



By Casey Dean and Aaron Childers

Your Exception to Policy is in hand, your packers are scheduled, and your family is ready to move. COVID-19 delayed PCS season a bit, but it's still coming. As a field grade officer or senior NCO, you may have the option of serving in the National Capital Region (NCR) for the first time in your career. Being assigned to the NCR can be one of the most rewarding experiences in your career and, if done right, will provide invaluable insight into how our military fits in with the rest of the U.S. Government. If done wrong, your tour to the NCR can be frustrating to both you and your family. Whether you work in the White House, a place most people will only see in the movies, or work in the basement of the Pentagon, a place most military officers never want to see, here are some tips to help you get the most out of your assignment to the NCR:

It's a broadening assignment for a reason

Broadening assignments are intended to further develop officers and NCOs outside of their traditional specialty. Use this time to get the most out of it and truly expand your experience base. [DA PAM 600-3](#) does a great job breaking down broadening assignments and describes them as positions to contribute and learn outside of one's perspective through five major categories: 1) functional, tactical, or institutional (OC/T, Ranger Regiment); 2) scholastic and civilian enterprise (train with industry, ACS); 3) joint or multinational (GCC, NATO); 4) interagency or intergovernmental (State Dept); 5) cross-component (First Army). The main purpose of the broadening assignment is to provide expertise beyond your traditional functional area. Your experiences in these positions may be foreign or even painful at times but they will make you, and the Army, better and more flexible in the long run.

Study before you go

A critical component of your success, whether you are going to the Joint Staff, Army staff, or to support a niche capability, is your understanding of how you and your assignment fit into the bigger picture. The pace and measure of each of these assignments is different and you have to understand where you fit into the larger organization and who you will interact with. If you are on the Joint Staff, you will be greatly affected by current events and you will communicate with your Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) counterparts daily. On the Army Staff, you will march to the beat of the Program Objective Memorandum (POM) cycle and the mission of training, manning, and equipping the Army. If you're headed to the interagency world, reach out to your sponsor ahead of time to get a 101 briefing of your potential portfolio and then do some of your own research to see how it fits into the larger picture.

Where to live

Deciding where to live in D.C. is a personal decision based on family requirements, willingness to commute, and whether you want to live on or off post, among others, but there are a lot of choices. Many people think of house-hunting in the NCR as like the Hunger Games, so prepare in advance. The market moves extremely quickly for rentals and sales. Unlike most army posts where you can either live on post or in a small community, there are options- a LOT of options.

We recommend you list your priorities (schools, commute, house/condo, city/suburbs, fenced yard, etc) then share them with a realtor or look at one of the many bases that offer on-post housing (Fort Belvoir, Bolling AF Base, and many others). The choices can be overwhelming, but once you make a few key decisions you'll have a plethora of options. Reach out to those you know in the area or use social media pages. For any spot you get, be prepared to dip into savings for the security deposit and first and last month's rent at D.C. BAH prices.

Embrace the commute

There are many options to get to work. All of them could see massive delays due to accidents, construction, hellish traffic, and tolls. Don't let the commute stress you out. Pick out some Audiobooks or favorite podcasts to listen to. Once you get settled here, get a local library card. You can sync it to the [Libby](#) app and checkout thousands of audiobooks for free.

When doing your initial research to determine if driving is feasible, make sure you check on the commute in your maps app during rush hour. You may only live 10 miles away, but the drive could take you 90 minutes on a bad day. Always have two commuting options. Just like planning a patrol, you need a primary and alternate- don't let a pile-up on I-95, or a metro delay, keep you from work.

Stay out of politics

Being in D.C. means working in a diverse political environment but it is important not to let politics impact your judgement in the workplace. Your specific work environment may dictate how much you feel the pull of politics. Just remember, as military leaders we follow the prescribed policy and our commander's intent. Taking a page out of [GEN Marshall's playbook](#), when asked whether he was a republican or democrat, Marshall simply replied "I'm presbyterian."

