

What is a Fort but the Soldiers? Steps to surviving and thriving as an Army Garrison Commander



By COL Scott Halter

William Shakespeare wrote in *Coriolanus*, “What is a city but the people?” In the same vein, what is a Fort but the Soldiers? “We are the Army’s Home,” the tagline for the Army’s Installation Management Command ([IMCOM](#)), succinctly defines the primary purpose of U.S. Army bases worldwide. Our forts, arsenals, camps, proving grounds, barracks, and depots support nearly one million Army Soldiers. U.S. Army Garrisons operate these installations, providing the backbone for our [Strategic Support Area](#) – enabling our Army to fight and win around the world.

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This summer, dozens of Army lieutenant colonels and colonels will take command of U.S. Army garrisons from Korea to Europe and all across the United States. Garrison command is perhaps the most challenging leadership position in the Army. Unlike an infantryman who takes command of an organization he spent the better part of his career serving and learning in, a garrison commander is walking into a novel experience. These senior leaders are placed in command of civilian-centric organizations with unfamiliar complex problems and limited resources to support their tenants, Soldiers, civilians, and families.

Prior to taking command of a garrison in 2017, I was one of those guys who used the word “garrison” in a disparaging way - “back in garrison” or “those guys in garrison” or “it’s the garrison’s fault”! I, like most Soldiers, was an unknowing consumer that did not have a clue what a garrison does daily and what little resources they have to do it. Today, I have a serious appreciation for the term “garrison” and all it involves, doing everything from checking ID cards to making ID cards; from maintaining clean water and clean air to waste water and solid waste; from firefighting to financial advising; from drug testing to deployment support; from resource management to emergency management to pest management; from taking care of the mail to taking care of your children; from policing to photography to power lines to pools to [pandemics](#); and from family advocacy to facility maintenance, and so much more.

For all those about to take command, and those who are curious, I offer these thoughts on surviving and thriving as a garrison commander.

1-Put first things first. People. Our purpose is to serve the people on our installations. We exist to help others and it defines why garrisons exist. Garrisons are in the customer service business. Start with your team and continually reinforce a service-oriented culture. Ensure you are part of a detailed on-boarding program that clarifies Army standards and expectations. IMCOM’s “Operation Excellence” is a good training program for newcomers

that requires the involvement of garrison leadership.

Take a long view of the garrison by developing and implementing a leader development program that builds the bench with meaningful experiences. The civilian workforce is hungry to learn and grow from your depth of leadership knowledge. We brought in guest speakers, conducted an annual leader off-site, improved on areas of weakness (i.e. supply discipline, maintenance, hiring practices), executed an [Arbinger](#) seminar, and focused our mindset around Servant Leadership.

Next, find ways to improve and sustain the quality of life for our Soldiers and Families. Challenge current programs and practices to grow and improve their support to the health, safety and welfare across the installation. One of my first actions as a garrison commander was to survey the workforce about what we could do better. We then pulled together a team of eager mid-grade leaders to develop and execute solutions. Some ideas were successful, others were not, but the buy-in and empowerment made a difference across the installation. Start your command by investing in people and the return will be great for our Soldiers.

2-Integrate and communicate. Army Garrison commanders are not Installation Commanders. The senior commander (typically the senior general officer on the installation) is in charge. Garrison commanders only command the garrison, but the senior commander relies on the garrison to integrate all the supporting elements to meet the priorities and goals of the senior commander. This role can present significant challenges on bases with a population of diverse, joint, and interagency tenants supported by multiple unaligned commands.

The garrison must often coordinate emergency response, activities, and information flow between functional organizations with radically different languages and missions. The Network Enterprise Center wants help hiring from the Civilian Personnel Action Center who requires physicals from the Medical Treatment Facility that receives supplies from the

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Logistics Resource Center. Most of our Soldiers shop at the commissary, their kids attend schools on and off-post, and live in the surrounding community. To successfully integrate these and many other stakeholders, the garrison team must build strong relationships with these organizations and have disciplined processes that bring them to the table on a regular basis to communicate requirements, priorities, and expectations.

