

A History of Unit Stabilization

Colonel John R. Brinkerhoff, U.S. Army, Retired

ONE OF THE PERSISTENT themes in the U.S. Army is the belief that stabilizing personnel in units will improve readiness and retention by slowing down the movement of soldiers and holding them together long enough for them to bond and learn to operate as teams. History and sociological studies provide persuasive evidence that soldiers work better together if they remain together for extended periods of time.

Too much personnel turbulence in units degrades unit readiness, and high rates of personnel velocity lead to dissatisfaction with service conditions, which causes soldiers to leave the Army. Despite unit stabilization's evident desirability, the Army has not yet been able to sustain it.

Unit stabilization, which is different from unit rotation, is a personnel-management action that achieves a low rate of personnel turnover in a unit by restricting assignments outside the unit for a sustained period of time. Unit rotation is an operational action that moves entire units from one location to another to perform missions (often overseas assignments of protracted duration in short-tour areas). Unit stabilization is not required for unit rotation, but it is usually part of the unit rotation scheme. Units may be stabilized without entering into unit rotation.

Army Unit Stabilization Programs 1899-1980

Having long appreciated the value of stabilized units, the Army has tried to initiate and institutionalize a stabilized unit replacement program 10 times since 1899. The Army has also recognized the inherently bad features of an individual replacement system, particularly in combat, and tried repeatedly to adopt some form of unit rotation. However, a combination of fiscal and manpower constraints and a general state of unpreparedness thwarted the Army's efforts to create and sustain such programs.

From 1899 to 1912, the Army rotated battalions to sustain forces in the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico where tropical diseases were prevalent. Each deployed regiment was directed to fill one battalion

with unfit and ill soldiers and send it back to the United States to serve as a depot. The depot battalion would recruit to full strength, train, and after a year return overseas for a 2-year tour to replace another battalion that would then return to the United States. This system had problems, however, mostly because soldiers' enlistment contracts expired before the battalion was to deploy, causing turbulence and reduced readiness. The Army abandoned the system in 1910 and in 1912 officially adopted the individual replacement system (IRS).¹

During World War I, the Army initially provided replacements by forming one replacement division for every two combat divisions. However, the initial demand for replacements to fill understrength divisions, the need to place all available divisions in France on the front line, and a failure to provide for nondivisional unit replacements undermined this plan. Depot brigades in the continental United States (CONUS) could not provide enough trained replacements, and the Army had made no plans for a workable individual replacement system. The result was a system that thrust poorly trained soldiers into combat units and impaired unit performance.²

During World War II, the Army tried package unit rotation, but this failed because receiving commanders elected to break the packages down and distribute individual replacements to combat units. Withdrawing divisions from the line long enough to refit them was impossible because the Army fought the war with the minimum number of divisions. All but one division (in Hawaii) was committed to combat during the war. The Army once again used an individual replacement system that worked poorly, in part because it was hastily formed and staffed and partly because estimates of replacements of combat losses were too low.³

From the end of the Korean War in 1953 to the start of the Vietnam War in 1962, the Army tried five unit replacement programs. The most ambitious was Operation Gyroscope (1955-1959), which at first involved the rotation of entire divisions to and from Europe, then later only battalions. Operation

Gyroscope worked well initially, but the Army abandoned it because of high support and facility costs and too few support personnel to keep stabilized units at full strength. In 1961, the Army devised the overseas unit replacement program to support Korea with stabilized units to improve morale and reduce transportation costs. The Army deployed seven battle groups and met all expectations, but the program could not cope with contingencies. The Berlin Crisis effectively ended the program in 1962.⁴

During the Vietnam war, the Army used individual replacements to keep units in Vietnam full. The Army relied on an expanded training base (including some combat divisions) to provide trained recruits to sustain a 1-year tour policy. After the Vietnam war, the Army tried two methods of unit rotation—this time focusing on supporting Europe. At the direction of Congress, the Army set up a battalion-level system in which one battalion was on a 6-month temporary duty tour in Berlin, another ready in CONUS, and a third in training. The program's purpose was to cut the gold flow and help the U.S. balance of payments program. The program did not work and was quite costly, so the Army terminated it in 1963. In 1969, the Army began the REFORGER program to deploy selected units back to Germany annually, although the program did not involve stabilized units.

