



# MULTI-COMPONENT UNITS: MAXIMIZING THE TOTAL FORCE

By Darren Buss, Richard Giarusso and Ron Granieri July 21, 2020  
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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to *A BETTER PEACE*, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**- professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College and podcast editor of the War Room. It is a pleasure to have you with us. The Army and the Joint Force have recently expanded Multi-Component Units, or MCUs, over the past five years to conserve limited manpower and to improve total force readiness. These units bring together service members from across the services and can include both Regular and Reserve Components creating both opportunities for synergy and special challenges for integration. Our guests today have come to discuss those challenges and possibilities of organizing and serving in an MCU. They are both members of the US Army War College Class of 2020. **Colonel Darren Buss**- an active duty member of the regular army integrated US Army Reserve Personnel into 18th Airborne Corps Headquarters' pilot MCU program from 2015 to 2016. He was also the deputy director for future operations from 2013 to 2017, including time in Afghanistan and then in Korea until 2019. Conversely, **Lieutenant Colonel Rick Giarusso**- a troop program unit member of the US Army Reserve, served as a member of US Transportation Command's Joint Enabling Capabilities Command, or JECC, from September 2015 to May 2018 and then as a Battalion Commander with the 167th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion. Both of them have extensive experience on this question and have come to explain both the meaning of MCUs and their possibilities for the future. We are delighted to have them with us. Welcome to *A BETTER PEACE*, gentleman.

**Darren Buss:** Thanks for having us.

**Rick Giarusso:** Thanks for having us, Ron.

**RG:** It's great to be here with you. So, I want to start by asking this question about Total Force Policy, which is a phrase that's associated with the creation of MCUs. What is it and why does the Army and the Joint Force use it? Darren, I'm going to go to you first.

**DB:** The Total Force Policy is really a means, when the Army looks at it and the Joint Force larger too, but looks at all the different components of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines and how we need to use them all to meet our mission. Not just our Active Duty Component, but our Reserve Component, which includes the National Guard as well. So, it's how we bring all those forces to bear. It's not just the active duty to meet our missions. Sometimes that's all in different units. Sometimes it's in the same unit.

**RG:** Rick what is your experience with Total Force Policy?

**LTC RG:** Total Force Policy, for me, I studied it is part of my strategic research project and it came out of the decision for the United States Army after we emerged from Vietnam and stood up an all-volunteer force. You got rid of the draft. So, the Army took a look at how they were going to get things done and how they were going to accomplish the mission with this volunteer force. Total Force was really all about how we integrate the different “compos” as they call them- compositions of the unit Active Reserve and National Guard- to be able to get the job done. And one of the outcomes of that is we now have about 53% of the Army comprised of the Reserve Component.

**RG:** This actually gets to an interesting question because I'm thinking when the decision was made to go to the all-volunteer force in 1973 after a long discussion and certainly a corresponding with the end of Vietnam conflict, the Armed Forces had the advantage then for the next decade and a half of being largely peacetime forces with few combat deployments. Since 1990 however, one could argue that the US Armed Forces, even with the all-volunteer force, have been deployed with sort of increasing frequency I guess we could put it, to put it mildly. Has the Total Force Policy concept held up under the pressure of the extensive deployments that we've experienced, especially since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001?

**DB:** I think it has. I think that the Reserve Components realized after the end of the 1980s and Desert Storm that what we needed them to shift from a strategic Reserve to an operational Reserve, and that it really is what it's been. As the active Component reduced in size throughout the 90s, the Reserve Components continue to share more of the burden, but more from an operational perspective than from a strategic role. And that just accelerated even after 2001 with the War on Terror and operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**RG:** Rick has that been your experience too, as a member of the Reserve Component?

