 32 percent of the Army. They marvel at the new Fort Benning family housing, now run by private contractors. “It’s a different style for the new soldiers,” Robinson says.

## The Big Benning Theory

“It looks like a village – a community,” Taylor adds.

“They don’t even cut their own grass,” snorts Robinson, who is quite taken by the base’s recently constructed \$16 million physical-fitness facilities: “The modern gyms out there are fantastic. The old gyms were like steam pipes.” They are also impressed by today’s pay: “When I started in 1965, I was making \$68 a month,” says Robinson, who was an Airborne Ranger. “When I found out I got another \$55 for jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, I signed up. Soldiers today make more money than they know what to do with.”

But some things remain the same. As the sergeant majors recount the changing uniforms, tactics and weapons, they see continuity. Though retired, Robinson and Dikes are still at Benning – Dikes in human relations, and Robinson serving as a bank manager. “We’re still taking care of the soldiers,” Dikes says.

Styles of command may have evolved in the post-9/11 era, but, Robinson says, “Leadership is leadership. The principles are the same. Dedication to duty and love of your comrade – that hasn’t changed.”

And war is still war. “War and killing and fighting is the same in any language,” Robinson says.

**The Future is Now.** “It’s a really big outfit here,” Gen. Ferriter says about Fort Benning’s vast and varied training, active brigades and special teams, family facilities and military research, including the MCoE Capabilities Development and Integration Directorate (CDID), which endeavors to maintain battlefield primacy with its integrated “war of the future” focus.

Pulling together all the aspects of the MCoE takes extraordinary leadership and teamwork. “There’s a lot of credit that goes around,” Ferriter says, referencing an array of general officers, senior government officials and regional development officials. “The big idea is we win together. We came up with a pretty good plan, and we’ve been resourced with state-of-the-art, first-class facilities for training and developing our people, and also first-class facilities for our families.”

Physically, Fort Benning is about to become even bigger. Even before BRAC and the armor move, a 1999 RAND Corp. land-use study classified Fort Benning as being seriously overcrowded. With the Maneuver Center of Excellence now bursting with its new facility needs, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and the Department of the Army announced plans in June to expand the base by almost 40 percent with the acquisition of another 82,800 acres.

The enormous expansion will undoubtedly create another set of challenges for Fort Benning, but Ferriter says that great teams and inspired leadership can do amazing things. “It’s about people,” he says, turning an imaginary wheel. “You create a flywheel of energy and keep it going.”

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