By 1980, the Army recognized that a high level of personnel turbulence degraded combat readiness, particularly in combat arms units. Several studies concluded that the individual replacement system caused the problem.⁵ The 1980 Army Cohesion and Stability (ARCOST) Study, done at the behest of Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) General E. C. Meyer, pointed up the advantages of personnel stabilization to unit cohesion and training readiness.⁶ As a result of the ARCOST Study, the Army established Project COHORT (Cohesion, Operational Readiness, Training) in 1981 to test the concept of stabilized units using 20 infantry, armor, and field artillery COHORT companies. In 1981, a study group, headed by Inspector General Lieutenant General Richard G. Trefry, recommended the adoption of a mixed system of unit and individual replacement, pointed out several changes that would have to be made in procedures and policies, and recommended the adoption of company-level stabilization.⁷ At this point, Meyer directed the adoption of the unit manning system (UMS).

The Unit Manning System 1981-1996

The Army initiated the UMS to reduce personnel turbulence and increase unit readiness. The Army's view was that "by late 1980, a consensus had developed among senior Army leaders that the

overall combat readiness of the Army was being degraded by an unacceptably high level of personnel turbulence, especially in combat arms units. A series of studies, which culminated in a report by the Inspector General concluded that the Individual Replacement System (IRS) caused the problem. High turbulence was preventing attainment and retention of cohesion and collective proficiency in units. The UMS (initially called the new manning system) was initiated in 1981 to enhance the overall combat readiness of tactical units."⁸

Stabilization recognized the need to keep soldiers and leaders together in units for longer periods of time by developing "unit life-cycle models to control the movement of personnel into and out of units so as to maximize overlap of soldiers and leaders consistent with sustainability and manageability constraints. The ultimate goal was to reach a stable unit environment in which higher levels of cohesion and collective proficiency could be attained and retained."⁹

The Army would use unit movement to sustain forces outside the continental United States (OCONUS). Movement of trained, cohesive replacement units would be the norm, supplemented by the individual replacement system.

Regimental affiliation would provide each soldier with a career-long affiliation with a single regiment. All troop assignments would be to battalions of the regiment to enhance esprit, develop a sense of belonging, and provide career-long association with a small circle of peers, subordinates, leaders, and families. The Army believed this would enhance retention.

Home-basing would assure that each soldier and each battalion would have a permanent home base at an installation that would serve as the repository for the regimental flags and a rallying point for regimental esprit. Soldiers and their families could count on returning to the regimental home base over a career. During the implementation of this concept, the regimental affiliation and home-basing elements combined into the regimental system and the stabilization and unit movement elements into the COHORT system.

As originally envisaged, the regimental system was to provide a framework for rotating COHORT units as a refinement of the 1957 Combat Arms Regimental System.¹⁰ The Army intended this version of the regimental system to pair CONUS and OCONUS battalions in the same regiment and home station. Because of downsizing and base closings, the home-basing aspect of the regimental system never went into effect, although there are de facto home bases for some organizations, such as the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Caro-



Members of the 1st Infantry Division board buses after arriving in Germany to participate in Reforger '82.

US Army

lina. In 1982, the Army adopted regimental affiliation, which remains in effect. Initially, all soldiers were assigned to a regiment, but this proved to be unworkable without a central personnel management system, and in 1985, regimental affiliation became voluntary for first-term soldiers and mandatory for all others. Because the regimental system was never fully implemented, the CSA decoupled it from COHORT in 1985.

The concept underlying COHORT involved integrating six elements: external stability, internal stability, stability-based readiness reporting, leader training, training strategies, and the command climate. The Army considered stability of personnel paramount. Stability of personnel included not only external moves in and out of units but also internal moves within units. Techniques for enforcing external stability are well known, but less attention has been paid to internal stability. The U.S. Army Personnel Command (PERSCOM) (now U.S. Army Human Resources Command) could mandate and enforce external stability, but commanders had to insist on internal stability as well. Small unit leaders needed to understand the importance of maintaining crew, squad, and platoon integrity.

COHORT allowed unit readiness reporting to go beyond merely reporting levels of fills or events accomplished. The Army intended the unit status report to address the factors of cohesion and retention of proficiency. For COHORT, the Army relaxed two long held beliefs: one, that all units must be ready at all times, and two, that scheduled stand-

downs of units were unacceptable. Some COHORT units deliberately stood down so the Army could organize, reinstitute, or deploy them.

