



As part of the AECW predeployment training, all workforce members were trained on how to properly don chemical and biological gear, 8 October 2024. (Photo by Scott Sheldon)

# Green Light, Go!

Heidi Stoetzel

**M**y journey from Army soldier to Department of the Army (DA) civilian involved unexpected detours, calculated ascents, and crucial support. I navigated my civil service career progression, recognizing the “green lights” that propelled me forward alongside the “yellow” and “red lights” that illuminated challenges. This article articulates the personal development initiatives and leadership cultivation

that facilitated my advancement from a temporary GS-6 position to a permanent GS-13 role. I share my experiences to inspire and empower fellow professionals with the intent of providing specific ideas and actions to enable other Army civilian professionals to advance their careers while illustrating the power of perseverance and the importance of a supportive network. As a former paratrooper, the jumpmaster’s “Green light,

go!” call triggers immediate action. This pivotal moment, the transition from aircraft to open air, evokes intense emotions for parachutists. Just as “Green light, go!” signaled decisive action in my paratrooper days, I discovered this same audacious spirit was crucial for navigating the complexities of a DA civilian career.

### **First Green Light: Military Service to General Service (GS)**

Around November 2005, I faced a critical decision: reenlist as an Army staff sergeant or pursue a DA civilian career. Seven years of military service—my entire adult life—made the Army familiar. I valued my role in supporting operations and aspired to become a sergeant major. However, parental responsibilities weighed heavily with a one-year-old son and an approaching expiration term of service. My dead-

requirements and duty location, (2) annotate related skills and experience, and (3) continue to seek development opportunities. A standard method of mine is to share my resume with my network of peers, coaches, and mentors and receive their feedback. I encourage the next generation never to stop trying to find a position that will fulfill their professional aspirations while providing work-life balance and financial stability.

On 3 April 2006, I began my temporary GS-6 administrative assistant position and journey as a DA civilian. I was unaware of the one-year temporary job limit and the potential for a reduction-in-force (RIF) later that same year. Fortunately, my Defense Travel System proficiency secured me a term budget technician position within Fort Riley’s G8 (Budget Section) during the 2006 RIF. It is important to note that a RIF can be an unsettling situation for most employees.

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line was Thanksgiving; I would reenlist if no civilian position materialized. With reenlistment, I would transfer back to Fort Bragg, which has an extremely high operational tempo, and likely leave for a deployment that would conflict with being home to raise my son. I applied to numerous USAJobs announcements. Although my persistence in submitting resumes led to multiple interview opportunities, the hiring managers selected other candidates. Then, during the week of Thanksgiving, an Army captain at Fort Riley, Kansas, called me and offered me a temporary GS-6 administrative position in the Resource Management Office. “Green light, go!” I accepted the position after my April 2006 expiration term of service and began my DA civilian career. This experience taught me that you might get one hundred rejections to only one acceptance, but a single affirmation can be enough to change your trajectory. Some effective best practices include the following: (1) always research the job

During a RIF, managers evaluate their employees’ skills and determine where to place employees within the new organizational structures. In this case, the RIF was a propitious occasion because it allowed me to move into a permanent position. With a permanent placement, I had health insurance and other benefits previously unavailable as a temporary employee. While not all RIF actions have such positive outcomes, this turn of events significantly impacted my career path.

Upon transferring to the G8, I encountered a veteran civilian employee who embodied the classic “little old lady in tennis shoes” archetype—a phrase familiar to those with extensive Army experience. Ms. Smith, who had over forty years of federal service as a budget analyst, became my first mentor. U.S. Army leadership doctrine describes mentorship as a relationship where a knowledgeable, experienced person “provides a less experienced leader with advice and

counsel over time to aid in professional growth.”<sup>1</sup> Initially, Ms. Smith and her seasoned team perceived me as an inexperienced young brat. However, once I demonstrated a willingness to learn, Ms. Smith imparted invaluable knowledge on navigating a successful career and overcoming obstacles. For the leaders who will come after me, I recommend you seek feedback from peers, subordinates, and superiors through coaching, counseling, and mentoring. My support network provided me with the necessary leader development; without my support net, I would never have reached where I am now. After a year of dedicated service at the GS-6 level within the G8, I became eligible for advancement to GS-7 positions. I leaned on the skilled educators at the Army Education Center (AEC). As mentioned above, sharing my resume and seeking help in the resume-building process helped immensely. The AEC also provided invaluable assistance in refining my resume, ensuring it effectively highlighted my newly acquired skills and experience gained during my G8 tenure. Consequently, I secured an administrative assistant position in Fort Leavenworth’s Battle Command Integration Directorate in May 2007. This exciting prospect prompted a significant relocation for my son and me, shaping our future endeavors.

