



BE ALL YOU CAN BE

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN THE ARMY

by LTC AMOS C. FOX, U.S. ARMY
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In 2023, the Army rebooted the *Be All You Can Be* (BAYCB) recruiting slogan from the 1980s and 1990s.

It is well known for its popularity and as one of the Army's most compelling series of commercials. In fact, it helped the Army rebuild from its disarray following the Vietnam War and it helped solidify the post-Vietnam all-volunteer force.

Following the BAYCB campaign's first run, the Army cycled through a variety of less popular recruiting initiatives. It is important to understand that recruiting reflects retention, among other things, such as growth or contraction strategies. Today's BAYCB campaign operates in a period of relative stability in which force structure is neither growing nor contracting—a period that reflects retention considerations. This might seem unexpected, considering that the Army says it has met its retention goals for Fiscal Year 2023.¹ Yet, merely accomplishing a retention goal does not tell the whole story; such an accomplishment can actually hide personnel challenges.

With that understanding, this article examines the BAYCB campaign from the perspective of retention challenges. These can be representative of many things, much of which is deeply personal to each individual servicemember. Addressing both individual and force-wide challenges, especially those that get in the way of retaining needed talent, and providing alternate career paths for skilled personnel who are no longer competing for key billets can help the Army to be all it can be.



HOW THE ARMY CAN BE ALL IT CAN BE

How can the Army be all that it can be? The answer to this question is as diverse, and as personal, as the individuals providing the answer. Therefore, the ideas in this article are just one perspective; rather than attempting an endless comprehensive exercise to outline every application of and reason behind BAYCB, we will look at it in light of retention challenges. Recruiting—the *raison d'être* of the BAYCB program—exists to offset retention shortfalls and so to maintain institutional and operating force requirements. It thus follows that examining retention issues can help solve, if even to a small degree, some of the Army's recruiting challenges—and allow the Army, and Army forces, to be all they can be.

As we move forward, it is worth noting that the Army needs individuals more than individuals necessarily need the Army. Unfortunately, all too often, the Army personnel system places this ordering on its head: it operates according to the principle that individuals need the Army more than the Army needs individuals.

Recruiting reflects many aspects of generating and maintaining a force; retention is one aspect that impacts recruiting. To be all it can be, the Army should consider addressing retention challenges.

Regarding personnel, there are currently two drivers of instability that might inhibit the Army from reaching its potential. First, frequent permanent change of station (PCS) moves disrupt Army families, eventually causing Soldiers to leave the Army ahead of when they might otherwise have left. Second, *up-or-out*, and the supposed necessity of key billets, such as command for officers, as a requisite for promotion and continued service, can cause both non-commissioned and commissioned officers to depart the Army ahead of when they might otherwise have left. Because of these two issues, the Army loses talented, trained and educated professionals whose continued service would allow the Army—and Army forces—to be all they might otherwise be.

Although there are many options to address these two drivers of instability, this article proposes two specific options that might help the Army be all *it* can be. First, homesteading, or creating community, within the Army and within Army forces, can help address the problems associated with frequent PCSing and its subsequent retention problems. Officers, for instance, move every two to three years. This provides very little time for their families to develop bonds—but plenty of occasion to develop resentment toward how these moves impact the children, friendships and the spouse's ability to maintain a career. When this dynamic develops, servicemembers are indirectly backed into a corner of prioritizing their career at the expense of their family, or prioritizing their family at the cost of their Army career. Second, instead of operating an up-or-out personnel system, and a personnel system built on the attainment of key billets, such as command, a more forgiving personnel system that still allows for upward mobility could offer a better way for the Army to retain talent. As it is, the Army slowly bleeds away relatively young and talented individuals who could easily be helping it to be all it could be.

1. Todd South, "Army Hits Retention Goal Four Months Early, Says Top Enlisted Soldier," *Army Times*, 12 June 2023.

Homesteading

In 1943, psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a particular hierarchy of human needs in his paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation.”² Love and Belonging, i.e., friendship and a sense of connection, rest at the center of this hierarchy. Safety Needs, such as employment, health and property, sit just below. Yet, the Department of the Army’s Career Engagement Survey (DACES) report for 2021 suggests that the Army is not meeting many of its Soldiers’ basic needs. For instance, the DACES report for 2021 finds the following top five reasons for Soldiers leaving the service: (1) the effects of deployments on family and personal relationships; (2) the impact of Army life on a significant other’s career plans and goals; (3) the impact of Army life on family plans for children; (4) the degree of ability or predictability of “Army life”; and (5) the impact of military service on a the well-being of a Soldier’s family.³ The DACES 2022 report echoes the findings of DACES 2021.⁴