Training strategies and leader training, which were to be tailored to the life cycles of the COHORT units to take advantage of the dynamics of group cohesion, played important roles in COHORT. COHORT was designed to enable unit commanders to raise unit performance levels progressively without backsliding when large numbers of new personnel reported for duty.

The Army considered it essential that the command climate in the unit and above the unit support the COHORT model. COHORT worked best when an entire division, its home base, and its supporting and higher headquarters supported the idea of stabilized units.

The COHORT concept applied only to combat arms units (infantry, armor, and field artillery). Army studies show that extending this idea to combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) units would be difficult because about one-third of soldiers with CS and CSS skills were assigned to combat units and because the balance between CS and CSS units in CONUS and OCONUS was inappropriate to permit a rotation cycle to occur on a sustained basis. However, the Army tried to find ways to apply COHORT to CS units because of the problems caused by having troops with two quite different forms of rotation and tour lengths in the same overseas theater.

COHORT applied to peacetime and wartime operations. The Army's wartime replacement plan

(circa 1989) envisioned replenishing units with a mix of individual and small unit (crew/squad) replacements. COHORT models were consistent with this concept. COHORT would allow the peacetime Army to practice how to operate a wartime personnel sustainment system.¹¹

COHORT Models and Applications

During the 15 years of COHORT, the Army made no substantial changes in the specifics of the program and its applications. All particulars were derived from the statement of purpose: “The driving force behind the UMS was the need to keep soldiers and leaders together in units longer. All other parameters of the concept were designed to facilitate or supplement unit-oriented stability. The approach was to develop unit life-cycle models to control the movement of personnel into and out of units to maximize the overlap of soldiers and leaders consistent with sustainability and manageability constraints. The ultimate goal was to create a stable unit environment in which higher levels of cohesion and collective proficiency could be attained and retained.”¹²

The basic parameters of a COHORT model included the following:

- The life cycle was the time during which a COHORT unit was partially stabilized by restricting assignments into, out of, and within the unit. This life cycle was either fixed or continuous. In the fixed life cycle, the unit was established and trained or operated for a fixed time (usually 36 months) after which it was disestablished. In the continuous life cycle, the unit had no fixed date for disestablishment.

- Assignment windows were fixed periods in a unit’s life cycle when the Army assigned soldiers into or out of the COHORT unit.

- Intervals were the periods between assignment windows when soldiers were not permitted to join or leave the unit. COHORT models had intervals of 4, 13, or 36 months.

- Variable enlistment was a formal contact option in which a recruit who volunteered for a COHORT unit enlisted for 3 years plus the approximately 4 months needed for initial-entry training.

- Strength profiles showed the reduction in unit strength during intervals between assignment windows because of unprogrammed losses and other exceptions to stabilization rules.

- A sawtooth curve appeared when the strength profile of a COHORT unit was plotted over time. The exact shape of the sawtooth profile depended on the interval, the strength ceiling, the strength floor, and the amount of unprogrammed attrition to unit strength.

- The echelon was either company or battalion.

- Deployability determined whether the stabilized unit was to remain at its home station or deploy periodically to an overseas location. There were two types of deployable units. Replacement occurred when a unit moved one-way from CONUS to an overseas location. Rotation occurred when a CONUS unit (or units) and an overseas unit traded places.

Two basic COHORT models were used—traditional and sustained. The fundamental difference between the two models was the type of life cycle. The traditional model had a fixed life cycle of 3 years. The sustained model was continuous. Before 1986, all COHORT applications used the traditional model. In 1986, sustained models replaced most traditional models. Figure 1 shows the difference between the two.

Applications of the Traditional Model

To form a traditional model COHORT company or battalion, the Army moved through the following steps:

1. The U.S. Army Recruiting Command (US-AREC) formed COHORT units by obtaining enough nonprior-service volunteers who would agree to be assigned to one unit for their entire first term in the Army. The Army sought and obtained a change in

Characteristic	Traditional Model	Sustained Model
Life Cycle Type	Fixed	Continuous
Echelon	Company or Battalion	Company or Battalion
CONUS or Overseas	Either	Either
Deployer or Non-Deployer	Either	Either
Life Cycle Duration	36 months	Infinite
Leader Training Program	Yes	No
Assignment Window Interval	36 months	4 or 12 months
Stabilization Period	36 months	4 or 12 months

Figure 1.

the law to allow it to enlist personnel for 3 years plus about 4 months for initial-entry training so they would be able to serve 3 years in the stabilized company or battalion.

