

Reflections on Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Combined Arms Warfare, the Battalion Tactical Group and Wars in a Fishbowl

by Lieutenant Colonel Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army



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by Lieutenant Colonel Amos C. Fox, U.S. Army

Lieutenant Colonel Amos C. Fox is an officer in the U.S. Army. He is a PhD candidate at the University of Reading (UK), Deputy Director for Development with the Irregular Warfare Initiative, and he is an associate editor with the Wavell Room. He is also a graduate from the U.S. Army's School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he was awarded the Tom Felts Leadership Award in 2017.

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In Brief

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—and the subsequent conflict—has illuminated several critical features about both the Russian military and the larger phenomenon of warfare.
- The Battalion Tactical Group, or BTG, is a force structure incompatible with large-scale combat operations against a state actor. Russia's force structure misstep is important to internalize so as to avoid similar organizational traps.
- Operations—and their effects—in small theaters (fishbowls) do not create the same impact in large theaters (ponds) without a comparable increase in warfighting systems and forces.

Reflections on Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine: Combined Arms Warfare, the Battalion Tactical Group and Wars in a Fishbowl

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in the spring of 2014, and had cooled by the spring of 2015, is hot once again. Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has officially brought inter-state conflict back to center stage and has placed state actors at the fore of contemporary armed conflict. Breaking with the obfuscated proxy approaches used during its 2014–2015 Crimean and Donbas campaigns, Russia's most recent invasion has relied on conventional army forces operating in the open.

Russia launched a three-pronged attack on 23 February 2022 with the goal of taking possession of Ukraine, removing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy from power and placing a puppet government in control in Kyiv.¹ Russia, which gradually began positioning forces along the Ukraine-Belarus border and the Ukraine-Russia border, launched its attack from the Mazyr-Gomel corridor in Belarus toward Kyiv; from Belgorod, Russia, to Kharkiv; and from Russia's Rostov region to reinforce the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR).²

As the war has unfolded, Russian President Vladimir Putin's strategy has proved faulty and his plan unreasonable—and his assumptions about both his soldiers and the attitudes of the Ukrainian people have shown themselves to be wildly misguided. At its high-water mark in late March 2022, the Russian army captured the Antonov Airport, just outside Kyiv; it pierced into Kharkiv; and it linked Crimea with the Donbas via Mariupol.³ Nonetheless, those triumphs were short-lived. Within days of taking the Antonov Airport, Russia's holding force was routed, resulting in possession of the airport passing back to Ukrainian hands.⁴ Russia's attempt to encircle and capture Kyiv was thwarted by an active and mobile Ukrainian defense, which drove the attacker from the Kyiv pocket and back toward their laager sites in Belarus.⁵ At Kharkiv, Russian forces failed to encircle the city and were unsuccessful in wresting it from Ukrainian control. They did find a modicum of success in southern Ukraine with the occupation of cities such as Kherson, Melitopol and Mariupol.⁶ And, in conjunction with the Donetsk People's Army

(DPA) and Luhansk People's Army (LPA), they still control the Donbas, but their ability to hold that territory looks more tentative with each passing day.

Moreover, Russia has not gained air superiority over Ukraine, nor is it even close to doing so. According to the *Kyiv Independent*, as of 7 September 2022, Ukrainian forces have grounded 237 airplanes, 208 helicopters and 880 unmanned aerial vehicles.⁷ The lack of Russian air superiority has allowed Ukrainian land forces to operate with near impunity against both Russian land and air capabilities. As a result, the Ukrainian armed forces, to include international volunteers fighting on behalf of Kyiv, have killed over 50,000 Russian soldiers and have destroyed 2,097 tanks, 1,194 artillery systems and 300 multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS). In total, Russian casualties, in their first six months of combat, were estimated to be between 70,000–80,000.⁸ From any angle, these numbers are staggering. Ukraine has performed magnificently, whereas Russian forces have performed abysmally. Additionally, Russian forces are displaying high degrees of indiscipline and low morale, which manifest in theft, desertion and a sharp number of crimes.⁹

