Army engineer leaders developing campaign plan to make the Engineer Regiment better across the board

Over the past several years, the United States Army has undergone more changes than perhaps at any time in its history. One driving factor has been a stated need to effectively engage in "full-spectrum operations." What does that term mean? According to Army posture statements: "Full-Spectrum Operations is the Army’s core idea about how to conduct operations on land—its operational concept. Full-spectrum operations entail the application of combat power through simultaneous and continuous combinations of four elements: offense, defense, stability, and civil support. Each element of full-spectrum operations is necessary in any major campaign or operation. Soldiers operate in the midst of populations, not adjacent to them or above them. They often face the enemy among noncombatants, with little to distinguish one from the other until combat erupts. Killing or capturing the enemy while in proximity to noncombatants complicates land operations exponentially. Winning battles and engagements is important but alone is not sufficient. Shaping the civil situation is just as important to success. Informing and influencing public opinion and perceptions is central to mission accomplishment. Within the context of current operations worldwide, stability operations are often as important as—or more important than—offensive and defensive operations."
FUTURE ROLES AND MISSIONS

Taking a “three-dimensional” look at the missions engineers are tasked to perform today, members of this working group asked themselves, “Do we have the right engineer units, organizations, staffs, and individuals to deliver full spectrum engineering at every organizational level, in every mission environment, for all engineer mission requirements?”

Participants agreed that today’s modular engineer force provides the regiment and the Army with the right capabilities for full spectrum engineering. However, they also concluded that the engineer regiment and the Army lack the ability to synchronize and plan full spectrum operations at the brigade combat team (BCT), division, and corps level. The group determined that without an identified and properly resourced and trained engineer staff that understands these type operations, the effect at all levels will be inefficient and un-synchronized.

The group also determined that engineer and Army doctrine does not identify resourced missions and associated task lists pertaining to developing and building long-term “capacity,” by creating an operational environment supported by policy, which fosters (for example) institutional development, community participation, and enterprise creation.

work group focus areas

future roles & missions
accessions
training & education
employment
retention
strategic communications

ACCESSIONS

Recruiting and convincing the right people with the right qualifications and education, to enter the engineer regiment is a key component to the ongoing effort within the regiment to build great engineers. Today’s newly trained and motivated Soldier or civilian will become tomorrow’s leader or manager.

Estimates are that 60 percent of all engineer officer positions within the regiment require some sort of engineering academic degree. Realistically, in 2007 only 28 percent of officers entering the engineer regiment had such degrees. This statistic points to a need to explore innovative and effective programs designed to convince people to become an Army engineer “on their own” rather than being directed to do so by those in charge of accessions.

Recent policy allowed entering individuals to make first, second and third choices of desired functional branches within the Army (Engineer, Infantry, Signal, Intelligence for example) and their selections had no relationship to the type academic degree held. A person could select “Engineer,” as their first choice whether or not they had an engineering academic degree. Realistically, in 2007 only 28 percent of officers entering the engineer regiment had such degrees. This statistic points to a need to explore innovative and effective programs designed to convince people to become an Army engineer “on their own” rather than being directed to do so by those in charge of accessions.

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An Iraqi army soldier shakes the hand of LTC Bob Hatcher, commander of the 44th Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, as LT Col. Hatem Hameed Jhwy, commander of the Engineer Regiment, 11th Iraqi Army Infantry division looks on during the graduation ceremony from the Iron Claw Academy at Camp Taji, Iraq, Oct 16, 2008. The Iron Claw Academy, run by U.S. Army Soldiers from A Company 40th Engineers attached to Task Force 1-68, trains Iraqi army troops in basic route clearance techniques such as battle drills, how to look for and recognize IED’s and what to do when they think they’ve encountered one, methods of securing a route before convoys and how to keep the public safe from the IED’s. (Photo by Sgt Jerry Saslav)
TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Within the joint military community, Army “exter services” generally tend to access more degree-holding engineers, and invest more than the Army in engineer educational certification and training programs after personnel are assessed. The training and education working group examined at what point in a typical officer, warrant officer’s and noncommissioned officer’s professional career progression, where specific type courses of instruction and advancement would be needed to support engineer capability areas identified for the force. Center to the “training and education” work group’s efforts in developing recommendations in this area, is the role played by the U.S. Army Engineer School (USAES), located at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The group concluded that the overall USAES educational system must adapt to accommodate more “external factors.” Today for example, students arrive for training and education programs at the school with different levels of expertise gained through first-hand participation in real-world engineer missions...many related to multiple, year-long combat deployments in Iraq and/or Afghanistan. Still, each arriving student must undergo and successfully complete the same course program of instruction, using the same type instructional delivery methods. The working group concluded that a logical change would be allow, through validation testing to better test potential officer qualifications and tactical competency, to receive beneficial training in complimentary subject areas, rather than wasting valuable training time with things they already understand.

Along with improving the manner in which students are professionally developed at the engineer school, goes a priority need to assure that only the best instructors are made available to students, and that they each hold proper teaching credentials as well as an appropriate level of field experience. Additionally, methods utilized to present instruction at the engineer school need to be state-of-the-art as much as possible, with a greater “hands-on” approach. For example, the school should make itself more comparable to the type of “electronic and virtual realism” educational instruction at the Engineer Brigade conduct technical power and structure surveys at an Iraqi school in the Thawra 1 neighborhood in Multi-National Division - Baghdad.