Civilians at work

Your interactions with civilians in DC will be much different than what you experienced at other duty stations or at your unit. Remember that civilian control of our military is the bedrock of our profession. In D.C., you will work with and for more civilians than ever before in your military career. If you embrace this, they will make you a better officer or NCO. There are many different roles the civilians play in the military and the defense sector but below are a few types of civil servants you may not have seen in your career before:

- The politically appointed civilians are individuals, appointed by the current administration, who oversee everything from where we deploy troops to what the Army buys. Usually these individuals are highly educated and have a vast amount of experience in their fields. Don't be surprised if you have read books or articles by the person you are briefing in the E-ring of the Pentagon.
- The Senior Executive Service (SES) civilians are highly qualified and usually have years of experience in a particular area. They are general officer equivalents and are well respected in the Pentagon. Often, the SES in your agency will have years of experience in that office. Now, more than ever, you will see individuals with extensive experience in Cyber, Sustainment, and even the corporate world bring their experiences to the army.
- Civilian employees. These individuals have served decades in the NCR and are

competent and skilled. They were at the Pentagon long before you got there and mentored General X when they were Major X. Seek these people out and let them help you.

Interagency cooperation

In an interagency environment, you'll likely arrive cold to new surroundings, working on initiatives and priorities that are new and foreign. Don't dump the vast experience you have, just apply it to your new team. As you build experience and understanding, your civilian colleagues will see the value you bring to their team. They will be hungry for your planning and organizational skills and will easily make a place for you on the team. Just don't ruin it by saying, "that's not how we do it in the xxxxx," or whatever tactical-level organization you just came from.

Find your professional development opportunities

One of the benefits of being in D.C. is the diversity of opportunities for self development. While leader development at a unit is typically robust and focused, most of the jobs in D.C. involve being on higher-level staffs or inside agencies where leader development may not be geared toward your specific career path. The good news is that there are MANY opportunities for self development.

Are you social? If you are interested in a particular subject, there is probably a niche club or group in D.C. Interested in learning about future assignments? The NCR Leadership Forum focuses on leadership lessons for those going into Battalion Command. Many groups follow the "Drink and Think Model" where groups meet at bars to discuss various topics. Groups like [Cigar, Scotch and Strategy](#) and [Professors & Pints](#) meet to discuss strategy and history. These groups are great places to learn about specific topics and expand your network.

You can also constantly find lectures and panels in D.C. on any topic you can imagine. Think

tanks, university series, and independent lectures offer opportunities to broaden yourself on everything from the future of warfare to diverse cultural experiences. Many of these events, like the [AUSA breakfast series](#), are Army focused and keep you plugged into the green machine.

Whether you love or loathe staff rides, there is more than enough history around the DC area. You are surrounded by battlefields and fortifications from the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, and Civil War. If battlefields aren't your forte, or your kids don't like driving through Antietam for three hours (not that this has EVER happened), check out the museums in the area. The Smithsonian's American History Museum, the Museum of the Marine Corps at Quantico, and the Museum of the U.S. Army on Fort Belvoir are all great options.

Talk with peers and develop a network

As you pursue professional development opportunities, keep track of those folks (military or not) you come in contact with. You'll be surprised how often you'll run into someone you know at a meeting or future event. [Network until it makes you uncomfortable](#). You won't be disappointed. You will also have many opportunities to work with other services. Make friends and expand your joint network. As you continue to progress in your career, you will likely see each other again and relationships matter more in this environment than ever before.

Enjoy Your time

D.C. moves fast, very fast, so make sure you take the time to exhale. Enjoy a [run on the Mall](#), take your spouse to a brewery or winery in the Blue Ridge, or take advantage of the many children's activities in the NCR. This assignment should be an opportunity for both you and your family. Unless you were stationed in a major city before, you probably weren't at a place where you could easily go to a major sporting event, or enjoy minor/ poor performing teams like the Redskins. A tour in the NCR will be rewarding. It's not jumping

out of airplanes or tank table VI, but if you capitalize on the many opportunities to widen your personal and professional experiences , you will leave D.C. a better person and a better officer or NCO.

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