**LTC RG:** Yes, one of the areas I'm most familiar with as a logistics officer in the Army Reserve, and I mentioned 53% of the Reserve Component makes up the United States Army. However, when you get to certain specialties, and logistics is one of them, you find at those percentages are much higher- 80% or more in logistics depending on what type of logistics units

you're talking about. So, the Active Army finds it very difficult to be able to go anywhere and do anything without the Reserve Component. So Total Force Policy has really joined us at the hip. What Darren was referring to in terms of the operationalization of the Reserve Component has put on some additional stresses for employers, soldiers, families, and units, so it's been difficult.

**RG:** Right. And going back to you, Darren, because I'm thinking about this too. As we talked about MCUs, right, they can be multi-Component from a Joint Force perspective, and they can be multi-Component in the Regular/Reserve aspect. The question is what kind of different challenges exist when you're talking about creating an MCU with members of the different armed forces and the different services versus with the one when you're trying to merge Regular and Reserve Components?

**DB:** So, once you throw a joint flavor and requirement on to it, it makes it a little bit more difficult because not only different Components have different policies and authorizations, but so do the different services. It's not really my perfect area of expertise. I think Rick could probably speak a little bit more to serving on a joint multi-Component unit, but from an Army perspective and then Army Headquarters, an active duty unit that integrated Reserve Components there were still challenges that both the active duty team and the Reserve Component team had to figure out.

**RG:** I got you. And Rick, what would you like to add to that?

**Lt. C RG:** With my experience with the JECC, certainly those administrative actions like pay and personnel actions, evaluations, those kinds of things, were all handled by the service Component aspect of the unit. So we had the Army Reserve element, or Marine Corps Reserve element, whatever the service, and they took care of those kinds of things and let the unit focus on the operational aspects of getting people out the door, trained, and ready to do the job that needed to be done.

**RG:** As a headquarters question, and this is going to be a very civilian, non-combat arms question, but I'm just basically curious. If I'm serving in an MCU, who signs my paychecks? Who am I working for? Am I working for the service that sends me and it's just that somehow each one is working its own bookkeeping aspects, or how does that change by day to day experience, I guess, as a soldier than as a sailor, or as an airman? Or does it make a difference at all?

**Lt. C RG:** You're thinking about that exactly right. I went to the Joint Enabling Capabilities Command as an Army officer. I had to also be a Reserve officer, but I was paid by the Army's personnel system. So, I was essentially on loan to a joint unit from the Army. That's a way to think about it.

**RG:** And that happens both between Reserve and Regular but also between the services in that kind of situation?

**Lt. C RG:** Correct.

**RG:** So, the bookkeeping is kind of complicated in that somebody is balancing to figure out who is officially working for whom at which time?

**LTC RG:** Correct. The other aspect of that is how do you integrate these soldiers and airmen and marines into one unit? And the onboarding process at the Joint Enabling Capabilities Command was extremely well-thought-out and worked very, very well. And they hit everybody who shows up there. The unit had a week-long orientation, and then we were all trained as joint planners collectively before we were given the green light to be able to go out and do the mission.

**DB:** Just to highlight the challenges, the pay is one thing. You're still paid by your service, but it's also some of the entitlements that you might need. For example, at the 18th Airborne Corps when we had reserve officers coming in, the status they came in on- a lot of them were traveling from all around the country. When you live at Fort Bragg, you have a house and you can go home. When you don't, you have to find a place to stay. What type of entitlements do you get? Where do you live? How do you travel there? So, there's all this type of other in pay and entitlements that these Reserve Components officers normally have to deal with when they're going somewhere and having to travel to go do their training. Not even just deploying, but just training as well.

**RG:** Sure. I am curious what is the difference in the day-to-day experience of serving in an MCU versus serving in a joint-billet- when I think of a typical joint-billet as someone being at the Pentagon or being at some combatant command a joint-billet. Where is the dividing line between those two things?