Communication is critical for effective installation and community cooperation and synchronization. How will you cultivate strong relationships, ensure stakeholders are informed and engaged, and message to the tens of thousands of people that rely on the garrison daily? How will you know it is working? An aggressive, consistent, and deliberate communication strategy that targets both those on the installation and key leaders in the local area will succeed with the support of leaders across the installation.

3-Doing the Right Things Right. It will not take you long to understand that our installations do not have the resources to do everything that needs to be done, fix everything that needs to get fixed, or buy everything that needs to be bought. Garrisons have just enough funding to pay the bills and deliver services at a good enough level. Some components of the garrison have flexibility, but most have to make hard choices about what will get done and what will not get done.

As the commander, you must be ruthless with requirements validation. Understand what must be done and to what standard. Force your team to prioritize all resourcing requirements and ask the hard questions; “what authoritative document (policy, law, regulation, directive, order, etc) directs the garrison to (fill in the blank) and what happens if we don’t do it?” Just like in the tactical Army, nearly every task in garrison has a standard. Leaders must be able to connect the funding and manpower required to deliver to the standard. And if you are not delivering to standard, why? Is it training, people, attitude, or process? What is your feedback mechanism to know if the people you are serving are satisfied?

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The garrison commander is responsible for delivering base operations services, so it behooves you to know what they are and are not, while understanding everything you do will have an impact on the tenants, Soldiers, civilians, and families.

4-Infinite Game. In Simon Sinek's recently published book, [*The Infinite Game*](#), one of his main points is to take a long view when approaching problems. Many of the issues on our installations have no quick fixes and the solutions are often implemented long after you depart.

Two primary long-term challenges on our installations are infrastructure and housing. Infrastructure includes all the "real property" - that is buildings, roads, water & sewer lines, railheads, airfields, and much more. To play this "game" well, you need to understand the components, processes, and programming that go into the installation master plan, construction proposals, and renovation & modernization requests.

You must also know how your installation plan supports the Army's vision. While planning the deep fight, you cannot lose sight of the close fight - current year sustainment plans to maintain your infrastructure today. Clearly communicating the infrastructure challenges, risks, and the limited resources to your senior commander and tenant leaders is necessary. This insight will help when the inevitable crisis appears - perhaps as a major roof leak or an HVAC dies on a large facility, requiring a reprioritization of funding.

A vital piece of the installation's infrastructure is on-post housing. There are two types of housing - Army owned/operated and privatized (also known as RCI - Residential Communities Initiative). Both have challenges in the present and future. Garrison commanders play a key role in the success of on-post housing by ensuring the safety and quality of the dwellings our Soldiers and families live in today and 20 to 30 years from now. We must maintain daily, close oversight of maintenance activities, ensure new residents move into a safe and quality home, and cultivate a strong sense of military community in our

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housing areas. To sustain this, we absolutely must keep a long term perspective on future renovation and development plans to ensure they are appropriately funded and synchronized. This constant attention to detail guarantees our communities maintain quality, and we achieve our charter to care for our most important asset - our people.

5-Drive Change. You are leading a civilian centric, government organization that likes the status quo. We have active duty officers in charge of our garrisons to challenge good enough and to continue to improve the garrison. You may not fully understand civilian hiring processes, or contracting, or environmental law, or many other technical aspects of a garrison, but you know how to lead. The Army selected you because you have the capacity to learn, grow, and help an organization get better. Do not be shy about asking why and pushing to run our installations at a higher level. Can we use things like data visualization to better understand our energy efficiency? Are there technologies available to improve our base defense? Could we better define our base operations service standards? Are we developing the next generation of Army Civilians properly? It is too easy to let the garrison run on auto-pilot for two years. Step into the fray and make a difference in the lives of the people who live and work on your installation.

Lastly, have fun. You will learn more in this assignment than in any other during your career, and I promise it will be the most challenging. Embrace the challenge, learn, and enjoy the people.

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