

Key Points

- The 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, is stretched thin as it prepares for an upcoming deployment to Europe. There is no margin for error in its training and deployment schedule.
 - Its greatest challenge is personnel readiness, particularly filling all necessary positions, managing personnel turnover, and matching open positions with troops who have the right skill set to fill them.
 - Struggling with a lack of available spare parts and maintenance time, the brigade also faces significant equipment readiness shortfalls.
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This is the first in a planned series of reports on the readiness status of the 2nd "Dagger" Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) of the 1st Infantry Division, stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas. We will track the brigade's readiness over the coming months to understand the challenges it faces as it prepares to deploy to Germany as part of the European Reassurance Initiative. But we will also evaluate the Army's efforts to return from a rotational, wartime readiness model to a more traditional pattern meant to sustain overall service preparedness for a wide variety of missions while rebuilding the capabilities needed for high-technology conventional conflicts.

Dagger Brigade is representative of this initiative, indeed of the heavy Army in general. To begin with, the overall reductions in Army personnel strength and delays in modernization place limits on what can be accomplished. Even though the brigade's weapons systems have been improved and upgraded, its M1 Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and Paladin howitzers are fundamentally the same as those employed in the 1991 Gulf War, and the brigade now has less equipment than it did. Its other supporting capabilities have also been reduced,

and its parent division is a smaller organization. The parent division can provide some support, including select equipment and personnel from its sustainment and combat aviation brigades, but it cannot allocate the firepower, communications, or logistics support past division structures permitted. Finally, if employed on today's high-end battlefields, the brigade would lack organic air defense or electronic warfare assets; while it can coordinate external support, it would not necessarily own the skies or the electromagnetic spectrum on its own.

Thus, even as we measure Dagger's efforts to meet the new and rigorous service readiness standards, it is important to understand what these standards mean in terms of combat capability and capacity. Assessing readiness must include an explicit definition of the unit's mission. "Ready for what?" is the underlying question. For Dagger, that means preparing for high-intensity land combat—decisive action in the Army's lexicon—while also readying to work with and support US allies.

As the following trip report reveals, by far the largest challenge to sustained readiness is personnel. At a fundamental level, the demands of the service

as a whole are often at odds with those of the unit; career development, for example, conflicts with sustained unit cohesion. In an Army still shrinking in size, the margin of error between minimal readiness and unreadiness is razor thin.

Dagger Brigade

At the end of the summer, Dagger will load its equipment onto trains and ship off to Europe for a nine-month deployment, the second such rotation directed by the European Reassurance Initiative. Once there, it will disperse across the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where it will be tasked with buttressing the frontline of deterrence against Russia. For the soldiers of Dagger, who returned from nine months in Kuwait in the summer of 2016, readying for this deployment has been their singular focus since early fall and will continue to be so through the summer.

In late 2016, we traveled to Fort Riley to meet with members of the brigade and learn about their experiences as they gear up for such a momentous deployment. Meeting with officers ranging from company commanders to the brigade commander and acting division commander, we discussed their approach to managing the training process, the challenges they have faced so far, and the road ahead. The purpose was simple: to hear firsthand what a brigade must do to deploy and to gain a better understanding of the greater military readiness challenges they face. What is the day-to-day impact of what service leaders describe as an ongoing readiness crisis on the men and women tasked with carrying the nation's security strategy?

That the soldiers we spoke with were impressive came as no surprise, but the range and depth of obstacles they face is striking. Dagger Brigade has been tasked with one of the most important-and high-profile-deployments in the Army's portfolio: It must prepare for a high-end, combined arms fight with the Russian army while helping NATO allies respond to Russian efforts at subversion and political warfare. One might expect the brigade to be well cared for and well-appointed, yet-even with superior leadership-the officers detailed a host of issues.

The biggest challenge appeared to be what we would deem personnel readiness: a mismatch of open positions in the brigade and no one with the

right skill set to fill them; turnover of personnel, especially among mid-grade noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and majors; and shortages of soldiers available for training. Although reflective of personnel shortages or mismatches, these issues show up in the Army's readiness reporting system as training, not personnel, shortfalls. Personnel metrics measure the total number of soldiers in the brigade but not necessarily their availability to train or whether their training and skill sets are matched with the right position. So, while Dagger has a full set of personnel-it has more soldiers than available roles-it does not have enough healthy, properly assigned soldiers to fill out its tank, artillery, or other crews at each stage of training. That shortage may be reflected in low training readiness by Army metrics, but it is fundamentally a question of personnel availability and readiness.