**LTC RG:** Frankly, I'll tell you that the dividing line is really in the individual's head more so than it is anything else. Once you make that mental leap to be able to figure out what needs to be done on the administrative side, what uniform you're actually wearing makes no difference. I can speak from my personal experience that I was very uniform conscious when I showed up and my first joint-billet at the JECC because I've never had the opportunity to work with Navy and Marine Corps personnel to any great extent at all. Once I was there for a little while, sometimes I couldn't even tell you what service they were in, and they were wearing the uniform. I'm talking about Mike, and I can't remember. I think he was a Navy guy, but I knew him as a J-5 planner.

**RG:** And I guess that's the goal in any joint operation. Everybody's supposed to only see purple, right?

**LTC RG:** Exactly.

**RG:** Darren, what's your stance there?

**DB:** Even if it's a Green Team, you're all part of the same team. Some of you might be there every day and that's your full-time job. Other members of the team might come in for certain training or exercises, but then when you have to go deploy, you're all part of the same team. And it's getting everybody on that same team. For an example, 18th Airborne Corps is an airborne unit, so part of the drill training for the team members, the Reserve Component members, that came was we wanted to make sure that they could get their airborne status and get their jumps and their jump pay. So, we had to work different training schedules and qualifications to make sure they were just as much of a member of the team and getting that pay and entitlements as the Active Duty Component numbers that were there every day.

**RG:** And so, is the big moment, I guess, what makes an MCU an MCU when it is deployed? I guess I'm trying to think about, you know, as opposed to a work a day in a joint office and so it's the deployment that makes the difference?

**DB:** So the reason that the Army, several years ago, converted all the division active duty division headquarters and active duty headquarters to an MCU construct was because coming out of the Budget Control Act of 2011 and sequestration, there was a personnel cut that the active duty headquarters had to take- about 25%. So what the Reserve Component was able to do as the Total Army Policy was to provide some additional capacity, maybe not new skill sets, but just capacity to prevent a full-effective 25% cut, but those Reserve Component members on the staff are now in what we call the main command post operational detachment. So, it is basically the bench, if you will, for the main headquarters that when a deployment in an operation happens, with appropriate notification and planning, those Reserve Component members get mobilized and join the active Component portion of the headquarters throughout that deployment in duration. The challenge that remains afterwards though is you still have different deployment dwell times and mobilization timelines for those Reserve Component, so you have to manage- the unit has to manage- how long and how frequently they are mobilized for operations.

**RG:** Right. And what is, in general, when we talked about the time frame for a Reserve Component unit to be mobilized to participate in the MCU, how much time would they be given?

**DB:** So ideally, they're trying to schedule and notify this about 270 days out. You figure most of the Reserve Component have a full-time job, and some of them don't live in the immediate vicinity, so that coordination generally follows the same type of guidelines for mobilizing a

Reserve Component unit as well. It can be done shorter, and the unit can operate for periods of time without those mobilized reserve officers and reserve soldiers, but it adds the capacity and the depth, and it can't be guaranteed if you're trying to activate and mobilize that unit within a shorter time.

**RG:** And Rick, you're experienced as a reserve officer. What's the shortest time period you ever had to mobilize for a deployment?

**LTC RG:** My experience is much on the other end of the spectrum than Darren's. At the JECC we typically have what we call a Joint Alert Force. It's a group of officers- planners- that have been trained up and are ready to go out the door for missions within 72 hours of notification anywhere in the world. And I, in fact, had received a phone call that said, "Hey can you do this?" and I said "Yes", and went out the door. Two days later I was in Stuttgart, Germany, or Hawaii, or wherever we were going that time to work with a combat command on a planning term.

**RG:** Is it like being a firefighter that you know when you are on call, or are you always on call?

**LTC RG:** Yes, you know when you're on call. So, these Joint Alert Force they lasted 90 days. So, we get them once a quarter, and if you happen to be on that quarter's Joint Alert Force, you were then prepared to drop what you're doing at work, your civilian job, and grab your stuff and go. The other thing that the check did, just to give you an idea how much we thought about this, is every single person who shows up as a member of the team with the jet there, they are given a whole other issue of organizational clothing and individual equipment.

