

<https://juniorofficer.army.mil/reflection-branch-detail-program/>

A Junior Officer's Reflection on The Branch Detail Program

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Every year throughout the Army, junior leaders from The United States Military Academy at West Point, The Reserve Officer Training Corps, and Officer Candidate School have one opportunity to volunteer for the branch detail program. The branch detail program allows cadets to choose a basic branch (usually Military Intelligence, Signal, Finance, Air Defense Artillery), but also assigns them to a control branch (Infantry, Armor, Field Artillery, Chemical) – where they will serve immediately following commissioning. This unique career path ensures branches with traditional leader development opportunities are filled by



lieutenants from branches with limited lieutenant structure such as Military Intelligence (MI), Signal, Finance, and Air Defense Artillery. The control branch allows officers to gain combat arms experience in a 24 to 36 month period with the intent of the junior officer transitioning to the basic branch and applying their knowledge to the force. This career option produces well-rounded leaders, equipped with enhanced abilities to extend their personal and professional network and development in order to support warfighters at all echelons.

In 2012, I commissioned into the MI corps with a branch detail in field artillery (FA). Unlike today's accessions process, I did not volunteer for this career track and placed in the program regardless of my future career goals. However, I took a positive viewpoint to the situation and looked forward to what the Army had in store for me. As a newly trained FA Basic Officer Leader Course (FABOLC) graduate, I was extremely hesitant in mentioning any inclination of a branch detail status. Concerns of different treatment compared to pure branched peers always ran through my mind.

Unfortunately, branch detailed officers can be automatically written off and be told that their loyalty to the branch is nonexistent well before having a chance to disprove the stigma. This negative outlook and situation does not always occur, and every brand new junior officer's experience varies across the force.

When I arrived at my first unit, leaders quickly identified me as a branch detailed officer based on my officer record brief without me divulging the information. They already had their minds set that I would take the battalion S2 (BN S2) position once I finished leading a platoon. I would only have a short time frame to test and implement the knowledge I gained from the academically rigorous FABOLC and apply it to the operational force. One of the main purposes of the program is to gain as much experience and exposure in four years. If the junior officer is shortchanged, they will not have the tradecraft and technical expertise to meet the overall intent of applying their talents to the basic branch of assignment.

What if I wanted to stay FA? What if I found my calling in FA and I did not want to try another branch? I had no choice in the matter and leaders stuck with the set career path they had in place for me from day one. Initially, I was disappointed because I have always thought the best manager of your career is YOU. Luckily, leaders emphasized that what I learned in FA would be extremely valuable in the MI community. The key was to develop leadership and management skills as a junior officer and implement those concrete experiences to the MI branch. Regardless of the situation, I was taught to immerse myself in the position and learn everything I could from the control branch and other warfighting functions around me. I needed to be an information sponge and keep current on my craft to lead soldiers and support my commander's intent.

After serving 24 months in FA, I faced the significant career decision – transition into my MI or stay FA. Naturally, it was a tough decision. I created several courses of action and war-gamed each one to ensure I made the best choice. Should I stay in a branch that I was now very familiar with and where I had started to develop a good reputation or should I transition into a branch where I had little to no experience and where my peers had already started to develop connections that would help them in their careers? This was only a fraction of the questions that ran through my mind as I contemplated my decision. Ultimately, my biggest fear was my last four years of hard work as a FA officer would not translate to my next assignment. After seeking input

from mentors and conducting some research, I found my initial concerns to be unfounded.

As I transitioned into the BN S2 position, I continuously sought guidance from mentors and feedback from my peers on whether to stay FA or transition to MI. I often found myself uninformed on whether or not making the branch change would help or hinder leader development and career progression. This forced me to seek a senior officer that had experience with the program to provide a realistic perspective and feedback. My Brigade S2, who was a former infantry officer, educated me on the pros and cons to the transition which in turn equipped me with knowledge that was not easily accessible on the internet. More importantly, he was unbiased and did not influence me in one direction from the other. It was not an easy decision, but I decided to make the transition hoping to apply my knowledge as a FA officer to the MI branch.

At first, I naturally felt behind my peers due to the lack of branch experience. My short time as a BN S2 did not equate to pure branch officers who spent their entire four years in the community. The Captain's Career Course (CCC) bridged the gap and mitigated my lack of experience in the intelligence warfighting function. I had a steeper learning curve to overcome compared to my peers, but the situation pushed me to study and self-develop outside of the classroom environment. After graduating the CCC, I was confident in my prior abilities as an FA officer and a newly qualified MI officer. I was more broadened and knew what the warfighter needed from me. I had firsthand experience of what the FA community needed from intelligence and how to best support operations. Branch detail gave me a variety of experiences and developed me into a multi-disciplined officer. I understood what combat arms soldiers went through and the extreme sacrifices they made. I had a greater understanding of the role I took in supporting combat arms and how important the intelligence professional was to the warfighter.

Rather than hurting my chances of success in my basic branch, my control branch experiences help me. Think of it like this, the branch detail program is like having two majors in college. Junior officers become subject matter experts in two warfighting functions that provide invaluable experiences. This enhances professional credibility, enables career development, and provides a marked advantage compared to the rest of their peers.

I am a strong believer and supporter of the branch detail program because it produces well-rounded leaders at all echelons. FA gave me an understanding of the close fight, depth of the battlefield, and integration of joint effects. Targeting skills provided the opportunity to employ intelligence at all echelons as I progressed through developmental ranks to enable the maneuver community to dominate their area of responsibility. I am forever grateful for the knowledge and experiences this career path provided me, and thankful for the leaders who invested in my development. There is no such thing as small parts, just small actors. Gripe, slow walk it, or blow it off, and you will just be given that same type of work until you demonstrate you are capable of more. Do what you are told and knock it out of the park. Success will follow. If you would like to learn more about branch detailing, you might check out a Q&A [here](#) or [here](#).

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