2. PERSCOM assembled noncommissioned officers who agreed to a 36-month tour with a COHORT unit. These soldiers reported to the home station of the unit 30 to 60 days before unit establishment so they could settle their families, in-process, and receive leader training.

Major Applications of COHORT Model

The COHORT system had five major applications: company replacement to Europe; company replacement to Korea; battalion rotation to Europe; light infantry division conversion; COHORT companies—the package replacement system (PRS).

Company replacement to Europe. From 1981 to 1984, the Army formed COHORT companies in CONUS to provide units for Europe. This traditional model was to provide stable companies for 18-month tours in Europe. Companies were formed and trained for 18 months in CONUS, then deployed to Europe with their families. They trained in Europe for 18 months and then their companies were disestablished in Europe. This model was already in existence when the Army adopted the UMS and was assimilated into UMS and expanded.

The Army formed a total of 44 COHORT companies, of which 35 completed their life cycles. U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) found this model to be unsupportable because the COHORT companies’ 18-month tour did not match the individual unaccompanied soldiers’ 36-month tour. After a COHORT company was disestablished, USAREUR could not reassign residual soldiers to local installations so it had to reassign them elsewhere in the theater. Also, forming units in CONUS every 18 months increased turbulence within CONUS units. The Army found this model to be unsupportable and terminated it.¹³

Company replacement to Korea. From 1980 to 1984, the Army formed COHORT companies in CONUS to provide stable companies for a 12-month unaccompanied tour in Korea. The Army formed these Korea-bound companies for 36 months of stabilization. However, the companies trained 24 months in CONUS and then deployed for a 12-month tour in Korea. The Army paired two CONUS companies with one Korea company to sustain the replacement flow. The Army initiated this model in 1980 as part of the original CO-

HORT project and assimilated it into the UMS. The Army formed a total of 49 companies, of which 15 deployed. The Army discontinued the program because the program for the new light infantry divisions had priority, but reinstated the program in 1987 to provide 24 companies from 8 CONUS installations.

The first deployment of the second phase occurred in October 1989. The Army found this model to be sustainable over the long-term and supportable in the field. The overseas tour length was the same for COHORT and non-COHORT personnel, and families did not have to move. However, Army commands in the Pacific did not welcome the program. (Assignment in Hawaii was considered to have some aspects of a hardship tour because of “island fever.”)

The Eighth Army in Korea was concerned that COHORT members would have a “short-timer” syndrome when the end of their tour approached. U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) said that the training of so many units to support Korea would detract from their primary mission for Europe. The Army used the model to facilitate the 2d Infantry Division’s conversion to the Army of Excellence design and found it was valuable for that.

Battalion rotation to Europe. This model linked pairs of battalions that rotated between CONUS and Europe. The Army formed four pairs of FORSCOM-USAREUR battalions and rotated them in 1986-1987. This was a continuous life-cycle model that imposed a stabilization period of 36 months for first term personnel and 48 months for leaders. First-termers would be assigned 18 months before and again 18 months after deployment. Leaders could come and go at assignment windows every 9 months.

This model permitted an 18-month progressive training program, which the Army deemed a success but terminated after one rotation. The logistics of moving the battalions was complicated, and the benefits on readiness problematic. Soldiers and dependents making the moves reacted well to them, but many NCOs sought to avoid service in these battalions. Feedback from the field indicated that this model could not be managed because local

COHORT Programs	Time Frame	Model	Units
Companies to Europe	1981-1984	Traditional	44
Companies to Korea (2d ID Conversion)	1981-1984 1987-1989	Traditional	49 24
Battalions to Europe	1984-1986	Continuous	8
Battalions for LIDs	1986	Traditional	27
Companies Worldwide	1988	RPS-4	144

Figure 2.

installations and communities in Europe could not absorb the effects of rotating battalions.

Light infantry division conversion. From 1985 to 1987, the Army formed COHORT battalions to further the transformation of four standard infantry divisions to the new light infantry divisions. The Army had not envisioned this application in the original COHORT concept, but it turned out to be useful. The Army formed 27 battalions (18 activated and 9 converted) to fill the 6th, 7th, 10th, and 25th light infantry divisions. The Army stabilized soldiers and leaders of these battalions for 36 months with an annual assignment window permitting “top off” of the battalions to offset unprogrammed losses. The Army formed, trained, and disestablished the units in the same locations. After a unit was disestablished, the Army formed a new COHORT battalion to take its place.

