

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

Editor's Note: This post is part of the FTGN Army Broadening Series that we are running from March 15-30, 2021. Each day, we will publish new insights into the Army's various broadening assignments, starting March 15th, 2021 with an [overview of AIM 2.0](#) and a discussion on how to educate others on assignment selection criteria.



By Aaron Childers

“With great power comes great responsibility.” Okay, so maybe that’s a quote from Spiderman, but if you’ve been in the Army long enough, you’ve also heard the saying “You are your best career manager.” As Army officers find themselves using the AIM 2 marketplace for virtually all assignments, these two ideas are more true than ever before. Following your key development, or KD, time as a captain and a major (usually company command or XO/S3 time), you have a window to pursue a broadening assignment.

However, choosing where to spend this dedicated time broadening yourself is something of a “Spiderman” moment. You have tremendous power to choose your next assignment - you may, in fact, have an AIM2 marketplace with hundreds of widely-varied options.

You have equally tremendous responsibility to make sure you spend the broadening window truly developing yourself. Some people think there are “magic” jobs you need to have during these broadening windows, like serving on a particular staff, but the truth is, none of these jobs are more important than how you perform in your next KD assignment. As such, you must look at potential broadening assignments with an eye toward preparation for your next key position. Whether that means focusing on the fundamentals, leading by teaching,

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

learning about (much) higher echelons, or going off the beaten path, choosing a job that improves your preparedness helps ensure you are at your best for those key assignments.

Are You Prepared For the Next Step?

The first question you need to ask yourself is: “Am I prepared for my next key assignment?” In other words, if you are a captain and you were assigned as a Battalion XO/S3 tomorrow, would you be prepared? If you are a major coming out of KD time, do you have what you need to succeed as a battalion commander the day after finishing as a Battalion XO? Spend some time on this question. Right now, your performance and potential are evaluated off what is expected of your current rank. But assessing your preparedness means looking at how your current performance would be evaluated at the next rank.

I had a friend who was just promoted to LTC say: “I just pinned two weeks ago....when I turned in work as a major, people said “This is incredible,” but now they look at the same quality of work and say ‘Seriously?’”

Preparedness is all-encompassing. Field grades are not just expected to execute basic skills like run a staff meeting, lead MDMP, and pick a BSA site. They are also relied upon to execute harder tasks, like comprehend ill-informed guidance, solve complex problems, and lead diverse organizations. When the Army designed the Command Assessment Programs for Brigade and Battalion Command, they included a portion that takes a hard look at command candidates’ cognitive and non-cognitive skills. The Army has made it clear that they expect their leaders to be both tactically proficient and skilled team-builders. We would be remiss if we did not also use these metrics to improve our preparedness through broadening assignments.

Focus on the Fundamentals

First, consider whether you are an expert in the fundamental skills required at the *next* pay grade. You may be excellent at building teams and leading others, but when you are a battalion field grade or commander, your team needs you to also be an expert at your functional skills.. These skills include navigating through advanced tactical scenarios, solving complex cognitive problem sets, and planning great training.

Your broadening assignment is the perfect time to build this kind of preparedness, especially in tasks and cognitive skills that you will need throughout your career. If you want to improve your tactical preparedness, there is no place in the world better at preparing units tactically than a Combat Training Center. Or, if you are looking to become

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

an expert at how to run an effective staff, consider an assignment working on a staff 2-3 echelons above the job you just left. For example, if you were a battalion S4, see if there are any division jobs that would increase your understanding of the complexity of sustainment operations at higher levels. These jobs will make you the model, or example, of what to look for in a tactical leader when you head back down to a battalion. Whether you are the Brigade XO who stays in a division to become the Chief of Operations (CHOPS), or the officer that goes to JRTC to become a master tactician, focusing on core tasks inside your functional area will make you more skilled at solving the cognitive, fundamental problems you will face in your next assignment.