**RG:** So, you can always keep it packed?

**LTC RG:** Well it's always there at the JECC, and if they need to get you out the door, they'll have you get on an airplane in Los Angeles to go wherever you need to go and say your equipment will show up and meet you wherever you're going.

**RG:** Oh interesting. So, this means you as the officer- your family, your employer, whoever that is, this is all baked into their experience.

**LTC RG:** That's correct.

**RG:** At least once a quarter you'll be in this kind of situation?

**LTC RG:** Correct, and for the Reserve Component personnel, once they were trained up and they were green like to get Darren's talking about- you've got to do all the free training stuff.

Once they're green, so to speak, and able to do the job, the expectation was that we would sign up for the Joint Alert Force 90 days out of a year, so once a quarter.

**DB:** I think Rick's experience highlights some of the scale and scope of this. His experience is at a smaller tailored organization that's made for that, and as you expand that to a larger scope with these larger Army headquarters, it's more people and it's a little harder. Not saying that those authority's rules can't be looked at and adjusted if required, but there are consequences when you're trying to recruit and retain a Reserve Component element to meet that high level of operational tempo that might not be able to be done at that big of a scale.

**RG:** Sure. The whole appeal of being in the reserve is that you actually get to have a civilian job and life while you're in between deployments, and so the idea that you're making that sort of a commitment is an interesting in-between place for a reserve officer to be. I guess I'm curious too then, when we think about how well MCUs have functioned up to now, do either of you have thoughts about how, if it all, the MCU process could or should be modified or further developed to make it more effective?

**DB:** I'll take a stab at that. I will say that the version of the MCU that I experienced was the pilot program. It evolved a little bit since my experience, so I don't have direct experience since then, but I do know that the Rand Corporation, about a year ago, published a study as to the effectiveness, and almost about a year ago, the Center for Army Lessons Learned published a handbook for commanders as to how to integrate and employ and prepare MCU headquarters as it's kind of a newer thing that we've been learning. I think that the program saved and was able to retain some capacity that, had the Active Duty Component just lost those spots, it wouldn't be there. So, you at least have members that you can train and integrate and plan on integrating better, so it does give you that bench. Is it perfect or is it ideal? No, but it's still a good way to go forward, and it shares that. There are risks and challenges of each, but with some training and coordination you can overcome some of those. Whether we can sustain it in the future where there are other changes is something that we'll have to see as structure continues to go forward into the coming decades.

**LTC RG:** And Ron, I'd just like to point out to listeners that what we're really talking about here is how do you access the Reserve Component? The traditional way has been full mobilization, think World War 2, or a partial mobilization. We've seen those in the past, but recently Congress has changed the law through the National Defense Authorization Act in 2012 and added two additional activation authorities. The first one is the activation for a reservist up 120 days to respond to disasters. We're all familiar with seeing that right now.

**RG:** Absolutely

**LTC RG:** The second one is to permit the activation of reservists for up to one year for pre-planned missions in support of a combatant command. So that has given the service a lot of latitude in how they can access the Army Reserves. Not just in the Army, but in all the forces.

**RG:** I see. So that means that if one signs up for the reserves, then one realizes that you could get that one-year deployment depending on a pre-planned operation?

**LTC RG:** That is correct. And what we do- I'll talk about it from a battalion commander's point of view- is typically when you're serving a pre-planned mission like my battalion did, we basically had a manning document that we had to fill, and we knew well and ahead of time, like Darren was saying, 180 days out at least or more. They needed so many people of these different specialties and rank to be able to go to support US Central Command for a mission period for a year. And we would typically get people from different units rather than just send one unit, so you create another unit to be able to go out the door to be able to do that mission.

**RG:** So that means because any individual unit might not be able to send all of its people is that part of the problem?

