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Anecdotal Evidence of a Hollowing Force? *A Closer Look at Junior Officer Retention*



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Today's Army is "the most combat-experienced force the nation has witnessed in two generations. Our All-Volunteer Force is being asked to do more than ever and is showing remarkable resiliency in a time when there is growing strain on the institution."¹ As the military continues to be engaged in an era of persistent conflict, institutionalizing the combat experience of its leaders – specifically its young officers – is arguably the Army's lynchpin and a key component to U.S. national security.

In a recent conversation with an active duty Army division commander about what keeps him up at night, he responded, "the retention of captains." As the Army grows six brigades by 2010, it may struggle to fill critical mid-level leadership billets. The retention of young officers is essential to filling these billets and is directly linked to institutionalizing combat experience in the Army. A pervasive narrative today is that maintaining these officers is playing out like a Shakespearean tragedy as mid-level officers flee the Army in droves, specifically due to an increase in combat deployments. There is only one problem with this common story: thus far, it is not accurate.

This paper focuses on whether junior

officer retention is lower as a result of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts and assesses the magnitude of concern for junior officer retention, especially given the Army's expansion plans.

The Tragic Narrative – The Impact of Iraq and Afghanistan on Attrition

Recent media reports have "documented" the supposed Army retention crisis. A New York Times article from April 2006 said, "young Army officers...are bailing out of active-duty service at rates that have alarmed senior officers."² In December 2007, Washington Monthly reporter Andrew Tilghman argued that young officers "are leaving the Army at nearly their highest rates in decades" in an "exodus of the best and brightest."³ These reports are misleading.

While some great officers are indeed leaving the Army, this is not an uncommon occurrence. In recent years, continuous deployments and the instability this schedule can inflict on young families have prompted many to assess their options and sometimes choose to leave the service. Many officers, however, are staying. In recent years, the attrition rate has declined. Consider the overall company grade (lieutenants and captains) loss rates, which dropped from 8.5 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2005 to 7.9 percent in 2007.⁴

Prolonged conflict has historically adversely affected officer retention, but this is not the case today. In a comparison of loss rates among captains during the Vietnam War versus the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, today's All-Volunteer

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Not Vietnam Revisited

Fiscal Year	Vietnam Era Army CPT Loss Rate	Fiscal Year	All Volunteer Army CPT Loss Rate
1965	10.9	2002	10.2
1966	10.9	2003	8.5
1967	15.6	2004	11.9
1968	22.4	2005	12.5
1969	21.6	2006	11.0
1970	25.5	2007	11.1

Table 1. Not Vietnam Revisited. Data courtesy of the G-1, Department of the Army.

Force demonstrates a significantly higher ability to retain its junior officers.⁵

Data from the United States Military Academy (USMA), which produces roughly 20 percent of the annual number of commissioned officers, is usually accepted as an indicator of the health of the force. A close look reveals that graduates are not leaving at an accelerated rate compared to previous years at the end of their five-year obligation. Since 1982, the average attrition rate of USMA graduates at their five-year mark has been 30.4 percent, similar to the attrition rates of recent classes after their five-year service obligations: 1997 (30.6 percent), 1998 (21.9 percent), 1999 (28.1 percent), 2000 (34.2 percent), 2001 (35.3 percent), and 2002 (30.9 percent). The classes with the highest attrition rates were 1987 to 1989 (averaging 44.9 percent), which were the junior captains most affected by the post-Gulf War drawdown.

The Army staff compared retention rates at five years and four months for recent USMA graduates to account for officers that leave service over the course of the fiscal year – not necessarily precisely at

the five-year mark: 1998 (71 percent), 1999 (64 percent), 2000 (58 percent), 2001 (58 percent), and 2002 (59 percent). This study revealed almost no change between year groups 2000-2002, suggesting that war has had a limited impact on officer attrition thus far. The class of 1998, for example, had a 71 percent retention rate even though the Iraq invasion began during its fifth year. This was one of the highest retention rates in recent history.⁶

Given that many graduates have now completed two or three combat tours, the most telling data may be when the class of 2003 completes its initial service obligation in May 2008. Table 2 details USMA class attrition by year as of September 2007.⁷