EMPLOYMENT

New strategies should to be developed within the regiment which evaluate, segregate and “employ” individual talents available to the force. In other words, personnel “assignment” to specific positions needs to be done so as to place the right people in the right jobs. Traditionally, the Army has somewhat filled vacant positions with whomever might be available. Given that “people” are the Army’s greatest asset, the employment working group suggested that the regiment needs to develop a better job assignment system, which matches specific talents to specific position requirements.

The group considered the fact that more than half of all engineer field-grade positions in the Army are technical in nature and require a person with an engineering, science or related technical degree. Thus, the group concluded, the regiment should develop a career progression pattern which assures it properly develops technically qualified leaders, while at the same time assigning them to positions in which to utilize and progressively improve their level of technical competency. One possible example which was looked at by the group, was to consider placing junior leaders assigned to engineer troop units with the regiment's technical experts, and resident U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) District Field Offices, into short-term USACE utilization assignments, which might support the development of needed engineer technical skills.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Methods were examined through which to “market” and inform those potentially interested in the engineer branch. In many respects, this work group’s task was to examine what already exists in this area and to judge if it was working as intended. For example, while the Engineer School has had a website for years, the group recommended that a top priority be to make it even better.

The group discussed the potential effectiveness of television ads, informative videos and printed marketing materials which would be oriented on “telling the story” of the engineer regiment. During their analysis, the work group concluded that much of what is being accomplished today in this regard was not well coordinated between various elements within the regiment, USACE and USAF for example. Consequently, when one element produced their unique method of delivery for communications for targeted audiences, they often failed to consider potential complementing aspects of the other. In short, information presented throughout the regiment needs to be consistent, and interaction between at least these two major players needs to be ever-increasing.

USACE develops district oriented programs within their regional boundaries to “plant the seeds” of engineer knowledge. As such, programs need to be marketed and coordinated at regional colleges and universities.

RETENTION

The working group examined current retention rates for engineers in the Army and found that the engineer branch is losing junior officers at a faster rate than the Army average. Additionally, they noted statistics which concluded that “degree” engineer officers are leaving faster than those without an engineering degree. The group found that rates of separation are also on the rise for senior enlisted personnel, especially at the 20-year career point. To potentially reverse these negative trends, the working group recommended that senior leaders within the regiment do a better job in “monitoring” subordinates to help influence their long-term commitment to the Army. For example, observations from the field indicate that many junior members of the regiment are generally not well informed concerning future job assignments which might be appealing to them, nor are they generally aware of potential educational possibilities which might exist for them in the future. Other retention ideas were suggested such as: incentive pay for technical engineers, allowing more to select “installations of choice” for assignments, increasing the number of USACE positions for young officers so they might better utilize their technical education, and greater flexibility for assignments between the active and reserve components.

In summary, the group felt that there needed to be a better balance of current Army requirements with “career ambitions” if success is to be achieved in reversing the unsatisfactory retention trends recently experienced by the engineer branch.

Multi-National Division - Baghdad. Soldiers from the 926th Engineer Brigade, 890th Engineer Battalion, 926th Engineer Brigade, Multi-National Division – Baghdad. It is important that these type Soldiers be properly mentored so they stay with the force instead of deciding to separate. (Photo by Carmen Guerrero)
Some of the recommendations (not all having been included in this article) resulting from efforts of the cited working groups have already been implemented, or are being implemented. For example, this year thousands of ROTC cadets participating in summer camps were introduced in a spectacular and hard-hitting way to the Engineer branch. Also, a pilot program to wirelessly connect classrooms and students at the Engineer School was initiated, including issuing laptop computers to some students. Lastly, in August of this year the school completely transformed its web presence by designing a new website which is more user friendly and relevant to all who might visit. And lastly, senior engineer leaders throughout the force have been aggressively visiting colleges and universities to explain engineering opportunities available within the Regiment.

The emerging plan to “build great engineers” will be a touchstone document for Army engineers for the next five to ten years. Unlike earlier strategies, written and communicated over the past several decades, and which were “headquarters based”, this one appears to have been developed more from the bottom up. More importantly, it is being developed at exactly the right time, while the nation is at war, and thus fully engaged in executing full spectrum operations type missions.

While challenges lie ahead, especially in relation to obtaining adequate Army resourcing to implement recommendations presented by the working groups, one thing remains clear. The Engineer Regiment has always been good, but given the insightful and well synchronized planning and execution being carefully guided by engineer leaders serving today, it will most certainly become great! AE

The author is the Editor of Army Engineer magazine. He based this presentation largely on materials published last August in a presentation co-authored by the following Army engineers: CPT William Mohr, LTC Jeff Anderson, COL Jerry Meyer, COL Robert Tipton, COL William Haight, Mr. Steve Tupper, and BG(P) Gregg Martin. It must be noted that approved recommendations to be included in a formal “regimental campaign plan” are forthcoming, as of the date of this writing.