Considering these findings, it is also important to ask what is meant by Army life. Despite the term’s centrality in both DACES reports, neither of them defines it. So, we offer the following definition: it is the day-to-day activities of a serving Soldier and how those activities impact the Soldier’s life, that of their spouse and children (if married), and that of friends, family and relationships for single Soldiers—all regardless of rank. The day-to-day activities of a Soldier’s life, i.e., Army life, should be governed by battle rhythms, confirmed training schedules and long-range planning guidance, but in many cases these products are just formalities. Consequently, near-term Army life is reactionary and unpredictable, and the personality of leaders contributes to the challenges. Many cases of toxic leadership, for example, have emerged in the past twelve months, pointing to the damage those leaders have had on individuals in their ranks.⁵ These problems affect more than just the Soldier; like anyone, Soldiers often carry their emotions from the day home, which results in families being indirectly impacted by their day-to-day activities and encounters.

Though a Soldier’s unit or assigned organization predominately governs day-to-day activities, it is actually the Army’s personnel system that dictates what Army life means for Soldiers and their friends and families. In point of fact, it dictates their ability to satiate the need for belonging, friendships, employment, health (to include mental health) and property. As many people have already highlighted, the Army’s PCS cycle causes significant difficulties for an Army household to hold two jobs—one for the Soldier, one for the spouse—because of having to move every few years. This is important when taking into consideration jobs that require state-based credentialing and accreditation. Texas, for instance, is very particular regarding the acceptance of teaching qualifications from other states. Thus, individuals certified elsewhere face significant challenges finding jobs.

In the abstract, the Army’s personnel system exists to generate and maintain Soldiers for the Army. Further, it exists to maintain steady, predictable manning levels in accordance with the Chief of Staff of the Army’s (CSA) manning guidance. But from Soldiers’ individual

2. Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–396.

3. *Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey: First Annual Report* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army), 21, https://talent.army.mil/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/DACES-Annual-Report_JUNE2021.pdf.

4. *Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey: Second Annual Report* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army), 19, <https://talent.army.mil/daces/>.

5. Jaime Moore-Carrillo, “Army Fires 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade Commander,” *Army Times*, 23 June 2023 .

perspectives, the Army's personnel system either contributes to, or detracts from, a Soldier's fulfillment of his or her respective needs, as they relate to Maslow's hierarchy. Given the previous two years' DACES reports, which illustrate that Army life is not suitably addressing many of a Soldier's basic needs, it is not a stretch to suggest that the current personnel system is not functioning appropriately.

To address a problem of this magnitude, but also one of such far-reaching implications for both retention and recruiting, the Army might consider what can be called homesteading. This could take many forms, but, on a basic level, it could mean allowing Soldiers—and their families, if applicable—to put roots down at one location for a period of time that exceeds two-to-three years. Doing so would allow them to develop a better sense of belonging, to improve the opportunities to maintain a dual-income household, and to decrease the potential unhappiness regularly found in Army life.

Regiments

Looking backward for solutions to modern concerns, much like the Army has done with the Army Green Service Uniform and the BAYCB recruiting campaign, provides a potential solution to address the Army problems identified in the DACES reports: regimental force design. Similar arguments are being made regarding the divisional structural.

Homesteading at a single installation in a specific regiment is one way the Army might be able to positively impact retention challenges.

Ultimately, regiments could be one way to make Soldiers feel like they are part of a cohesive, insular team.⁶

Why the regiment and not the brigade combat team (BCT)? Proponents of the BCT structure will likely argue that the regiment is not a combined arms organization, or that BCTs provide Soldiers with the same sense of identity and belonging as the regiment. Yet, the BCT proponents often overlook the fact that modern regiments—those of the twentieth century—were more often than not combined arms organizations,

albeit with limited capacity in some areas. To be sure, the Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), with its mix of cavalry—to include troops equipped with tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles—artillery, aviation and support units could be banded into a cohesive fighting unit. Going further back, infantry regiments of early eras included tank companies in their task organizations. Today's 11th ACR, although a unique organization, with its squadrons maintaining a combined arms configuration, demonstrates how this is possible. The Stryker cavalry regiments—the 2nd Cavalry and 3rd Cavalry Regiments—provide additional examples of how this idea works today.