Future Needs

The current stress on officer retention is a by-product of accession decisions (downsizing) in the 1990s and the transformation of the Army's structure, attrition, and deployment tempo. Officer requirements have increased due to an expansion of the force since 2002 (see Figure 1); plans for further expansion mean it is even more important to retain and maintain the force. Fifty-eight percent of the growth necessary to fulfill expanding officer requirements (8,000 slots) due to growing the force from 2002 to 2006 was needed in the ranks of captain and major, with the greatest increase occurring between 2005 and 2007.⁸

Figure 2 depicts how the Army's captain and major requirements have changed since the 1990s and contrasts requirements with actual strength. The rapid increase in historical requirements after

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FY 2005 was driven primarily by force expansion and modularity, with the organizing principle of brigades versus divisions for the Army. There is a dramatic increase in projected requirements for both captains and majors from FY 2008 to 2010 as the Army continues to grow.

In January 2007, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) produced a report for the House Armed Services Committee detailing the Army's need for a strategic plan to address its emerging officer accession and retention challenges. The report claims, "the Army projections show that it will have a shortage of 3,000 or more officers annually through FY 2013 because of actions such as recent measures to expand the size of the Army."⁹ At the end of FY 2007 the Army was only short 2,235 officers (the service's own January 2007 prediction was 2,774).¹⁰

USMA Class Year	# Officers Commissioned	Percent Attrition At Years of Service		
		5	6	7
1986	1008	22.2	45.2	51.5
1987	1028	40.0	52.1	56.8
1988	986	49.0	55.7	59.0
1989	1079	45.6	52.0	56.7
1990	947	34.5	42.8	48.6
1991	974	29.8	41.4	47.1
1992	978	26.4	39.6	47.9
1993	1046	31.7	46.5	52.1
1994	1039	32.8	50.1	55.7
1995	1006	30.5	46.4	52.4
1996	914	27.3	44.5	49.3
1997	913	30.6	43.3	49.6
1998	874	21.9	41.8	50.9
1999	981	28.1	40.3	50.3
2000	935	34.2	49.4	56.9
2001	903	35.3	50.4	
2002	981	30.9		

Table 2. USMA class attrition by year as of September 2007.

Additionally, the projected total officer operating strength deviation for 2010 is only around 700. From 2002 through 2005, the Army's officer strength actually exceeded requirements.

Meeting Demand While Maintaining Quality

To address the potential shortfalls in officer billets, the Army needs to commission more officers, or access an increased number of second lieutenants each year, and retain more of its current base of officers. The retention efforts must continue to focus on the junior captains, specifically those who have not taken a command or a branch-qualifying position, and are potentially at a career crossroads.¹¹

The January 2007 GAO report noted, "shortages suggest that the Army might have to retain officers at higher than historical levels." Indeed, the number of required majors rose by 2,144 from 2004 to 2008. Since it takes a decade for the Army to produce a major, the Army needs to increase accessions and retain more captains.

To meet service requirements, the Army relies on its three commissioning sources: the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), USMA, and Officer Candidate School (OCS), with the latter providing the mechanism to "flex," or provide more officers, to meet demand.¹²

The Army has successfully grown and maintained the officer corps over the last several years through various initiatives while maintaining quality. Officers from year groups 1997 through 2002 are getting out at comparable rates to their

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// Officer Candidate School throughput is expected to increase by 262 percent from FY 2004 to this year's projection."