Additionally the brigade is wrestling with equipment readiness challenges-recurring shortfalls of parts for vehicles-and adapting to the Army's transition to a new readiness reporting system, dubbed Objective T, which was delayed partway through the brigade's training calendar.

In sum, the brigade is performing a high-wire act in its effort to meet the new readiness targets. There was little room for error, and the unit was spread thin, with the parent division capable of offering limited material support.

Training and Manning the Brigade

At the heart of the brigade's challenges lies a disconnect between the training schedule and the personnel rotation schedule. That is, even as the brigade progresses through its training milestones, soldiers consistently cycle in and out of units.

Training began in early fall 2016 with small-unit "gunnery" availabilities, or training exercises for, at first, crews-for example, an Abrams tank requires four soldiers per crew, and a Bradley Fighting Vehicle requires three to maneuver and man its main weapons systems-and then larger units. As the weather grew colder, the scope of training exercises increased. Dagger's goal was to have 100 percent of crews fully trained, or qualified, in advance of its first full-brigade, combined arms exercise, dubbed Danger Focus, in January and February 2017.

From there, the brigade devoted itself to preparing for a rotation to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, in the spring. An NTC rotation represents the lone opportunity for the brigade to engage in large-scale, live-fire exercises designed to emulate combat against a modern enemy, in this case the Russian army. It is, in other words, the highest-profile and most demanding training event the brigade will experience. Returning from California, the brigade will then tend to itself over the summer and prepare for its eventual deployment for which packing will take a good month's work.

The training schedule, then, is unforgiving, and Dagger has developed an internal operating strategy, mapping out the inflection points and key events, to guide its planning. Yet personnel turnover profoundly complicates matters. The Army's training process dictates that units, beginning at the lowest level and moving to ever-larger echelons, must hit a series of training benchmarks before deployment. However, after each table-top step up the readiness ladder -soldiers will be pulled out of the brigade or reassigned, leaving crews that just qualified short a gunner, for example, or a commander.

Let us step back for a moment: The skill-level mismatch is not a reflection of the quality of the soldiers. The officers with whom we spoke made clear their respect for the troops they command. When a staff sergeant is reassigned-"PCS'ed" in Army parlance-he or she moves at the pleasure of Human Resources Command (HRC), a centralized authority pulling the personnel strings for the service. Dagger Brigade finds itself at the congested intersection between HRC's schedule and US Forces Command, which dictates deployment and usage calendars. Personnel and training schedules are imperfectly synchronized.

Lacking a clear understanding of what replacements they would receive or how many soldiers they would have, company and battalion commanders had to plan training events and manage their units under a cloud of uncertainty. They could lose soldiers to health or discipline issues or to PCS assignments, and replacement calendars, while projected, are subject to change. Often, commanders anticipate certain manning and equipment levels and plan according to those expectations-only to find themselves with a different set of personnel or

equipment. At points, the brigade and division headquarters appeared to have different personnel projections than the battalion and company commanders did. One company commander, for example, expected to go to NTC with half the soldiers he needs, but the division did not foresee such a shortfall. This confusion may be inherent to the process, particularly given the routine shuffling of soldiers in and out of the brigade; continuous personnel churn, exacerbated by general personnel shortages, strains units at all echelons.

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One mechanized infantry company commander with whom we spoke had recently completed platoon-level, live-fire exercises for which he had scrambled to produce a full complement of commander-gunner-driver teams for his ¹⁴ Bradleys. In the intervening 10 days, five of those ¹⁴ crews had lost at least one crew member. The company was preparing for exercises the same day we were there, and the commander had only four Bradleys up and running.

Moreover, he only had been able to field ¹⁴ full crews earlier by gutting the squads of infantry "dismounts"-foot soldiers who can be carried by and discharged from the Bradley to fight in conjunction with the mounted crew employing the main gun and other armaments. These units experienced 80 percent personnel turnover between scout team qualifications and the end of platoon exercises. The captain predicted he would have one dismount squad ready just in time for deployment, as opposed to the intended three.