Further, current battalion organizations link their lineage to the regiments, not brigades. Soldiers regimentally affiliate; they do not brigade affiliate. Take the 10th Cavalry Regiment, for instance. Many 10th Cavalry Regiment sub-units have existed over the years: most recently, 1st Squadron, 4th Squadron and 7th Squadron. Those organizations have been division formations and parts of various brigades. Nonetheless, Soldiers that have served in the 10th Cavalry Regiment proudly

6. Jules Hurst, "Move Soldiers Less: A Divisional System in the US Army," *War on the Rocks*, 30 August 2023.

proclaim their service with the regiment, and not with the division or brigades in which they served. The regiment, not the BCT, gives Soldiers a sense of identity.

Homesteading in Regiments

Homesteading and keeping Soldiers in regiments could improve leadership. Instead of the two-to-three-year turn-and-burn that most officers experience, for example, homesteading could improve many of the systemic problems that units frequently deal with on a regular basis. Unit maintenance is one example; maintenance in armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) is almost universally in disarray. The two-year command cycle in units arguably compounds the problem. Instead of having time to truly fix systemic maintenance problems, many leaders opt to hastily do what has to be done to keep their fleets running and leave fixing the problem for the next leader.

Moreover, homesteading in regiments would allow Soldiers to work together for longer periods of time, building better cohesion and trust. This would additionally put the onus of leader development on leaders within the regiments since they would be entrusted with the same formation of Soldiers for far more extended periods of time than the current two-to-three-year models allow.

Viewed together, homesteading within a regimental structure—limiting PCS moves and allowing Soldiers to serve in units that better reflect a sense of group identity—might help improve some of the challenges of Army life that are causing much of the personnel attrition of more senior Soldiers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and commissioned officers. This is not to say that homesteading and a regimental structure would fix all of the problems associated with Army life, but it would be a small, first step—and perhaps a signal that the Army is indeed trying to consider ways in which to ameliorate the challenges to the motivation of Soldiers and their families. In short, personnel systems should serve the Soldiers; Soldiers should not serve the personnel system. By orienting this model in the proper direction—i.e., the personnel system serving soldiers—the Army would be one step closer to being all it can be.

Professional and Technical Tracks

While the Army's recruiting trouble in recent years is well known, the Army appears to be doing well with retention. Nonetheless, whispers across the force suggest that senior field grade officers—colonels and lieutenant colonels—are leaving the force in droves, creating significant manning shortfalls. The attrition might be due in part to the command selection process at battalion and brigade levels. For combined arms officers, and other branches with key development (KD) positions at those ranks, being bypassed for command and KD positions is the kiss of death for a career—the chance for promotion and continued relevance within a respective career field is all but over. Whether or not this is truly a problem or not remains to be seen. Further, the focus on colonels and lieutenant colonels is not to suggest that these ranks are the

only ones experiencing high levels of attrition. To be sure, the retention rate of enlisted tank crewmembers is also rumored to be struggling, with ABCTs having to offset tank crew shortcomings with infantrymen and other pragmatic solutions. This problem, indirectly acknowledged in recent reporting, has created qualification problems across several of the Army's divisions.⁷ Further, a recent BAYCB commercial in which a tank crew is conducting a qualification table is also likely a nod to the recruiting (and most likely retention) problems being felt across the force.⁸ This leads us to a discussion of professional tracks.

Creating opportunities beyond the narrow confines of existing career timelines and maps is another way that the Army could positively impact retention challenges.

The up-or-out promotion system, which was created in 1980 as part of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, or DOPMA, in many cases inhibits the Army from being all that it can be.⁹ And, although it was rumored to be on its way out just a few years ago, it remains firmly in place.¹⁰ A problem with the system, however, is that it can cause untimely departures of very talented people. The manning problems of armored units and the shortfalls of lieutenant colonels and colonels across the force, as just two examples of many, illustrate the negative impact of promotion tied to arbitrary metrics. *Army Times*, for instance, reported that in 2023, junior NCO promotion rates have "collapsed."¹¹ This report comes just a few years after spokesmen for the Army stated that changes to its centralized promotion board processes would create "an environment where there is no promotion stagnation."¹²

Stagnation in officer, NCO and enlisted promotions, as well as general career opportunities, creates an environment in which personnel processes and systems directly and indirectly cause the Army to lose many gifted individuals, thereby preventing the Army from being all it can be. To be sure, the untimely departure of personnel can cause a significant brain-drain in which valuable experience, technical expertise and administrative and procedural know-how leaves the Army and is replaced with inexperience. Among many other problems, this can leave the Army struggling to fill billets for which it has a disproportionate shortfall.

