

Fort Benning: Maj. Gen. Robert Brown takes command of U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence

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As Maj. Gen. Robert Brown took command of Fort Benning Thursday afternoon, he singled out two of his former coaches at Michigan's Grosse Pointe North High.

First, he thanked his basketball coach, Ray Ritter, then his track coach, J.D. Edwards, a World War II veteran.

Brown has asked Ritter to attend military ceremonies before, but this was the first time the retired coach could make it. Ritter drove 16 hours from Ohio to Columbus to watch Brown assume command of the U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence from Maj. Gen. Mike Ferriter.

Before his assignment to Fort Benning, Brown was chief of staff for U.S. Army, Europe, in Heidelberg, Germany.

There was a reason Brown wanted Ritter here.

"Coach Ritter taught me a lot about leadership," Brown said after the ceremony.

Edwards has stayed in touch with Brown as he climbed through the ranks.

"He would always send packages to us," Brown said.

Ritter watched proudly as his former player took the flag from Ferriter, signifying the change of command.

"This is one of my most happy days in education," Ritter said. "But I am also happy for the Army. I really believe that Bobby has the qualities that make him a great leader."

Ritter saw those character traits when Brown was a star prep player who went to the U.S. Military Academy and played for Mike Krzyzewski.

"Bobby is not going to ask you to do anything he hasn't already done," Ritter said. "He was the hardest working player on our team — and he was the best player on our team."

Krzyzewski has produced 26 All-American basketball players, but Brown, who played at West Point from 1977-81 and is a member of the academy's 1,000-point club, is the legendary coach's only Army general.

Brown takes over Fort Benning at a critical point. The Armor School is being moved from Fort Knox to Fort Benning, a transition that must be completed by September 2011.

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“Big changes always produce big challenges,” said Lt. Gen. John Sterling Jr., deputy commanding general and chief of staff, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. “This change is huge. ... I told Bob he has a lot of rocks in his rucksack. Mike Ferriter has cleared the trail and eased the burden that will be in his way.”

Nearly 116,000 soldiers train at Fort Benning each year and there are 61 courses taught on post.

When the Maneuver Center of Excellence transformation is complete, there will be 39 new courses and 30,000 new students each year. About 10,000 new jobs for soldiers, civilians and contractors are being created on post as a result of the Armor School move.

“It is a trickle that will grow to a cascade of soldiers and employees,” Sterling said.

Brown said he never pictured himself as a general.

“In some ways, I am uncomfortable as a general because I would rather be out there talking to the troops,” he said. “But in another way I am glad to be a general because I can change the things that are not working.”

The first order Brown made as Fort Benning’s commander was to allow the soldiers holding the company flags behind him to bring down the flags, which were being whipped around by the gusting winds.

This is the first time Brown has been assigned to Fort Benning since he was a lieutenant in 1982. He has been in the Army 30 years and made 23 moves during that time.

His command experience includes commander of the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Fort Lewis, Wash. He also had a command position in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Ferriter was philosophical about leaving Fort Benning.

“When these colors get passed,” Ferriter said of the ceremony, “I always say to myself, ‘So it is.’”