Nor was that company unique. One brigade support company expected to bring only 69 of its ¹⁴⁰ soldiers to NTC, and when new soldiers did get assigned to it, most were not qualified for the tasks they were expected to perform. The company routinely received truck drivers who did not have a license to drive trucks at Fort Riley-seven weeks later, they could claim ⁴⁰ hours of training and certifications.

A cavalry company was 14 people short-79 versus 93-and expected to lose 27 more, meaning two of its 14 Bradleys sat unmanned and another two crews would be broken up after NTC. The commander expected to receive replacements, but they would not arrive trained, meaning they would have to repeat live-fire exercises.

Each battalion boasted about 58 crews, of which an average of 45 could be expected to remain stable throughout the training process. Even an armor battalion, which deployed the day we were there for live-fire training, was short two tank platoon leaders, out of four total platoons, and had no platoon sergeants. Worse yet, the commander reported that there were no replacements in sight.

One officer reported that the brigade had 55 to 60 percent of the staff sergeants it needed, due in part to them being called to other units deploying before Dagger.

All told, fewer than two-thirds of the required tank crews had completed their qualification training and were fully manned. Among rifle squads, fewer than one-half met those standards, and many other crucial units-including tank plows and mine rollers, howitzer crews, and signal and mission command master gunners-were at similar levels. Every platoon in the battalion suffered a grade mismatch; that is, each had a position that required a distinct training and expertise base but no one who qualified.

In short, operating without complete crews and key positions filled is the new normal.

Commanders must live and operate with those constraints. The brigade feels the strain of skill- level-position mismatches-what the Army calls MOS/SL mismatch-most in its NCO corps.

The end result could be seen in Dagger Brigade.

One officer reported that the brigade had 55 to 60 percent of the staff sergeants it needed, due in part to them being called to other units

deploying before Dagger. To boot, many of those sergeants had not completed their gunnery training, meaning they were sent forward with fewer qualifications

than many of their peers and will in turn struggle to get promoted. Similarly, three-quarters of the NCOs from the brigade sent to specialized schools to advance their careers promptly have a permanent change of station (PCS) upon return. For example, the brigade now expects to be missing seven of the 37 master gunner sergeants it needs in the coming months.

The combined effect of this constant NCO turnover is degraded training quality. Quality sergeants enable Army training by guiding inexperienced enlisted soldiers and officers through the hoops. When they get moved in the middle of the training schedule, the forces they leave suffer. One company in an armor battalion had two platoons led by brand-new lieutenants who, lacking any senior NCOs, were stuck asking corporals and specialists-as opposed to more senior NCOs-for advice. Even those units gifted with quality NCOs can lose them after doing live-fire training. Worse still, there is no accounting for the qualifications of the men and women sent to fill those now-open positions; one company expected to receive a sergeant who had been on a recruiting billet for four years.

Victims of the abattoir of budget cuts and a shrinking Army, officers now spend less time in positions than they once did, even in the midst of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the Army shrunk and sloughed off brigades over the past eight years, the total number of positions for advancement-minded soldiers shrunk. To accommodate that while still giving high-performing officers opportunities in key roles, the Army shortened rotation allotments. Field-grade officers, for example, get no more than 24 months in a position before rotating to another. Those in key leader positions, such as the brigade S3-its operating officer-and the executive officer, used to receive 36 months or more, so they now garner less professional development time. As a result, units such as Dagger have a tension between the need to man the brigade-retain talent-and the need to promote career advancement-cycle out the talent.

Under the Objective T guidance, the brigade would have needed to deploy with at least 75 percent of the key leaders who participated in the NTC rotation, but it was barely on pace to hit

that target, even before Objective T implementation was delayed. As is the norm, it expects to lose about half its field-grade officers between NTC and deployment. The brigade S3, who keeps the engines running and will have overseen the entire train-up process, will depart at midsummer, as will other key staff officers. Some battalions expect to deploy to Europe with fewer than two-thirds of their key leader positions filled-and NCO numbers are not much better.

The loss of experience and heavy turnover rates in these positions eat away at a brigade's overall knowledge base and competency.

The high rate of turnover affects forces not only in the near-term but also downstream. The men and women who cycle through those positions are well-trained and highly competent but get less time in positions and have less experience. The brigade's field-grade staff now averages only 12 years of experience, but in the past staff usually had about 15. Similar to the drain of NCOs, the loss of experience and heavy turnover rates in these positions eat away at a brigade's overall knowledge base and competency. The forces will still hit their marks in training, and the brigade will still be well-run and well-organized. But the cost of getting there, in terms of both time and money, continues to become an ever-growing burden on the brigade.