Given the boogeyman status assigned to Russia's military in the period following the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign, why has the Russian military performed so poorly in Ukraine?¹⁰ Undoubtedly, a large part of the answer resides with the Ukrainian military's stalwart performance. Ukraine's military is pragmatic—they do not aggrandize one method of warfighting over another; instead, the Ukrainian military evaluates the situation and applies the right methods and tools to obtain tactical victories.¹¹ Further, Ukraine's tactical activity demonstrates a keen appreciation for, and ability to apply, combined arms. Ukraine has been able to compound the positive effect of micro-victories into tactical and operational success. To be sure, Russia's failure in the initial phase of the war, marked by its withdrawal from the Kyiv and Kharkiv sectors and its relocation of forces toward the Donbas, is a clear indication of the Ukrainian military's ongoing success.¹²

On the other hand, Russia's operational- and tactical-level performance is embarrassing. Not only is their performance abhorrent, but the Russian military reeks of low morale and a lack of discipline. While there are likely just as many explanations for this as there are opinions on the matter, this paper contends that Russia's poor performance is due to ineffective training, ill-conceived command and control (C2) arrangements, and the wrong organizational structure for the operating environment in which Russian forces are entangled.

Training, Command and Organization: Pillars for Successful Warfighting

Successful military operations are the product of combined arms warfighting carried out by the appropriate force for both the threat and the operating environment. Combined arms proficiency is the product of appropriately organized units, which are well-led and capable of effectively integrating, synchronizing and directing all-arms tactical engagements and operations. Since 23 February 2022, Russia's military operations in Ukraine have illustrated that it is not the lethal war machine that many policymakers, analysts and practitioners feared. Instead, the events of these months have called attention to the fact that Russia's armed forces are inadequately trained and resourced for combined arms, and its army is not properly organized for the theater in which it is engaged. Straddling both of those ideas, Russia's force is inadequately led—its task organization into ad hoc battalion tactical groups (BTGs) does not lend itself to cohesive combined arms teams at scale, nor does it lend itself to a disciplined military force. In turn, these shortcomings manifest themselves in issues of morale and discipline, to say nothing of engagements and battles lost.

Training: Combined Arms Warfighting

Each year, on a rotating basis, Russia conducts the Zapad and Vostok collective training exercises. Each exercise is geared to stress-test the Russian military along the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Testing and evaluating three capabilities—combined arms and joint force integration, tactical and long-range sustainment, and distributed C2—is the primary focus during these exercises. Further, many of these exercises incorporate members from the Collective Security Treaty Organization to test interoperability challenges and to develop solutions for collective C2.¹³

In collective exercises such as these, combined arms tactics and operations should be the focal point.¹⁴ Combined arms warfighting argues against like-system fighting (i.e., tank against tank). Instead, combined arms require incorporating a diverse array of combat arms into a single organization, so that the weakness of any single arm is compensated for by the other arms' strength.¹⁵ Further, when properly coordinated and synchronized, combined arms complement one another: an opponent defending itself against one arm makes it vulnerable to another combat arm.¹⁶

Terrain is also an important component of combined arms warfighting. Military theorist Robert Leonhard contends that positionally dislocating an opponent—forcing an opponent into the terrain on which it is most vulnerable—is an important facet of combined arms operations because it amplifies the potential benefit of combining arms.¹⁷ For instance, tanks should not fight tanks. A tank in open terrain arrayed against light infantry dispersed throughout open terrain is a relatively equal fight. However, a light infantry force with antitank weapon systems in dense terrain—either urban or heavily wooded—possesses a distinct advantage over the tank formation.¹⁸

Despite what might have been perceived as materiel disadvantages, Ukraine possesses a diverse array of combat arms, which provides them the physical means to wage small level and collective combined arms operations.¹⁹ At the same time, the Ukrainian military possesses a clear understanding of combined arms warfighting and a C2 framework that facilitates combined arms operations. In fact, the dynamic described above—antitank-capable light infantry squaring off against tanks in restrictive terrain—is, thus far, a defining paradigm from the Russo-Ukrainian War.²⁰ Reports from the war are replete with cases of Ukrainian infantry luring Russian mechanized formations into urban areas, canalized road networks or wooded areas, and then ruthlessly eviscerating those dislocated formations with a range of antitank weaponry.²¹ As a result, Ukraine's battlefield prowess has exposed poor Russian training and tactics.

