

Infantry, armor troops ready to mix it up on Fort Benning

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FORT KNOX, Ky. -- Most people know that oil and water just don't mix.

Well how about the armor and the infantry?

Several members of the U.S. Army's Armor Reconnaissance Course, which is scheduled to move to Fort Benning this summer, say the storied days of one-upmanship between the traditional rival military branches and their troops, for the most part, are a thing of the past.

"I don't think that's going to have anything do with whether you're infantry or armor. I think that just has to do with soldiers in general," Sgt. 1st Class Keith Pruett, an instructor with the ARC, said during a visit with his unit last week. "I think all soldiers could tell you some stories about fighting other units. I know I've got a few of mine from my younger days."

Maj. Joe Harrison, who is set to take charge of the Cavalry Leaders Course at Fort Benning this summer, said a certain measure of divisiveness may have been part of the armor-infantry culture years ago, but Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 took much of the wind out of that mentality.

"When you get into Baghdad and you need to move 5 or 10 kilometers, you realize really quick - do you want a guy that has tracks or wheels?" Harrison said. "Likewise, if you're in a tank or you're in a Bradley and you don't have enough (ground troop) dismounts to clear rooms or to cover high ground, you realize real quick that you need your infantry brothers."

Both Pruett and Harrison said there's plenty for each of the branches to learn from each other as they combine training forces and become the U.S. Army's Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, completion of which is federally mandated by Sept. 15.

"I'm actually excited about it," said Pruett, who has served in the military just over two decades. "You've got the best of both worlds as far as the Army goes. You've got the armor and infantry. There'll be a lot of stuff to take from it, a lot of cross-training between the two branches to facilitate a stronger fighting force."

Sharing space, attention

Not that there aren't concerns, however. Some wonder if the two training entities will have enough elbow room to navigate the Georgia post's swath of forest.

Both were founded in 1918, but Fort Knox has about 109,000 acres of land upon which the armor force has been the dominant player with no other major training units. Fort Benning has 182,000 acres of land at its disposal and is now in the process of trying to purchase more from adjacent property owners.

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“In regards to the training areas, it’s going to be tougher for us at first,” said Staff Sgt. Jake McCrae, an instructor with the cavalry course. “We’ve got all the training areas at Knox to play in. We have a lot more maneuver space. Down there it’s going to be a lot tighter for us until we get things hashed out.”

Harrison put things in a different perspective. It boils down to the U.S. Armor branch stepping into deeper water, essentially becoming a smaller fish in a bigger pond.

“We get more resources (at Knox) and we get a little bit more attention here because we are kind of the only game in town,” he said. “When we move down to Fort Benning, we’re one of many players in town, so our voice is a little bit smaller, not quite as large.”

He cited the Army’s Airborne School and the Ranger Training Brigade as other components of Fort Benning’s permanent party mission. The post also is home to the war-fighting 3rd Brigade Heavy Combat Team, which has seen extensive action in Iraq.

And while allocation of land at Fort Benning may be a concern, Harrison said the move to combine the two rivals will be a good one in the long run.

“There are good things and bad things,” he said. “Being a big fish in a little pond feels good. But being in a bigger pond, you’re going to see a lot more training and a lot of the good things that they’re doing over there (at Benning), so that collectively all of us should learn from each other and get better in all of our courses and create a better product.”

The changes for the armor troops are steadily occurring. Fort Benning on Thursday said the Reconnaissance Summit, a gathering of senior armor leaders normally held each year at Fort Knox, will take place Wednesday through Friday at the Armor School’s new training center at Harmony Church on Fort Benning.

It is the first time the event has ever been held here.