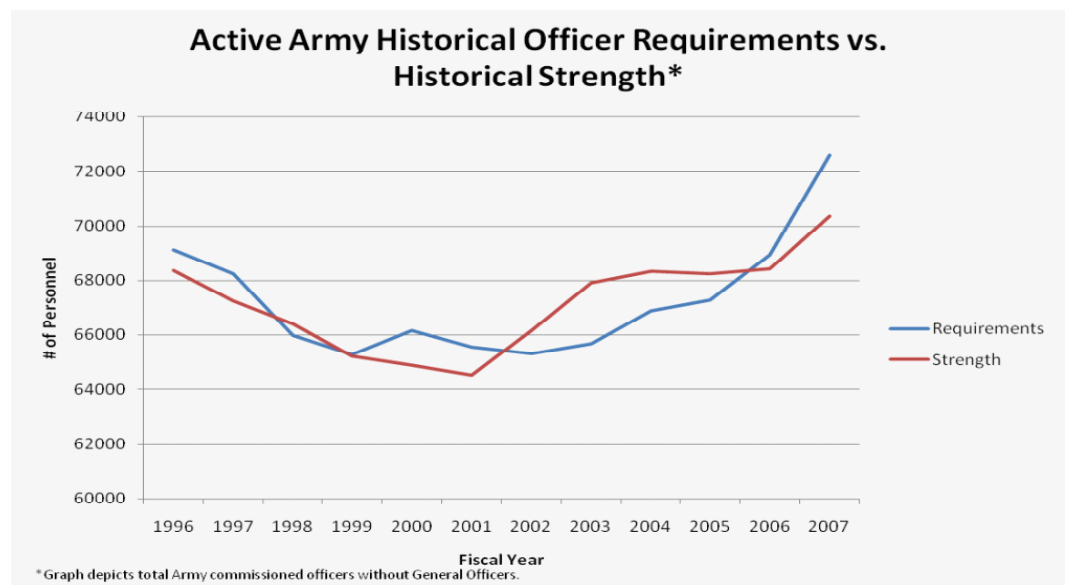


Figure 1. Data courtesy of the G-1, Department of the Army. Historical strength was determined at the end of the fiscal year.

cohorts from 1987 through 1996.

While the throughput of the USMA, or those who complete the program, has remained steady, the OCS throughput is expected to increase by 262 percent from FY 2004 to this year's projection. It is important to note that increased officer accessions do not provide a short-term fix to the gap that currently exists within senior captains and majors.¹³

Recently there has been an accelerated promotion time to captain (38 months in FY 2007, down from 40 months in FY 2004) and major (113 months in FY 2007 down from 113 months in FY 2004) along with an increased perception that "everyone" was getting promoted. To stem previous concerns over rising selection rates (as high as 97.1 percent in FY 2006 for primary zone majors and 98

percent for primary zone captains) and overall quality within the officer corps, the "below-the-zone," or early consideration period for promotion to major, has recently increased to a two-year window to recognize the potential of battle-hardened captains and to entice young officers with the prospect of an earlier promotion. The percentage of below-the-zone promotions has increased from historical five percent averages to ten percent in FY 2007 and 15 percent in FY 2008. As the number of below-the-zone promotions increases, the overall promotion rate to major will decrease, theoretically improving the quality of the officer corps.¹⁴

The Army has also authorized a critical skills retention bonus (CSRB) of up to \$35,000 for active duty captains who agree to stay on active duty beyond their initial service obligation. The Army is

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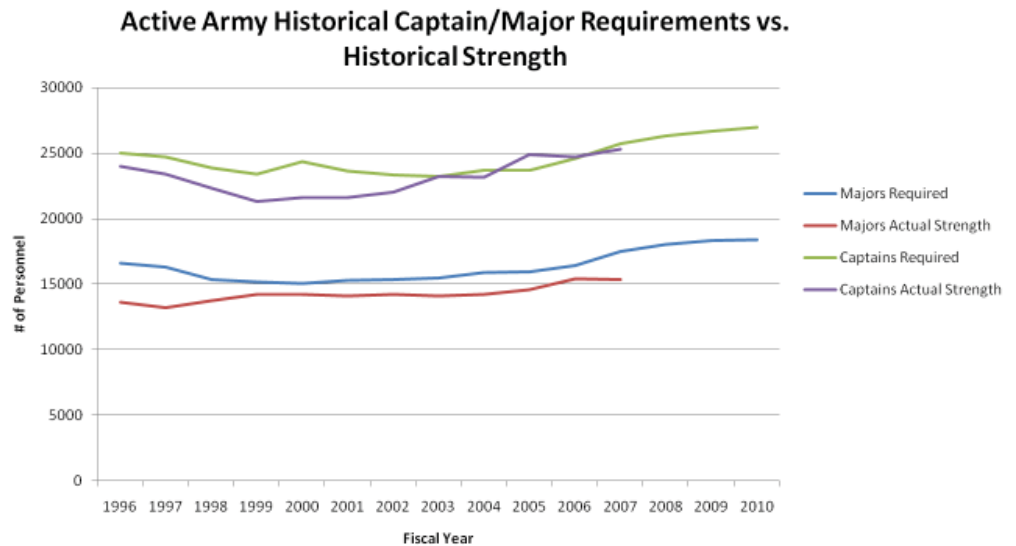