This model permitted a 36-month progressive training program. Evaluators considered that it offered the most promise for unit cohesion and readiness, and division commanders supported it. Despite its popularity, the Army terminated this model because of force structure reductions and installation closings. The Army inactivated the 7th and the 6th divisions. The 10th and the 25th divisions had only 9 COHORT battalions.

COHORT companies—the package replacement system. Starting in 1986, the Army formed 141 companies and was semi-stabilized by use of a PRS. Soldiers and leaders could move into or out of these companies during assignment windows every 4 months. Companies were filled every 4 months by assignment of replacement packages, but this approach did not provide adequate stability for developing cohesion. The system was essentially a modified individual replacement system that provided groups of new soldiers periodically.

The Army created the package replacement system to provide cohesive groups of replacements for COHORT units, principally continuous model units that the Army filled every 4 months. A package consisted of first-term soldiers, who trained together during initial-entry training, and career soldiers, who reported to a COHORT unit during a designated assignment window. Although the Army intended this to provide a cohesive subunit for a COHORT company, company commanders did not have to keep the packages intact and seldom did.

The company commander determined how he would assign the personnel of a replacement package in his company. The replacements could end up as a cohesive squad in a platoon, as individual replacements in a single platoon, as buddy teams throughout the company, or as individual replacements throughout the company.¹⁴

The PRS had two applications, both nondeploying, continuous life-cycle models. In the PRS-4 version, assignment windows occurred every 4 months during which time soldiers and leaders could move into and out of the unit. The Army stabilized all soldiers and leaders for 4 months, and there was no leader training. Although the Army trained and assigned first-term soldiers as a COHORT package, there was no requirement to keep the package intact. The Army implemented this model in 1986, replacing the battalion rotation model, to provide units to USAREUR, U.S. Army Western Command, and heavy units in FORSCOM. Personnel managers could handle this model easier than the other COHORT applications, but the model did not provide the advantages of stable personnel strength and composition and was the least desirable of the COHORT models.

PRS-12 was similar to the PRS-4 model except that assignment windows occurred 12 months apart, and soldiers and leaders were stabilized for 12 months. With this model, PERSCOM could easily manage and facilitate annual cyclical training programs, but the model provided less readiness than traditional models that had longer periods of stabilization. The model also required a variable enlistment option. The Army applied this to the 7th and 10th divisions because those divisions wanted to remain in the nondeploying battalion mode. This model had 60 companies and provided 12-month stabilization, the minimum acceptable for enhanced cohesion.

Assigning COHORT companies to battalions with non-COHORT companies caused considerable difficulties. Both of the COHORT company-level models resulted in quasi-COHORT battalions with both COHORT and IRS companies. The preferred model was a battalion with COHORT companies.

Evaluation results indicated that the COHORT company had strong primary group bonding, but COHORT companies could not achieve full potential in a quasi-COHORT battalion. Battalion commanders could not manage two different personnel systems or develop two separate training programs. Thus, the Army trained COHORT companies in IRS style, negating the advantage of stability. In addition, a great deal of conflict arose in quasi-COHORT battalions between the COHORT “haves” and the IRS “have-nots.” COHORT units received favorable treatment that included exemption from details and priority training facilities. Because non-COHORT companies provided the cadre for the COHORT companies, they were usually under-strength compared to the COHORT companies and did more than their share of undesirable details. As a result, COHORT companies were often not well received in their battalions and communities.



Soldiers of 7th Infantry Division (Light) prepare to case one of the division's unit colors, 1998. The Army formed COHORT battalions to further the transformation of four standard infantry divisions to the new light infantry divisions between 1985 and 1987.

US Army

The End of COHORT

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command conducted a major assessment of COHORT in 1989 and recommended continuation of the original concept with some changes. Although the CSA directed the program to continue, it languished in the early 1990s and the Army formally halted it in 1995.