When MG Tammy Smith completed her time as a staff captain, she was looking for her next assignment. She had built a solid team in her S4 shop, had the trust of her subordinates, and worked well with her peers. A mentor suggested going to JRTC as an Observer/Controller, a job that had just opened to women. This gave her access to combat arms leaders in a manner that was not yet available to women in other assignments during the 1990's, providing her a broadening experience that she would refer back to countless times for the rest of her career. She was able to observe and develop more units in the field than she ever imagined. The opportunity to see multiple units solve tactical problems in different ways, and see different leadership styles was truly developmental. At the end of her time as an OC, she felt confident that she could lead a staff through any problem set, tactical or garrison, because she had observed so many staffs perform under stress.

If you are looking to broaden yourself by focusing on the fundamentals of your profession, you might consider a: *Combat Training Center Observer/Controller, Division or Corps Staff, Active or Reserve Component Supporting Staff, Security Force Assistance Brigade, Basic Training or Advanced Individual Training Staff, or Mission Command Training Program. Although not necessarily a tactically-focused job, the Old Guard has the extraordinary task of representing the Army and our nation while still having many of the same tasks and functions of a traditional unit.*

Learn to Lead by Teaching

In the leadership book *Legacy*, about the "All Blacks" rugby team, there is a great chapter labeled simply "Leaders are Teachers." Leading, training, and teaching all go together. If you really want to stretch yourself, enhance your leadership skills, and give back to the profession, consider teaching.

It is easy to get comfortable in key tactical assignments, especially those we have done more than once (who here has been an AAS3, AS3, and S3?). If you have been lucky enough to

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

have experiences that helped you become great at a core job, help others develop their skills. Whether it's as an instructor at a Center of Excellence, or as an ROTC professor of military science, the Army needs good teachers. If you understand doctrine, go back and teach at the career course. If you were a great staff officer, consider teaching at Leavenworth. The benefits of teaching are two-fold; it helps the Army and develops you tremendously. Teaching forces you to become a master at the material you are covering. It builds your preparedness by honing your team-building skills and your ability to build trust with subordinates - the same skills that are required from leaders in a successful battalion. Develop yourself, hone your skills, and give back to the Army at the same time.

When I finished Company Command, a mentor suggested that I look at becoming a Captains Career Course instructor at the Maneuver Center of Excellence. In teaching doctrine, I discovered how little I knew. As the saying goes, "if you want to really learn something, teach it." As a Captain, I was the same rank as my students, yet I was expected to lead them and introduce new concepts (like MDMP). My peers were the absolute best from across the Army and forced me to push myself in the classroom. With almost forty instructors under one LTC, there was a lot of autonomy and max responsibility. After two years, I felt like I was the one who received the education, and it was one of the best assignments of my career.

If you are looking for teaching experiences, you should consider assignments as a *Captains Career Course Small Group Instructor, Tactical Officer at USMA, ROTC Staff/ Professor of Military Science, or BOLC Instructor.*

Better Understand the Institution

The Army is a big organization. It's so big that every two years the Army War College publishes a several hundred-page book called "How the Army Runs." Though it is one of the world's largest bureaucracies, the Army is still only one component of the Department of Defense. If you ever wondered why a USR report was so important or who answers to a combatant command, broadening assignments are likely the first chance you will have to see what goes on at a higher level.

Serving on the Army Staff, on a joint staff at a combatant command, or on the Joint Staff, allows you to see the "why" behind so many things you did in a BCT. The fact is, the Army is much, much larger than it appears at the brigade level. Some officers ignore this fact. Some even brag about the amount of time they spent down at a battalion. The truth is you cannot begin to fathom how your brigade fits into the bigger picture without...well... seeing the bigger picture. A battalion S4 shop is vastly different from the G4, or even the J4, and

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

not just in scale. The entire focus of the organization is different. The Army Staff teaches you how the Army uses many systems to manage the force, and a Joint or Combatant Command Staff will show you how the Army achieves national objectives. Don't shy away from these opportunities in your broadening assignment. One of the best ways to prepare for your next key assignment is to become well-acquainted with how and why the Army operates. An officer who understands how higher echelons function, is better prepared to support their commander and help their unit.