On the other side of the coin, Russia is nearly diametrically opposed to Ukraine. For the better part of the first 45 days of the war, Russia lacked a central, coordinating headquarters and a unifying commander.²² Professor Anthony King asserts that command is the art and science of decisionmaking, and that the purpose of command, that is, *the purpose of decision-making*, “is to increase military effectiveness through the coordination of forces.”²³ Instead of a single operational commander and clearinghouse headquarters, Russian forces have relied on a byzantine C2 network that is unable to effectively combine arms at the joint force level or to synchronize operations, thus spurring sequential Russian operations that lack the synergistic benefits of combined arms.²⁴ While many examples exist, Russia's failure to seize and retain the Antonov Airport outside of Kyiv demonstrates this problem.²⁵ Furthermore, the recurrence of sieges during the war also reflects this cognitive and training shortfall. Russia's inability to

sprint around a Ukrainian flank and encircle a Ukrainian force before it could slip into unfavorable terrain also illustrates this point. Russia's initial attempts to seize Kyiv and Kharkiv both fit this example.

Battalion Tactical Group

The BTG, an old Russian army force structure and personnel workaround, resurfaced in the wake of manning problems in its “permanent readiness” brigades in the early 2010s.²⁶ In most cases, where an organization chart showed a motorized rifle brigade, only a battalion's worth of combat power actually existed. Where a division existed on paper, only a handful of combat-capable BTGs materialized. Between Lester Grau, Charles Bartles, Michael Kaufman and others, much on the history and composition of the BTG has been recounted in recent months. This paper moves the discussion of BTGs down a different path.

The disparity between Russia's organizational structure and how it task-organizes for combat is negatively impacting its effectiveness in Ukraine. During Russia's major training exercises, it typically employs organic formations and task-organizes—i.e., realigns a force for a specific mission—as needed.²⁷ Yet, Russia invaded Ukraine with BTGs, and it appears that very little C2 overhead exists among the BTGs, the theater command and the theater commander. Looking at the situation from a different angle, the Russian armed forces organized, trained and equipped one way, but are fighting in Ukraine in a wholly different way. This has created significant problems for Russian troops in the field. To be sure, problems of C2 have contributed to the death of at least 12 Russian general officers and have exacerbated well-documented supply problems.²⁸

Given its performance in Ukraine thus far, Russia's BTG is the wrong formation for this war. Grau and Bartles allude to this in a recent RUSI (Royal United Services Institute) publication, stating that the BTG is better suited for local fights, low-intensity conflict and counterinsurgencies.²⁹

BTGs, small battalion-level combined arms task forces, worked well in the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign because the theater was relatively small. The Donbas front, roughly 420 km (260 miles) wide, housed the DPR and the LPR—Moscow's regional proxies.³⁰ The distance from the line of demarcation between Kyiv-controlled Ukraine and the DPR and LPR-controlled Ukraine to the Russian border was little more than 95 km (60 miles) in most places. Not only was this distance short, but the local armies, the DPA and LPA, operated within a contiguous battlefield with secure supply lines to Russia's Southern and Western Military Districts, which is where most of Moscow's support to the DPA and LPA originated.

Russia commanded the DPA and LPA with the Southern Military District's 8th Combined Arms Army.³¹ Russia organized the DPA and LPA into two field armies and used the BTG as the DPA and LPAs baseline combat formation.³² Some of the most notorious proxy BTGs to emerge from the DPA and LPA included the Somali Battalion and the Sparta Battalion. The Somali Battalion recently made news again, as its current commander, Lieutenant Colonel Timur Kurilkin, and several other soldiers, were decorated by DPR Prime Minister Denis Pushilin for their contributions during the brutal Battle of Mariupol.³³

Open-source information indicates that the DPA and LPA provided the preponderance of “Russian” force in the field during the Donbas campaign—Russian BTGs, when committed, generally arrived to assist the DPA and LPA BTGs when they were faltering. Most notable, Russian BTGs drove the 60–70 miles from their forward staging bases within Russia to quickly

support faltering proxy operations. Clear examples of this situation include the August 2014 Battles of Luhansk Airport and Ilovaisk, the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport and the Siege of Debal'tseve in February 2015.³⁴ However, open-source information is not sufficiently mature to parse the distinction in the degree, scale and percentage of participation between the Russian BTGs and those of the DPA and LPA during the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign.