To complement the internal personnel issues, the division is spread thin. There is little the division's rear attachment-the actual division headquarters is directing operations in Iraq at the moment-can do to support the brigade. The first ABCT of 1st Infantry Division deployed to South Korea this fall, and the division's 1st Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) is spread out between Afghanistan and Fort Bliss, outside El Paso, Texas. Absent its HQ and two brigades, the division provides what material and higher headquarters support it can.

Without other forces on base, soldiers from Dagger bear responsibility for upkeep around Fort Riley, called borrow military manpower duties; 8 percent of a support company was assigned to those duties when we were there, preventing them from taking part in training activities. Moreover, absent support from the division's CAB, Dagger will have to rely on external cavalry units to support Danger Focus and the NTC rotation-and even then those units will have a limited range of acceptable roles, constraining the scope of the training exercises. Fortunately, the National Guard units slated to participate in Danger Focus will join Dagger at NTC as well.

Equipping the Force

As an armored brigade-equipped with M1 Abrams and M2 Bradleys- Dagger feels the brunt of the equipment readiness issue more than a light infantry brigade combat team might. It must account for the dual requirements of equipment availability and crew training. This complicates the training regimen-planners must align personnel with available equipment-and amplifies the effect of the personnel-training mismatch.

As alluded to above, the brigade's heavy equipment increases the complexity of each step of training. Light infantry units, unburdened by crew qualification requirements, can more easily handle personnel turnover, but even then when a small unit is broken up and new soldiers added, unit cohesion suffers.

In armored formations, that degradation is compounded. When an Abrams crew cycles out two of its four members, not only does crew unity suffer, but so too does crew proficiency. Even if the two new soldiers have trained elsewhere, the crew must rediscover its

effectiveness-four men crammed inside a tank are not interchangeable- to say nothing of the need to requalify the entire crew if they have not been previously trained.

There is still the question of whether the vehicles run and operate. When the brigade returned from Kuwait in the summer of 2016, its equipment went into reset-post-deployment maintenance and overhaul. Armor units, for example, were given three weeks for reset. But shrinking budgets coupled with high operational demands have caused the Army's inventory of replacement parts to run empty, so maintainers

do not have new parts readily available. Instead, they must put in contract requests for them, which generally take six months to fill. In turn, some of the vehicles sent to reset did not return until the end of the calendar year, well into the training cycle.

What equipment did return on time has been a hobgoblin of the planning staff. The officers we spoke with, particularly at the company level, spoke of shortages of both maintenance time and teams. They explained that maintainers are given 11 days to service tanks instead of three weeks, the doctrinal allotment, and a senior officer put the issue simply: There were not enough maintainers or available parts and equipment to keep up with the maintenance demand in the time allotted. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that at one point a company had only 5 of its 14 Abrams tanks available for training and that one company expected to deploy to Europe with 7 of its 14 tanks fully qualified.

The result reflects what has been reported across the military: Units cannibalize parts from other vehicles. Commanders reported raiding the 1st ABCT's stores—recall that 1st Brigade is in Korea—and taking anything left behind. As somewhat of an unspoken rule of base etiquette, they anticipate that any equipment they leave behind upon deployment will be gutted and left on blocks when they return.

However, officers will also cannibalize within their own units. One company keeps a tank on ice as the parts source for its other 13 Abrams. If any of those suffer field accidents during training, another one or two could join their cousin as a supply depot for the company. The expansion of cannibalization from an inter-company to a division-wide practice is a relatively new occurrence to many of the officers at Fort Riley; 10 years ago, they solely exchanged parts within their companies.

If a broken part in a tank means either it will be shut down for 180 days waiting for a new part or its crew will harvest parts from another tank on the base, any mishap can be near-catastrophic for readiness. A significant portion

of maintenance time and money goes toward big-ticket demands, limiting availability for smaller things. But of course, in a brigade operating almost 100 tanks, more than 100 Bradleys, and a host of other heavy equipment and artillery, small issues arise regularly. These are by and large complex, old, and well-worn systems. Since the brigade cannot run the risk of equipment breaking, its tank commanders reported that they cannot drive their tanks to nearby training grounds.