Figure 2. Data courtesy of the G-1, Department of the Army. Active duty historical requirements include officers in transient, trainee, holdee, or student status. Historical strength was determined at the end of the fiscal year.

currently undertaking further efforts to examine the success of the CSRB and other options within the “retention menu of incentives” it is offering to captains for three more years of active duty service. Other items on the menu of incentives include branch or functional area transfer (changing jobs), assignment to their post of choice or attending graduate school.¹⁵ The Army is assessing the success of the incentives and examining future initiatives through programs like that run by Brigadier General Michael Linnington. BG Linnington recently lead a team to various duty stations with an interim objective of addressing the concerns of junior officers, strains on the force and potential retention initiatives.

Officers' Views

In an effort to gauge the attitudes of junior officers, I conducted an online survey in February 2008 of officers and former officers from year groups 1998-2004. The respondents consisted of 105 officers from 17 different branches within various units whose names were not selected completely randomly, but from previous personal associations.

The participants were 86 percent male and 14 percent female (the current percentage of women in the Army is around 14 percent) and 75 percent were on active duty at the time of the survey. The sample represented the various commissioning sources: 64 percent USMA, 31 percent ROTC, and 5 percent OCS. Seventy-three percent of those surveyed were postured in a combat arms branch (Special Forces, Infantry, Field Artillery,

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Army Officer Accessions (Army Competitive Category)	
FY 2004	4478
FY 2005	4630
FY 2006	4332
FY 2007	5234
FY 2008 (projected)	5200
FY 2009 (projected)	5500
FY 2010 (projected)	5500

Officer Candidate School Throughput	
FY 2004	843
FY 2005	1030
FY 2006	1382
FY 2007	1722
FY 2008 (projected)	2205
FY 2009 (projected)	2335
FY 2010 (projected)	2135

USMA Throughput	
FY 2004	913
FY 2005	916
FY 2006	834
FY 2007	983
FY 2008 (projected)	980
FY 2009 (projected)	950
FY 2010 (projected)	950

ROTC Throughput (Active Army Competitive Category)	
FY 2004	2722
FY 2005	2684
FY 2006	2116
FY 2007	2503
FY 2008 (projected)	2015
FY 2009 (projected)	2215
FY 2010 (projected)	2415

Table 3. Accessions Overview. Data courtesy of the G-1, Department of the Army. Army competitive category includes basic accessions branches and excludes Chaplains, Judge Advocate Generals, and Medical Command branches.

Aviation, Armor, Engineers). Seventy-four percent of participants had no military service prior to receiving their commission. Additionally, only three participants had never deployed in support of either Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom and 60 percent had deployed two or more times in support of those operations. Nineteen percent had deployed three to five times to Iraq or Afghanistan. The survey helped provide an understanding of the magnitude of the retention problem along with variables driving officers' career decision-making processes.

What are the most prevalent concerns over future service in the ACTIVE component?

Junior officers today are faced with many concerns regarding the prospects for

future service in the active Army. The survey asked respondents to rank concerns with regard to continued service in the active Army. Thirty-nine percent of officers ranked operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and the possibility of 12-15 month deployments for a 20-year career as their top concern, while 69 percent ranked it in their top three concerns. Despite receiving the second highest overall top ranking (30 percent) for the most prevalent concern, 72 percent placed the desire to raise/start a family/impact of attitudes of spouse in their top three concerns. Lack of ability to control one's career (duty assignments, possible career field designation) was the third most popular concern. Seventeen percent ranked this as their top concern while 49 percent ranked it in the top three. Concerns about

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For those that left the ACTIVE service, what are they doing now?	
National Guard or Reserves	34%
Pursuing a graduate degree	34%

promotions and disagreement with the current administration’s policies were the least prevalent, although a former Marine commandant stressed that it can be an important factor in retention:

“I think there is little doubt that we have a crisis. It is indisputable that there is a direct tie between officer retention rates and the trust that the officers have in their most senior commanders and in the leadership of the country. When you can’t answer the most fundamental question – ‘Why are we fighting?’ – people lose faith in their leaders. It’s just that simple.”¹⁶

Respondents voiced other concerns with regards to future service in the active component. Common trends included systematic problems within the Army Married Couples Program, frustration over the lack of contractor oversight, poor quality of school systems located in the vicinity of bases, and the lack of a special status for spouses desiring government service positions. Only one participant voiced concerns over the Army’s admissions policies for new recruits and one participant was concerned about the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

How successful is the captains’ retention

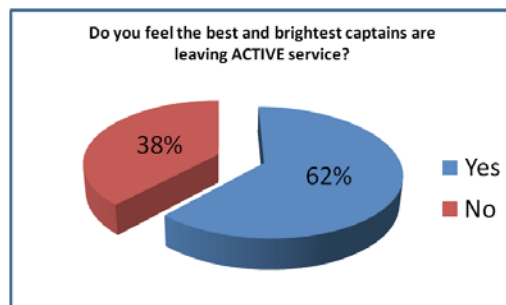
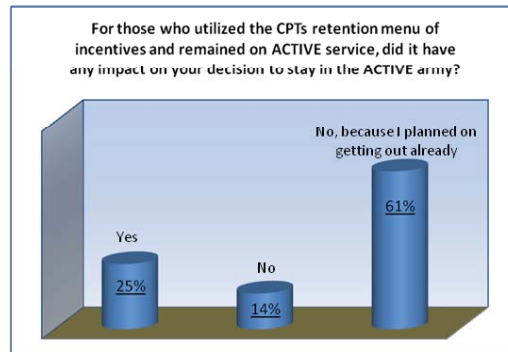
menu of incentives?

The captains’ retention menu of incentives offered captains a trade for three more years of active duty service. Retired Major General Robert Scales argues, “bonuses are bribes” and offers that the Army should “pay people what they’re worth.”¹⁷ Despite that notion, 68 percent of those that remained on active duty took advantage of the retention incentives, suggesting that the remaining 32 percent are not planning to serve an additional three years in the Army. Of those that opted to take advantage of the retention incentives, 93 percent took the cash bonus while the remainder took the advanced civil schooling option or the branch/functional area transfer. However, did the bonuses truly have the desired effect on the force? Only 25 percent of respondents were swayed by the retention menu’s initiatives. According to the Army G-1, the staff section responsible for analysis of manpower projection, junior officer projected retention numbers are based on an assumption of a 25 percent retention rate due to bonuses.

Do you feel the best and brightest captains are leaving ACTIVE service?

This question prompted the most candid and critical anecdotes as to why junior officers are deciding to leave the force, some voicing frustration with the management of their careers while others felt the deployed time was not worth the sacrifice to their family lives and/or marketability beyond service. Of particular interest is the divide a few respondents noted between themselves and their field grade officer superiors. Today, it is not

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uncommon for captains to have more combat experience than some of their superiors. Several captains suggested that a frustrating generational rift exists, which challenges the capacity of “Cold Warriors” to adjust to the counterinsurgency principles.

The Army, much like other businesses or non-military government offices, has always lost great personnel to new opportunities. The current conflict and associated family strains may eventually figure prominently in retention. However, as the hard numbers show, the problem is not critical yet and the shortages of officers by number are comparable with historical trends.

Conclusion

Overall, officer retention has stayed

relatively steady despite increasing deployments to Iraq and/or Afghanistan. However, the Army will have to retain junior officers at higher than historical rates to meet the demand caused by reorganization and force expansion. While the Army is currently short of mid-level officers, there is no short-term fix to the problem. The institution is taking measures to access more new lieutenants (primarily through OCS) and to retain captains to meet future demands, while maintaining the quality of the officer corps.

Essentially, the denominator in terms of the required number of officers needed is changing while the numerator, current strength, is staying stable. Increased accessions will grow the numerator but maintaining quality requires a gradual, rather than precipitous, increase.