The transfer of responsibility for COHORT from the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (DCSOPS) doomed COHORT. During the late 1980s, DCSPER had difficulty managing the personnel aspects of COHORT and obtaining the necessary first-term volunteers to sustain the program. So, in 1989, the CSA transferred staff responsibility to Lieutenant General Gordon R. Sullivan, DCSOPS, on the basis that the UMS, of which COHORT was the main element, was a unit program and that DCSOPS was responsible for units. This was a completely new venture for DCSOPS, and the action was assigned to the Director of Force Development.¹⁵

In a memorandum setting forth his “inclinations” with respect to the COHORT program, Sullivan said that COHORT offered the possibility for enhanced readiness through improved stability and cohesion and that there had been enough study—the Army should “proceed with the PRS-12 Sustained CO-

HORT System for the light forces and the PRS-4 Sustained COHORT System for all others [and] execute the Korea Traditional COHORT once for each 2d Infantry Division battalion for force modernization purposes only and then put them on the PRS-4 System.”¹⁶

The practical effect of Sullivan’s memorandum was to kill COHORT. Since evaluation was to be limited to specific programs, all DCSPER-sponsored research work at the Army Research Institute and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research stopped, thus closing the door on opportunities to determine the program’s effectiveness. Sullivan’s instructions meant that the Army was giving up on unit stabilization and settling for a mere management system of periodic packaged replacements that offered nothing in terms of unit stability or cohesion.

Some leaders involved in the action say that while DCSPER staff officers were having difficulty managing the real COHORT program, they supported the concept of unit stabilization, and that DCSOPS staff officers did not support the program and simply allowed it to run down.¹⁷ The buildup for Operation Desert Shield ended the Army’s attempt at unit personnel stabilization.

COHORT failed in part because of the particular way the Army chose to accomplish unit stabilization and rotation and in part because other related

systems were not modified to allow unit stabilization to succeed. But COHORT actually failed because the entire Army did not support it. A small but influential group of advocates in senior positions initiated UMS but it became so complicated and contentious that when its advocates left the Army, it died.

The demise of COHORT, however, does not mean that unit stabilization is impossible. If the Army heeds lessons learned from COHORT and current proposals to modify the personnel management and training systems, it might be possible finally to do this right.

Suggestions for the Future

The Army should apply unit stabilization universally. COHORT was flawed from the outset because the Army applied it piecemeal, applying personnel stabilization rules only to a small number of units and only to some of the personnel assigned to those units. Stress between stabilized and unstabilized elements existed inside and outside the units.

Within the Army as a whole, and within major combined arms organizations, stabilized and unstabilized units caused problems of a different sort. The original advocates of COHORT were interested primarily, and perhaps exclusively, in the training and combat effectiveness of maneuver battalions. They applied COHORT only to a relatively small number of rifle companies and infantry and tank battalions and a few artillery battalions.

Early efforts to include some combat support units were abandoned, which meant that divisions were composed of both COHORT and non-COHORT units, and considerable friction arose between the two. The members of non-COHORT units were jealous of the attention and better treatment COHORT units received in terms of post details and priority training areas and support. This disaffection applied also in Europe where members and families of COHORT battalions received better quarters and other privileges. The problem became so great that it was the major factor that led USAREUR to oppose COHORT battalions. The Army should apply any future unit stabilization scheme universally to all Tables of Organization and Equipment units of the Expeditionary Army—U.S. Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserves in CONUS or overseas.

Army officers and NCOs should also be stabilized. While it is desirable for all members of a stabilized unit to follow the same stabilization rules, it is imperative that the leadership group be stabilized. COHORT failed in part because it stabilized the junior enlisted personnel but did not stabilize their leaders.

The basic idea for COHORT was to marshal a group of first-term volunteers who agreed to serve together in the same company or battalion for their entire first term of service, normally 3 years. These junior enlisted personnel were really the only part of companies or battalions that were stabilized. NCOs could evade the stabilization rules and did so, and except for stabilized command tours, the Army never really applied the rules to officers. As a result, stabilization led to good horizontal bonding among junior enlisted personnel, but little vertical bonding with NCOs and officers.

Personnel turbulence continued relatively unabated within the leadership group of the company or battalion, reducing stabilization's positive effect on unit readiness. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a stable leadership group is the key to sustained combat effectiveness.¹⁸ A future unit stabilization system should focus on maintaining a stable leadership group while minimizing or managing turnover among junior enlisted personnel.