Though not a new idea, this is an opportune time to refresh the discussion on establishing professional, or technical, career paths for officers and enlisted Soldiers. Certainly, being bypassed for a KD position, or not being able to be promoted due to personnel system challenges, should not send quality Soldiers scrambling for the door. The force should examine ways in which to retain and promote talented individuals, even if their respective career field options have contracted. One such option is to create professional or technical tracks. The fields might include plans and strategy career tracts, institutional tracts at Centers of Excellence, or within branch-specific schools, or any other number of options. Considering that this idea is currently not an option means that a significant amount of research and planning would lie ahead to bring this to reality. Nonetheless, retaining talent rather than allowing it to fall prey to an arcane personnel system based on attrition is one way in which the Army might live up to the idea of being all that it can be.

7. Todd South, "Pilot Program Aims to Relieve Reading Problems Straining Armor Units," *Army Times*, 24 August 2023.
8. "First Target: Be All You Can Be, Go Army," *Go Army*, 21 August 2023, video, 0:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tC7nNc75Hpc>.
9. Peter Schirmer et. al., *Creating New Career Options for Officers in the U.S. Military* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).
10. Leo Shane, "Congress is Giving the Officer Promotion System a Massive Overhaul," *Military Times*, 25 July 2018 .
11. Davis Winkie, "Junior NCO Promotions Have Collapsed – Here's the Data, and Why," *Army Times*, 2 March 2023.
12. Devon Suits, "Army Makes Big Changes to Centralized Promotion Board System," *U.S. Army*, 19 April 2019.

CONCLUSION

While the Army seeks recruits who are interested in being all they can be in the Army, the institution itself should seek out ways that help it to do the same. And, while the number of options for how the Army might go about this are as many as the individuals examining the problem, two ideas have been presented within this article—addressing both Army life challenges and the loss of talent that stems from outmoded promotion and retention practices.

Former CSA General James McConville often stated that the Army was in a war for talent.¹³ Yet, many of the personnel practices implemented in recent years have yet to give ground from attrition-based personnel processes and move instead to embracing talent. The Army continues to move its Soldiers and their families every few years, despite evidence that frequent PCS moves create problems for married Soldiers, which, in turn, hurts Army retention.

Moreover, Army life, an ill-defined concept, continues to plague retention, while very little seems to be being done to address many of those challenges. For instance, during the summer of 2023, stories emerged from Fort Cavazos that the installation was having trouble keeping dining facilities open due to combat training center rotations, deployments to Europe and other requirements.¹⁴ Quickly glancing at this problem might suggest that III Corps or the 1st Cavalry Division is not effectively balancing its requirements. Considering, however, that the personnel shortfalls associated with operating the dining facilities are linked to operational—or “Big Army,” in a Soldier’s parlance—requirements, one can see how Army life can hold such a central position in the retention issues highlighted in the 2021 and 2022 DACES reports.

Fixing Big Army problems associated with Army life is, in many cases, a significant challenge that could take generational effort. However, Former CSA James McConville was also known for a particularly straightforward saying: “winning matters.” Considering McConville’s assertion that the Army is at war for talent and his proclivity for winning, addressing personnel processes is perhaps a simpler target against which to find quick wins. Modifications to the Army’s promotion system, which would certainly require Congressional buy-in in many cases, would help the Army overcome its attritional struggle for talent. At the end of the day, the Army needs its people to be all it can be.



Amos Fox is a PhD candidate at the University of Reading and a freelance writer and conflict scholar writing for the Association of the United States Army. His research and writing focus on the theory of war and warfare, proxy war, future armed conflict, urban warfare, armored warfare and the Russo-Ukrainian War. Amos has published in RUSI Journal and Small Wars and Insurgencies among many other publications, and he has been a guest on numerous podcasts, including Royal United Services Institute’s Western Way of War, This Means War, the Dead Prussian Podcast and the Voices of War.

13. Ed Daly, “The War for Talent, U.S. Army, 16 February 2021.
14. “After Military.Com Article, Fort Cavazos Announces More Dining Facilities Opening Up,” *Killeen Daily Herald*, 10 August 2023.

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