Despite the retention data telling a good news story so far, there is concern about a potential problem, especially as more officers return from multiple tours. The possible downturn has received significant attention from the Army’s leadership. If the Army fails to retain officers at a higher rate, specifically its captains, there is a potential for a crisis – but the time has not yet come (and may not arrive) to hit the panic button.

Jaron Wharton is an active duty Army officer with three tours in Afghanistan/Iraq. He currently serves as a military fellow with the Center for a New American Security. The views expressed above are solely those of the author.

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Notes

1 LTC John Nagl. Comments were made during the launch of the CNAS-*Foreign Policy Magazine*, U.S. Military Index, on 19 February 2008.

2 Thom Shanker, “Young Officers Leaving the Army at a High Rate,” *New York Times* (10 April 2006).

3 Andrew Tilghman, “The Army’s Other Crisis: Why the Best and Brightest Young Officers are Leaving,” *Washington Monthly* (December 2007).

4 Department of the Army, “U.S. Army Officer Retention Fact Sheet” (25 May 2007). FY 2007 data courtesy of Army G-1. These rates reflect company grade officer attrition for total commissioned active duty officers.

5 Of note is that in the Vietnam period, the uptick in loss rate coincided with a policy decision to involuntarily send captains back on second tours as individuals, not units.

6 The Army staff section responsible for this data collection was the G-1.

7 Data provided by Shared Systems Branch, Military Systems Directorate, Personnel Information Systems Directorate (PERSINSD), Human Resources Command. Spreadsheet Prepared by Ms Shirley Sabel, Institutional Research and Analysis Branch, Office of Policy, Plans, and Assessment, U.S. Military Academy.

8 “U.S. Army Officer Retention Fact Sheet.”

9 Charles A. Henning, *Army Shortages*:

Background and Issues for Congress (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 5 July 2006).

10 The Army was not short as many officers as the GAO predicted in FY 2007, but was still short a significant, but survivable, amount. This was due in large part to the growth of the force and the change of the force construct to modularity. I provided the Army’s FY 2007 projection to illustrate that both the GAO and the Army overestimated the officer shortage. This is a positive notion for the future since the Army forecasts a shortage of only 700 officers in FY 2010 – a suboptimal, but more feasible, shortage.

11 Most branches require a captain to take command of a company for a minimum of 12 months in order to receive branch qualification, while some branches require that an officer hold a key staff position.

12 Henning, *Army Shortages*.

13 Ibid.

14 Any below-the-zone promotions greater than 10 percent actually require approval from the secretary of defense, which was obtained for FY 2008. It is important to note that the below-the-zone look cannot alter overall major accessions according to law, so it is theoretically increasing the overall quality of the officer corps by not promoting officers in either their primary zone or above-the-zone/once passed over for promotion. The major selection rate actually went from 97.1 percent in FY 2006 to 94.3 percent in FY 2007. Since the below-the-zone look may potentially promote 15 percent in FY

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2008, one can logically assume that the promotion rate to major will drop below 93 percent.

15 Professional military training (e.g. Ranger school, language school) was removed as an option from the most recent menu of incentives released on April 1, 2008. This option was removed perhaps because of a lack of popularity and the current opportunities to attend military schools.

16 Mark Perry quoting comments by former Marine commandant General Joe Hoar. "US Military Breaks Ranks, Part 2: Troops Felled By a 'Trust Gap'. *Asia Times*. January 2008.

17 MG (Ret) Robert Scales. Comments were made during the seminar "Restoring America's Military after Iraq," Center for American Progress (28 February 2008).

Photo Credits

First photo: RABIAH, Iraq (2003)
Jaron Wharton speaks with his chain of command inside a newly opened bank situated a half mile from the northern-border crossing point with Syria, became fully operational June 18, 2003. U.S. Army photo by PFC James Matise.

Second photo: BAGHDAD, Iraq (2006)
Jaron Wharton speaks with his company, C/2-506th IN, during an awards presentation in the International Zone of Baghdad. Photo courtesy of CPT Jaron Wharton.

Third photo: BAGHDAD, Iraq (2006)
An explosive ordnance team attempts to recover a damaged vehicle. Photo courtesy of CPT Jaron Wharton.



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