**LTC RG:** Correct.

**RG:** So, what you're talking about then is it's not just sort of integrating a reserve unit with a regular unit, it also means that you're pulling together reserves from multiple units and experiences. So, they have to get to know each other first too.

**LTC RG:** Right. From my perspective, we were pulling people from both within my battalion and from outside the battalion reservists and creating another unit and then sending them out the door to support the Active Army in the Joint Special Operations Command.

**RG:** How long did they have a chance to get to know each other before they were sent to go? Those reservists, once they were all pulled into one place to live, did they meet each other at the airport and then they're on their way?

**LTC RG:** No. They had an opportunity to train together and to go through all the pre-training and the requirements necessary to deploy overseas based on the JSOC and CENTCOM's requirements. We made sure they had that opportunity.

**DB:** I think something to highlight here too is even the active duty forces Army will individually deploy personnel and send them to pre-deployment training to go augment or support already forward deployed headquarters and round out those headquarters. I also think it's worth noting, and not an area of my expertise, but different services have different roles and



means by which they employ the reserve forces. In the Army we like to try to do it more of a unit base, but the Air Force, for example, can kind of do it as onesie-twosie specialty skill type more along the lines of what Rick was talking about. So even as you look at how different services use their reserve forces, it plays into the system.

**RG:** Right. So, it can be a matter of what specialties are needed and who is available with that specialty?

**LTC RG:** Yep, that's correct. I think the Reserve Component can add value to the Joint Force in unique ways, and these mix compo units are continuing to evolve, and that's just one way that we can continue to do that.

**RG:** Sure. Well I am curious here since both of you then came to the War College with your experience with the MCUs, even from your different perspectives, but certainly with perhaps more familiarity with this whole concept than a lot of the officers that you have met as fellow students at the War College. So, did you feel as though you had a lot to teach your fellow officers about the existence and the experience of MCUs, or have you met a lot of fellow officers while here at the War College who have also happened to have experience with them?

**DB:** From my perspective, there is not as much experience among the active duty Army officers. The National Guard officer in my seminar and like Rick here, they have more experience because they've been living it. The active duty is, I think, getting more exposure to it now that the multi compo units are at the division and Corps level. If they haven't, as they move out from here, Active Duty Officers might get more exposure, but many have not had a whole lot of MCU experience that I know about.

**LTC RG:** I would concur with that. That's been my experience within my seminar as well, but I also had the opportunity to share my experience with my fellow officers in the seminar that I had at the JECC as well.

**RG:** Can I ask what are the two of you looking to do after the completion of your studies at the War College? Do you know what your next assignments are going to be? can you say?

**LTC RG:** I'm going to the Joint Staff in the Army Reserve element as a Joint-35 planner. Plans and operations.

**RG:** Outstanding. Darren?

**DB:** I'm scheduled to go down to US Army Central Command to be the Director of Aviation Operations for them stationed out of Shaw Air Force Base.

**RG:** Wonderful. So, both of you will have to be able to draw on your previous said joint and MCU experience as you move up as we like to say for our War College graduates to the strategic level.

**LTC RG:** Exactly.

**DB:** Definitely. I know US Army Central Command uses Reserve Forces Aviation Forces over there as well, so I do think my experience and research will help me out.

**RG:** Well great. I'm delighted that you were both able to share your research and your experience with the listeners of *A BETTER PEACE*. We are about out of time for today, but I want to thank Darren Buss and Rick Giarusso for joining us today for this conversation, and I want to thank all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs. Send us suggestions for future discussions. We're always interested in hearing from you. So, with thanks to Darren Buss and Rick Giarusso, until next time, from the WAR ROOM I'm Ron Granieri.

*That concludes our program. Thank you for listening. The views expressed in this podcast reflect those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views, policies, or positions of the US Army or the Department of Defense. Let us know what you think. Provide your feedback, comments, or suggestions through our web page at [warroom.armywarcollege.edu](http://warroom.armywarcollege.edu) and have a great day.*