Nevertheless, what is known is that Russian and Russian proxy BTGs operated in a small theater—a 420-km-wide front. From secure positions within Russia, Russian BTGs, tactical logistics and C2 solutions moved into and through Donetsk and Luhansk along secure road networks to forward combat positions, logistics supply points and command posts. Given the short distances of travel and secure road networks to these forward positions, Russian BTGs would have experienced several situations that are just now showing their effect on Russian operations, morale and discipline.

First, Russian BTGs participating in the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign would not have needed to plan, integrate and communicate with forward reconnaissance as they moved from staging bases along the Russia-Ukraine border to forward combat positions. Given the context of the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and how that greatly differs from the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign, this is an important point to highlight. Instead of using deliberate reconnaissance, Russian BTGs moving into the Donbas theater would have moved rapidly along road networks to link up with their counterparts or proxy forces at locations such as Ilovaisk or Debal'tseve. This likely resulted in a military culture that was not prepared to plan, resource or work with tactical reconnaissance while on the move.

In 2014–2015, Russia and its Donbas proxies created a hedgehog defense in the Donbas theater—Ukrainian forces had to attack into decently fortified locations to evict the defenders. In 2022, however, the operational table has turned. Facing an existential threat from Russia, Ukraine turned cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv into defensive anchors, which serve as bases of power and power projection for the country's defense. Due to insufficient, ineffective or non-existent reconnaissance, advancing Russian BTGs blindly and unwittingly impaled themselves during their push to take those cities. Moreover, the absence of reconnaissance turned static or defending Russian BTGs into ripe targets for limber, well-equipped and motivated Ukrainian forces. As U.S. Marine Corps Commandant General David Berger recently stated, Russia's tactical formations generally have no idea what is in front of them, what they are moving into when they are advancing, nor what is coming for them when they are stationary.³⁵ The Russian BTGs' inability to integrate local reconnaissance has contributed to the Ukrainian forces' ability to inflict an overwhelming number of casualties and equipment losses on the Russians.

Second, given Russian BTG combat experience in 2014–2015, and the short distances and safe passage from staging bases within Russia to forward combat locations, Russian BTGs would not have had to account for several sustainment factors. Russian leaders, for instance, would not have had to account for tactical movement while in contact (i.e., being sensed, being seen, and/or being fired upon) with the Ukrainians. This means that they likely did not gain experience planning and caring for casualties while on the move in hostile territory, which presents many more problems than caring for casualties in a small theater with quick exits to safe territory. Similarly, Russian BTGs likely did not have to account for the rigors of vehicle maintenance on the move in hostile territory while in contact with the Ukrainians. The effect of these shortcomings became readily apparent in late February and in early March 2022 as reports of deserted Russian vehicles and forsaken Russian casualties flooded the news.³⁶

A third problem regarding BTGs is their subpar communications and C2. In a small operational theater, with secure lines of communication that linked front line battlefield positions all the way to Russian-housed staging bases, Russian BTGs would not have had to worry about C2 while in contact with the enemy. Further, they would not have been as concerned with the tactical use of secure communications; instead, they would have relied on unsecure or less secure communication. In many cases, they might have overcome tactical snafus on the front by sending leaders forward from staging bases or Military Districts to provide quick-fix leadership at the front lines. Nevertheless, this situation likely influenced many of the communications and C2 shortcomings plaguing the Russians in Ukraine today. This has also likely contributed to Ukraine's ability to stay one step ahead of the Russian armed forces, resulting in situations in which the Ukrainian military eliminates entire BTGs from the battlefield and eradicates Russian general officers from the field of battle. Ukraine's recent destruction of a Russian BTG attempting a river crossing on the Siverskyi Donets River highlights this point.³⁷ In short, Russian BTG communications and C2 shortfalls, up against Ukrainian warfighting prowess, has allowed Ukraine to do to Russia what many thought was a significant component of Valeri Gerasimov's leadership: Ukraine is taking advantage of Russia's poorly disciplined communication practices to identify, target and eliminate Russian command nodes and critical battlefield capabilities, all while generally wreaking havoc and destruction on the opponent through precise signals-based targeting.