Stabilization should enhance rather than detract from career progression. COHORT put cohesion at odds with career progression and, thus, personal satisfaction. Officers and NCOs sought to avoid being stabilized because it hurt their chances for promotion and advancement. The leadership group—the most important group for unit cohesion and readiness—was disaffected most by the prospect of stabilized tours of duty.

For most first-term junior enlisted personnel, remaining in the same company or battalion for 2 to 3 years is a plus. Doing so means staying with friends from basic training or staying in the unit or at the same station for an entire enlistment.

Because promotion beyond E-4 (corporal) and career training is unimportant for most junior enlisted personnel, being kept from career progression was not a major handicap. For officers and NCOs, however, promotion and progression depend on moving often through a series of schools and increasingly more difficult assignments. Foregoing career-enhancing moves means reduced chances for promotion and important assignments. The leadership group felt it was important to avoid being stabilized—except, of course, for prized career-enhancing assignments such as battalion command or company command.

Any future unit stabilization system should assure that personnel management systems are compatible with widespread use of stabilized tours of duty. The system should also ensure that officers and NCOs can obtain the necessary schooling to qualify for promotion without cutting short their stabilized tours of duty. Current proposals that allow officers and NCOs to use distance learning and periodic short courses

Charlie Company, 25th Infantry Division (Light) arrive at Orgun-E Fire base, Afghanistan, to replace 1-87 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division soldiers, March 31, 2004.



US Army

either at their home base or at schools to satisfy educational requirements would enable such unit stabilization.

The readiness system should be revised to accommodate the rhythms of the stabilized unit cycle. A 36-month cycle would entail a period of fill and training, a ready period, and perhaps an operational rotation period. The unit would not be ready during its preparation period and perhaps not ready during an operational rotation. The Department of Defense (DOD) readiness system already allows units to be declared unready for good reason, such as receiving new equipment or undergoing equipment overhaul. Units should not have to be ready until they complete their preparatory phase. The Army should not require units engaged in operations to be ready at the same time for a different operation.

The Army should revise its personnel management system to support personnel stabilization. The Army superimposed COHORT on the existing personnel management system, which was not designed to accommodate and sustain stable periods of assignment. Personnel managers found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the opposing demands of the personnel management system and unit stabilization. Ultimately, personnel managers admitted that they could no longer support stabilization of even junior enlisted personnel. To provide personnel stability, it will be necessary to change the personnel man-

agement system in some major respects.

Unit stabilization and unit rotation work best in a stable environment. For at least the last two decades the Army has been subjected to massive buildups, drawdowns, and adjustments in which bases are closed, major organizations moved, and the only constant is change.¹⁹ To stabilize units, it is also necessary to stabilize the environment in which they function. The stabilized units themselves can be and will be capable of moving rapidly to respond to a variety of missions, but the institutions and infrastructure that provide support must also be stable, particularly when the stabilized units are to be part of a regular schedule of rotations to and from overseas stations.

Any unit rotation scheme involves a de facto period of stabilization because the unit getting ready to deploy is usually filled with personnel (and materiel) and held stable for a certain period of training before the move and often during the prescribed tour of duty. Once the overseas tour of duty is over, the unit often disintegrates as personnel move on to other assignments.²⁰

Unit rotation schemes are designed for routine peacetime moves and work well as long as there are no other demands for the units in the system. In the past, the Army used units designated as replacements for other units for some other purpose and had to fall back on an improvised individual re-

placement system that was unsatisfactory. In the future, unit rotation systems must be robust enough to meet a variety of unprogrammed requirements, and the Army must have enough units to meet rotation schedules and unprogrammed operations in peacetime. In wartime, the Army must have enough units to allow some to be withdrawn from combat for replenishment and retraining.

According to current studies, the most successful COHORT program was the creation of light infantry battalions for the new light infantry divisions, but the program did not involve rotation overseas. The program benefited from stability at home stations until the Army ended it because of unit movements and base closures.

Some studies suggest that personnel stability is necessary but not sufficient and that leadership is the most important factor in unit readiness and retention. Other studies suggest that personnel stability might not even be essential but merely a beneficial condition that allows leaders to work better. The benefits of unit stabilization have to be greater than the additional costs such a system involves.

