Should the General Engineer Battalion Transform, Again?

By Captain Walter K. Bogardus

The recent transformation of engineer construction battalions has generated much discussion. The traditional combat heavy engineer battalion, consisting of three engineer companies with vertical and horizontal platoons in each company and a consolidated equipment support section in the headquarters support company, has been replaced by an engineer battalion that consists of two vertical companies and one horizontal company. The platoons were given individual unit identification codes in an effort to make them more deployable and to allow the formation of a unit that supports the needs of the commanders on the ground, similar to the way brigade combat teams are assembled.

Lessons learned over the past year as the construction officer for the 368th Engineer Battalion, deployed to Kandahar Province in support of Regional Command–South, have highlighted an additional transformation that warrants further investigation. Forming engineer companies with broader capabilities, as opposed to the specific vertical and horizontal skills of current units, could increase engineer effects on the battlefield.

Engineer officers attend the Engineer Officer Basic Course, which is a general course that teaches the fundamentals of the entire engineer branch. Graduates may be assigned to a variety of units—route clearance company, combat engineer company, or vertical engineer company. The knowledge obtained at the course does not make graduates proficient in any of these duty positions—the real training takes place with the skills obtained and refined on the job.

This framework could also be implemented for the enlisted Soldiers in the typical military occupational specialties (MOSs) that make up the vertical and horizontal companies. As a former heavy equipment operator, I can attest to the skills obtained during advanced individual training. They touched on the basics of each piece of equipment, but proficiency required "stick time." That stick time doesn't occur in the classroom environment—it only happens after the Soldier gets to his first unit. The same can be said for all general engineering MOSs.

If the U.S. Army Engineer School restructured and created a general engineer MOS that taught Soldiers the basics of vertical and horizontal construction, company commanders would have a much more versatile force. The advanced individual training curriculum for general engineers would provide a broad understanding of the fundamentals of vertical engineering and the use of horizontal engineer equipment. Soldiers wouldn't graduate as proficient operators or master electricians, but they would possess the foundation for further training. The MOS structure would be more standardized, training would be much broader, and Soldiers would have a more diverse understanding of typical engineer tasks in a general engineer battalion than in the current specialized units. As a result, the "vertical" and "horizontal" unit designators would be eliminated and replaced with the designation of "general engineer."

Most construction missions conducted by Army engineers have vertical and horizontal components. As a result, battalions must task-organize vertical and horizontal assets to support these missions. In the general engineer company format, each company commander would have three platoons that are capable of taking on any mission with organic assets. The format would also increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the platoons. A platoon leader could use the same Soldiers for various phases of the project without having to provide one group of Soldiers to complete the earthworks and another group to construct the final structure.

On occasion, there is still the need to mass vertical or horizontal assets to complete a task. The change to a general engineer company format would not adversely affect this and could ultimately provide commanders with even more capabilities to accomplish the mission. If a project with a

No. 1 priority required a focused effort by the vertical trades, a company commander could dedicate the needed resources without any external reorganization. However, the next No. 1 priority would likely require the massing of horizontal assets. A more balanced concentration of vertical and horizontal assets at the platoon level would increase the flexibility of units to deliver the results being requested.

The terms *initial occupancy condition* and *minimum military requirements* are often used to measure the general engineering effects Army engineers provide in a tactical environment. In building tactical infrastructure, combat outposts, and forward operating bases, maneuver commanders are concerned with how quickly the task is completed. Construction engineers are often embedded with maneuver elements and tasked with building tactical infrastructure that will be immediately occupied so that operations can begin from that location. These facilities don't require tile flooring and complex wiring; they mainly consist of berms or perimeter walls, tent decks, a few guard towers, and perhaps some gravel to keep the dust down. The minimum skills required to complete this type of project could easily be encompassed in one general engineer MOS. There would still be a need for subject matter experts in vertical and horizontal construction at the unit level. We can't dispense with that strong noncommissioned officer who knows vertical or horizontal construction and can lead Soldiers. As with commissioned officers, areas of concentration could be established to give Soldiers a career track to follow and gain additional training and skills in a particular area.

Army engineers fit the definition of the "jack of all trades and master of none." They are asked to accomplish a wide variety of missions and expected to have a general understanding of all aspects of military construction. Developing junior Soldiers as general engineers could potentially increase the combat effectiveness of Army engineers and make the general engineer battalion even more diverse and capable of taking on whatever challenges arise.

When he wrote this article, Captain Bogardus was the officer in charge of the construction management section of the 368th Engineer Battalion at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil and environmental engineering from The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina, and is pursuing a master's degree in civil engineering from the University of Connecticut. He is a professional engineer in Connecticut.

ARMY CAREER TRACKER WEB SITE OPENS TO ENGINEER OFFICERS

By Lieutenant Colonel Brian Slack

On 23 January 2012, the Army Career Tracker (ACT) Web site officially opened to all engineer officers. Officers can log on at <*https://actnow.army.mil/*> for a "one stop shop" of engineer-related news, information, and career planning resources.

The ACT program, first unveiled to the enlisted force last summer, now also provides officers with a personalized look at their training, education, and assignment history alongside items that their branch designates as important. Officers can then use this information to develop their personalized career plan. ACT will offer leaders, raters, and mentors new ways of communicating with their Soldiers and monitoring their careers. When officers log on, they will select their rater and choose any number of mentors. Then, raters and mentors will be able to view an officer's education, training, assignment history, and future desires during mentoring and counseling sessions. ACT is designed to be accessed with a Soldier's Army Knowledge Online credentials and to seamlessly draw information from eight channels that support personnel, training, and military/civilian education programs.

On the *Career Resources* tab, ACT defaults to the Engineer Branch homepage where relevant and useful news and information are posted. On the *Officer* tab, it is possible to review past assignments, training, and self-development activities alongside Engineer Regiment recommendations for the officer's current pay grade and the next two higher pay grades. The recommendations follow Chapter 14 of Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*.[1] A useful feature of the Web site is a printable career map. Most entries are hyperlinked to additional information to help officers make better-informed decisions. All engineer officers are encouraged to explore this new Web site and provide feedback to the Engineer Personnel Development Office at <*leon.usaeshqrfi@conus.army.mil*>.

Endnote:

[1]Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, 1 February 2010.

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