Wars in a Fishbowl versus Wars in a Pond

The three shortcomings noted above provide a foundation for the idea that an actor's positive effects appear greater in a small theater than they would in a larger theater. This occurs because achieving and maintaining mass is easier to do in a minor geographic area than it is on a larger, less secure battlefield. Smaller theaters tend to hide significant problems because a force can react to and redress problems more quickly in a small theater than it can in a large theater. As a result, structural or operational problems rarely rise above the technical or tactical problem solvers, remaining hidden until geography—i.e., distance, terrain and structures (man-made and natural)—and enemy contact pull those problems out of the shadows.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia is a good starting point for examining "wars in a fishbowl." In terms of geography and population, Nagorno-Karabakh is approximately 1,700 square miles and has 145,000 inhabitants. For perspective, the state of Texas is 268,596 square miles and has a population of 29 million people. Rhode Island, the smallest state in the United States, is 1,055 square miles. To put that into context, the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred in a theater slightly larger than the state of Rhode Island. In terms of theaters of war, Nagorno-Karabakh is exceptionally small.

In this war, Azerbaijan used the latest drone technology, precision strike, MLRS, heavy artillery barrages and stand-off to defeat Armenia in six weeks.³⁸ Operating in restrictive terrain and relying on antiquated air defense, exposed land forces and poor tactics, Armenia quickly became operationally fixed, which accelerated Azerbaijan's overwhelming success.³⁹

The theater's small size, the terrain's canalizing effect on land forces and Armenia's outmoded force all complimented Azerbaijan's modern, combined arms approach to warfighting, created battlefield synergy that made Azerbaijan's approach appear more effective than it would have appeared had it occurred in a larger theater. This situation has resulted in many observers making grandiose prognostications that Azerbaijan's method of warfighting portends

the future of warfare, that the tank is dead (again) and that land warfare is dead (again).⁴⁰ The problem with these assessments is that they are not contextual because they fail to account for battlefield density regarding warfighting systems, such as a drone, to the theater's size. In effect, these observers are taking the mechanisms of small theater warfare and superimposing them on a larger theater, without accounting for the drift of battlefield effectiveness that occurs when warfighting systems and forces do not grow at comparable scale to the size of the battlefield.

Positive effects in relation to an enemy are quicker, cheaper and easier to achieve in a small theater. The ripples of a rock being tossed into water provides a useful analogy. Tossing a rock into a fishbowl creates the same basic ripple effect as when tossing the same rock into a pond. However, the rock—whose mass remains constant—delivers a greater impact in the fishbowl than it does on the pond because the fishbowl is small and self-contained, whereas a pond is much larger. To scale the rock's fishbowl impact to the pond requires the use of a significantly larger rock. Theaters such as Donbas in 2014–2015, or the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh theater, should be thought of in fishbowl terms. Positive combat effects in those environments are more the product of the environment's impact on warfare than they are the product of warfare's impact on war. To put it another way, the small theater amplified the perceived blessings of warfighting technology such as drones, precision munitions and MLRSs because the defender had little space in which to try to abscond or play for position on the battlefield; instead, it absorbed the full effect of the aggressor's thrust. On larger battlefields, movement, target identification and distance dilute the perceived blessings of modern technology that is routinely touted as revolutionary or game changing. The onlooker must therefore be wary of falling prey to the allure of “fishbowl wars,” or snake-oil salesmen espousing revolutions in warfare borne out of micro-theater combat.