The Army must be willing to bear the full cost of unit stabilization, and unit stabilization is expensive in terms of personnel needed to sustain the system. For the same force structure, more people are needed for stabilized units than are needed to support the present individual replacement system. Unit stabilization requires that the Army have more people (faces) than authorizations (spaces), which is contrary to current Army practice. Because of the implicit assumption during the Cold War that there would be time to mobilize and fill units before deploying, the Army became accustomed to staffing

units at less than full wartime strength. The Army has programmed itself to have fewer faces than are required to fill all spaces at full wartime strength.²¹

The practice of reducing unit strength authorizations by means of the authorized level of organization to achieve peacetime economies abets this predilection for understrength units. The Army does not even have enough soldiers to fill the reduced authorizations, and the imbalance between spaces to be filled and faces to fill them contributes to the high rate of personnel loss that affects retention and readiness and makes unit stabilization impractical. Personnel officers fill spaces when vacancies occur by reason of death, retirement, illness, or promotion. The Army emphasizes filling vacancies, which causes vacancies elsewhere. The greater the personnel shortfall, the faster people have to move to fill new vacancies.²²

A unit personnel stabilization system that inserts organized pauses into the flow of personnel to fill vacancies cannot survive in that kind of system. Thus, the Army must fall back on the individual replacement system, which has the sole virtue of being flexible. The Army cannot continue to maintain more force structure than it can staff properly if it wants to have stabilized units.²³

Despite the difficulties in supporting stabilized units, unit stabilization should be part of the Army's Transformation process. Old ways of managing units will not suffice for the Objective Force, and keeping soldiers together in units for prolonged periods might be essential to the success of the future combat system. The Army should determine if the benefits of unit stabilization outweigh the costs and proceed accordingly. **MR**

NOTES

1. Major Leonard W. Lerwill, Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 20-211, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1954); LTG Richard G. Trefry, briefing, Unit Manning Study, March 1981.
2. Lerwill, DA Pam 20-211, 473. The Trefry briefing suggests there was an attempt during World War I to have unit (division) rotation, but DA Pam 20-211 does not support this view.
3. DA Pam 20-211, 475.
4. Trefry.
5. GEN Maxwell R. Thurman, *TRADOC Assessment of the Unit Manning System*, Memorandum for Chief of Staff Army, Fort Monroe, VA, 4 March 1989, 1.
6. Don Weber, Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Headquarters, DA, interview by author 7 June 2001.
7. Trefry.
8. Thurman, 1.
9. No attribution given.
10. The Combat Arms Regimental System was instituted in 1957 to preserve the historical lineage of Army regiments during the introduction of the Pentomic Division, which had five battle groups per division instead of three regiments. Courtesy of GEN Paul Gorman.
11. Thurman, 10.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 15.
14. *Ibid.*, figure 8.
15. After the transfer to Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (DCSOPS) and at the

- instigation of then MG Theodore Stroup, Director, Program Analysis and Evaluation, COL John J. Theologos was the de facto DCSOPS action officer for COHORT for several weeks on a part-time basis. He continued to do so as a civilian for a short while after he retired from the Army. Theologos had been a member of the original COHORT team.
16. LTG Gordon R. Sullivan, Memorandum for MG Granrud, COHORT, 18 August 1989.
17. Theologos, telephone conversation, 11 July 2001; Weber.
18. GEN Paul Gorman cites the experience of C Company, 26th Infantry Regiment, during World War II, which was an effective combat unit despite heavy losses and turnover. Over 900 soldiers served in the company for the 330 days its parent division was in combat. The company maintained its combat effectiveness because its leader group remained stable and was refreshed from within the battalion.
19. Operating in an environment of constant change might be good training for combat, but it is not good for preparing for combat.
20. The U.S. Navy and, perhaps, the U.S. Marine Corps apply this system deliberately to their ships crews and battalions respectively, and it appears to work well.
21. Having enough nonunit personnel to establish a pipeline to replace losses and account for trainees, students, prisoners, and patients without degrading unit strengths is also necessary.
22. A cynic might label the military personnel management system a gigantic Ponzi scheme.
23. If the Army cannot or will not trim its structure so it can afford a unit stabilization system, it should study the current individual replacement system to find out how to mitigate its worst features. Trying to make the best of a bad situation rather than simply accepting current practice without question, would be good.

Colonel John R. Brinkerhoff, U.S. Army, Retired, is a national security consultant. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, an M.S. from the California Institute of Technology, an M.A. from Columbia University, and an M.S. from George Washington University. He has served as Director of Force Design, U.S. Army Concepts Analysis Agency.