Further, one artillery battalion was whipsawed by the uncertainties of Army modernization. The unit had been identified to receive the A7 version of the Paladin artillery system, an upgrade involving some changes in organization and equipment, turning in of spare parts, and crucially, fewer people than the previous version had. The personnel and logistics moves having been accomplished—the A7 would have required fewer people to man it, so those personnel were transferred out of the brigade in anticipation of the transition—the unit then learned that the upgrade would be delayed. When we visited, they were in the process of trying to reconstitute themselves to the A6 configuration, without recouping the lost personnel, while meeting the same general personnel and equipment challenges common to all units.

Stretched Thin

In sum, the overall impression is of a dangerously taut and unforgiving force-generation system: To meet readiness targets, everything has to fall into place precisely as planned, particularly in regard to personnel. Readiness—the all-important T-rating

—is expected to decrease between major events, most notably between NTC and deployment, and brigade leadership is working overtime to craft techniques for dampening those perturbations. Ensuring the brigade's overall fill, both in terms of quantity and skill level, remains on track throughout the training process is a fickle practice.

Brigade command has oriented its approach around maximizing the percentage of soldiers who both are available and assigned to train and are matched to correct skills. It is not confident that, across the board, it will hit its marks. The brigade expects to have only one rifle squadron and no dismounted scouts in its cavalry and is concerned it will not have enough cavalry scouts qualified in time for the NTC rotation. Its models predict

84 percent of the brigade will be both matched to a proper assignment and deployable, which is above minimum standards. But those same models cannot predict HRC diktat; they do not account for PCS assignments.

The limited number of soldiers to fill slots across the service is a core cause of Dagger's personnel instability and skill-level mismatches. As the Army has decreased in size, its responsibilities have remained extensive; it provides roughly half of the forces employed by regional commanders, and that burden is increasing. With an expanding set of responsibilities but a decreased roster of soldiers, the Army cannot fully man every brigade. The average brigade has about 95 percent of the soldiers it would need to be at full strength, and 10 percent typically are non-deployable due to medical or other issues, while 5 percent are at career development schools or otherwise unavailable.

The personnel churn Dagger experiences is largely a result of the Army's efforts to keep all its brigades above the baseline of 50 percent available to train. And that churn is seen most clearly in the mid-grade NCO and field-grade officer ranks because of both the importance of those roles and the cuts to those ranks during the recent downsizing of the force.

In some regards, Dagger Brigade has been dealt an unusual hand. Objective T is a new untested model, and although implementation has been delayed, the brigade was preparing to be the first to go through NTC, summer reset (in which it will lose personnel), another round of gunnery, and then deployment while under the new system. Its struggle to meet those benchmarks raises an interesting question about both the current readiness of the force and the viability of Objective T. If the new model represents good readiness standards, what does it say about recent training efforts that adapting to Objective T was such a struggle for officers? On the other hand, is the new sustained readiness model achievable, particularly given the current state of Army end strength and equipment, or does it ask too much of the soldiers?

The men we spoke with openly admitted to fatigue and frustration. As one officer attested, he feels as if they are employed like an Army at war but treated like an Army at peace. That is, they experience the same deployment-to-dwell ratios—the same amount of time deployed compared to at home—they did at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the pace of operations has not relented. However, they and their families do not receive the same support they did then and are given unusual deployment cycles, such as this one.

Some of these issues are a result of how the Army classifies Dagger's planned deployment. It will occur as part of the European Reassurance Initiative but not in fulfillment of a formal, named operation. Were it participating in a named operation, Dagger would receive more resources to support its soldiers and their families and to prevent extensive personnel turnover.

There are differences of opinion about what is needed most. The brigade listed more ammunition for training. However, from the perspective of the division and Army staff, ammunition is available, and if more is needed, more will be given. The officers' priority list also included a stable inventory of spare parts, more funding for maintenance and training demands, and most of all, more time. Given 10 months to train up and deploy to Europe, while losing key personnel throughout the cycle, not getting enough equipment reset time, and adapting to a new readiness reporting system, they are stretched thin.

Committed to a singular purpose, they do not doubt they will be ready to go when the time comes, but what is the cost? The margin of error for a brigade training to take on the Russian army is slim, at best.

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