Moreover, Russian BTGs, the rock in the fishbowl analogy, punched above their weight in the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign for reasons previously articulated:

- the theater was small and self-contained;
- BTGs were able to move freely from Russia to the front and arrive fresh and ready for combat;
- supply lines supporting front-line BTGs were short and uncontested;
- non-front line problems could be quickly remedied either close to the front in DPA-LPA-controlled territory, or safely evacuated to Russia, if needed; and
- communication and C2 problems were quickly overcome through proximity to rear-area headquarters.

The onlooker must then also be careful not to fall prey to the seductiveness of theater- or mission-specific organizational structures that succeed in one environment but are not scalable to larger theaters, nor possess utility beyond a narrow scope of work. The Russian BTG, built to overcome personnel shortcomings and to conduct counterinsurgency-style operations in small theaters, is ill-suited for the rigors of a large theater, with contested lines of communication, against a determined enemy. The indiscipline and lack of morale of most Russian soldiers likely leads back to many of the BTG's shortcomings.

In summarizing the criticism of BTGs, it is important to remember that positive effects are amplified in small theaters, but those effects do not necessarily scale when brought to medium or large theaters. Therefore, the “lessons learned” from the 2014–2015 Donbas campaign or

from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict need to be kept in context and not necessarily viewed as new “rules” of war or harbingers of future warfare.

The same holds true for the opposite side of this idea: negative aspects of warfighting in small theaters can be quickly overcome, thereby hiding potentially deleterious structural problems with force structure, warfighting doctrine and strategies. This appears to be part of the problem plaguing Russian armed forces in Ukraine—its vaunted BTG is floundering in Ukraine today. False positive “lessons learned” and bad habits acquired in 2014–2015 are hindering Russian land forces operating throughout Ukraine today.

Aside from bad habits, the Russian BTG’s structure and support network is maximized for small theater warfare, not medium or large theater warfare. Its small stature, ad hoc structure and detachment from its organic C2 and sustainment networks makes it a problematic force design for medium or large theater warfare. Given the Russian Army’s performance in Ukraine thus far, it is not a stretch to suggest that the BTG is the wrong formation for the war. However, as Ukraine closes the door on Moscow’s forces, pushing them closer to Russia, especially in the Donbas and in the areas proximal to Crimea, one should expect the BTG to fare better than it has throughout the war. This is because those BTGs will be operating on smaller battlefields, more comparable to those on which they found success in 2014–2015.

Conclusion

Russia’s poor performance in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War has many fathers. However, the Russian armed forces’ inability to conduct combined arms operations and the Russian army’s reliance on the BTG—a force structure useful in micro-theaters, but deleterious in large theaters—has allowed Ukraine to surprise nearly all onlookers through its resolute position throughout the war. Russia’s poor performance and inadequate leadership has lifted the veil on the indiscipline and lack of morale within its ranks, which is readily noticeable in the high frequency of desertions and atrocities promulgated by the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

Problems in small theaters, such as the 2014–2015 Donbas theater, are far more easily overcome than problems in medium to large theaters, such as that of the current Russo-Ukrainian War. Additionally, problems in a small theater can be much more quickly identified and remedied than they can be in a medium or large theater. Moreover, the perception of positive utility and positive outcomes is amplified in small theaters, whereas those positive effects take much more planning, time, resources and investment to scale up for large-theater operations.

The BTG cannot overcome problems associated with sustainment, C2 and unity of command that were hidden by the Donbas theater. In fact, the BTG’s ad hoc nature likely accelerates the inherent entropic aspect of normal military operations. Further, the lack of habitual command and support relationships likely contributes to the violations of international human rights law and Geneva Convention protocols witnessed during the war’s first six months.⁴¹ If one were so inclined, they could even go so far to posit that the BTG is creating a deleterious effect on Russian military operations instead of enhancing them.

Policymakers, military analysts and practitioners must be watchful of taking the “lessons” of small-theater campaigns or wars and making grand proclamations about how the mechanics of those conflicts have reshaped the face of warfare. Not all force structures, such as the BTG, or all warfighting techniques, such as those used by Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, are transferable or scalable to large-theater wars.

Notes

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Association of the United States Army

2425 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

703.841.4300 ★ www.ausa.org