I had recently returned from a deployment to Iraq in the fight against ISIS when an opportunity arose to serve on the Joint Staff J5, in the section tasked with the counter-ISIS efforts. I went from seeing things at a very tactical level, to, in a matter of weeks, seeing how the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the Secretary of Defense coordinated international efforts to defeat ISIS. Things that bothered us at the unit level downrange, like having to request some of the forces we left behind at Fort Campbell, were herculean efforts for the Joint Staff. Items that the unit thought took forever, like transferring equipment from Afghanistan to Iraq, were major movements for U.S. Central Command and Army Central Command. Looking back, what seemed like routine reporting and requests, enabled leadership at multiple echelons to make critical decisions while we were deployed.

To better understand the institutions that run our Army and the Department of Defense, you should consider *serving on Training and Doctrine Command staff, Forces Command staff, Army Service Component Command staffs, Combatant Command staffs, the Army Staff, the Joint Staff, or the Office of the Secretary of Defense.* Note: *If interested in this path, those coming out of company command should consider the Joint Chiefs of Staff Intern Program.*

Go off the Beaten Path

Still looking for something different? The Army has taken extraordinary steps to offer a variety of options that are, well, not even in the Army. These experiences are so varied and off the beaten path, they will force an officer to grow during the assignment.

These experiences are not designed to be fun or a break from the Army, although many of them are. Rather, they serve to broaden and prepare you in unique ways. Officers who serve with FEMA during their broadening assignment are better suited to assist when their unit is tasked to help fight wildfires or assist civil authorities during floods. The same is true for advanced schooling - the Army is not saving your advanced history degree for the chance of time travel. They are counting on you to use your skills to write clearly and communicate effectively as a leader.

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

During the response to COVID, I had the opportunity to serve at Health and Human Services and FEMA. When I arrived, there were already Army Interagency Fellows serving on the staff. These officers were fully integrated members of that agency's staff working as effectively as if they had served an entire career at HHS. They had no problems working with the civilian agency, leading operational planning teams, briefing the heads of agencies, and owning projects with no other military members involved. These officers were smart, relatable, and built strong teams, regardless of the environment.

If going off the beaten path sounds like something you would enjoy, look closer at *the Command and General Staff College Interagency Fellows Program, Advanced Degree Programs, Downing Scholarship, Army's Office of Chief Legislative Liaison, opportunities to work in US Embassies abroad, exchange programs with foreign militaries and other services, and opportunities with industry.*

Who Can Help You With this Decision?

If this all seems like a lot, it is. AIM 2 gives you the opportunity to see all available assignments for your year group and branch which can be overwhelming. Luckily, you don't have to make this decision alone. You have people out there to help you through this.

Branch managers are not going away because of AIM. If anything, they are even more important. As you look through the options, ask your branch manager about your specific career timeline, specific guidance from your branch leaders, and any Army Senior Leader guidance that may affect your choices. Branch managers know the nuances of different career paths and different jobs on your AIM list, and can help narrow your options.

Ask your boss what they would recommend for you. Every OER has a place for future positions, and the first time you talk about this with your boss should not be as you're getting ready to PCS. Talk about career progression during regular counseling. Get your boss' opinion and ask where you could best build your preparedness.

Talk to your mentors. They should be trusted agents who give sound advice and provide opportunities for you to share your thoughts. Mentors who have known you for many years may have a different perspective than your current boss, and can see talent management trends from across the Army. Your mentor has a vested interest in seeing you do well. Even Spiderman had Aunt May.

Decision Time

The Responsibility of Preparedness: Choosing Broadening Assignments That Will Make You a Better Officer

Before selecting your AIM preferences, you need to ask one more hard question: “Do I want to stay on this current path?” Your branch has a defined trajectory but in seeing all the jobs out there, you might want to get off the command track or try something totally different. Just because your brigade commander took a certain path does not mean you need to do the same. This broadening time is a chance to do something different and make you a better officer at the same time.

AIM 2 gives you the opportunity to see every job that is available, which is both awesome and intimidating. Don't waste the opportunity to develop professionally and build your preparedness. With great power comes great responsibility.

I would like to thank MG Tammy Smith for providing the preparedness framework, sharing her experiences, and for her insight on broadening assignments and officer development.

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