My transition to the Battle Command Integration Directorate proved opportune, fostering connections with influential mentors who significantly shaped my professional journey. My supervisor provided indispensable guidance, recommending that I attend Army Management Staff College (AMSC) courses as part of the Civilian Education System (CES). As he suggested, I completed the Foundation and Basic courses. In addition to CES, I took the initiative to look for classes and certifications relevant to my administrative position. These civilian courses gave me a better understanding of the role of DA civilians, specifically how to become a better teammate amongst Army teams. Moreover, my supervisor encouraged me to assist with planning meetings for challenging projects across the division and develop my administrative skills by attending the Action Officer and Organizational Leader Development courses. My new colleagues consistently coached and treated me equally, fostering a sense of belonging and contributing to a positive early career experience. Two decades later,



Stoetzel at Fort Benning, Georgia, in front of the barracks where she attended Airborne School in 1999. The photo was taken in 2015 while Stoetzel was an ELDP member. (Photo courtesy of the author)

many of those early career relationships have endured as personal friendships. Dick Winters, famously known for serving in WWII, states, “Properly led and treated right, your lowest-ranking Soldier is capable of extraordinary acts.”<sup>2</sup> A supportive and inclusive environment welcomed me despite the significant age gap I had within my team. I am grateful for the inclusion my teammates provided. As a teammate now, I treat new members with the same level of enthusiasm and coaching as I received as a junior DA civilian.

## Second Green Light: Capabilities Development and Force Management Internship

After approximately one year in an administrative capacity, a significant career development arose through an internship. Internships across the Army provide a direct path to promotion and training opportunities. Federal job sites (such as USAjobs.gov) provide the employment requirements and screening criteria. My internship program was structured as a multi-grade developmental assignment (GS 7/9/11/12) and offered a pathway to specialize in capabilities development and force management. This transition presented a unique opportunity to leverage existing administrative skills while acquiring new

competencies through specialized training. My selection marked a pivotal turning point in my Army civilian career. Becoming a capability developer intern was my most significant “Green light, go!” moment.

Upon entering the internship program in 2008, I became immersed in a professional environment that included rotations within multiple divisions. The rotations exposed me to the teams overseeing force management, capabilities-based assessment, and concepts. I received in-depth training on force design/structure, doctrine development, and How the Army Runs, which particularly impacted my education. As I progressed in the GS ranks, I completed the CES Intermediate and Advanced courses. I learned how to lead teams, lead change during adverse times, operate as an organizational leader, and forecast for the Army’s strategic level. In my final year of the intern-

The feedback I received, a mix of constructive criticism and genuine support, proved invaluable. This experience, my worst “red light” yet, played a critical role in my future. Do not be afraid to ask for help; it is not a weakness but a strength. “Asking for help isn’t giving up ... It is refusing to give up.”<sup>3</sup> Through this exposure, I turned a developmental need into a strength. Acknowledging my shortcomings and seeking support, I improved my communication skills and fostered stronger relationships. The encounter reinforced the idea that setbacks, while inevitable, offered growth opportunities and underscored the importance of self-development. “Self-development is essential to attain and sustain the competencies to perform successfully. Self-development activities reinforce and expand the depth and breadth of what leaders learn in classrooms and on duty.”<sup>4</sup> Embracing

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ship, I advanced to leading projects, further solidifying my skills and experience.

The high visibility of our team’s work culminated in briefings to Army senior leaders. My leaders trusted me and gave me multiple opportunities to provide senior leader briefings. My initial experience briefing a general officer was both unforgettably embarrassing and a significant learning opportunity. Tasked with briefing the commanding general of the Combined Arms Center (CAC), I found myself battling nerves and my face flushed as I stumbled through the introduction. However, the CAC commanding general displayed remarkable composure and empathy. He gently paused my briefing and engaged me in conversation, inquiring about my background and internship experience. This simple act of genuine interest eased my anxiety, allowing me to regain my composure. I then delivered the briefing successfully.

The uncomfortable occurrence with the CG became a turning point regarding my public speaking.

my vulnerability and seeking guidance to improve my speaking skills transformed me into a more effective communicator and assertive professional. One mentor demonstrated exceptional dedication by teaching one-on-one sessions with me until I had mastered the basics. He led follow-up group sessions with colleagues, focusing on enhancing my public speaking and communication abilities. Their unwavering support proved irreplaceable in overcoming my fear and anxiety of public speaking.

My four-year internship provided a plethora of leadership opportunities, culminating in helping lead an officer grade plate review. Tasked with aligning officer grade structures across division, corps, and theater Army structures, I initially felt overwhelmed by the scope and complexity. However, through iterative discussions with Army proponents, a pivotal shift occurred. The culmination of my education and on-the-job training coalesced, illuminating the intricacies of organizational design and the critical interplay of

warfighting functions. It takes time to comprehend and fully understand the complexities of our Army. That is why continuing to be a lifelong learner and seeking mentorship is essential as a DA civilian to become competent and proficient in your position.

### **Third Green Light: Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP)**

A few years after my internship, while honing my force management skills, I received an email detailing the Department of Defense (DOD) Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP). The ELDP is part of civilian talent development and offers a pathway for entry-level to senior-level enterprise programs.<sup>5</sup> I immediately began the application process, which included gathering endorsements, completing a medical screening, and securing senior leader approval. The ELDP consists of military and interagency personnel and provides experiential learning about the DOD and the warfighter. I was nervous about gaining an endorsement to pursue the ELDP and concerned about the potential disruption of extended absences. However, my leaders' unwavering support for my development and the program's value ultimately encouraged me to submit my application. Their approval, a resounding vote of confidence, underscored the organization's commitment to fostering professional growth among its members. Employees often think the organization will not approve their request or they cannot leave their jobs due to the mission. Be that as it may, the organization may miss gaining a better employee who is only away temporarily. Hence, individuals should not be afraid to take risks and ask to participate in leadership development venues. The best course of action is the chain of command approves; the worst course of action is the chain of command denies the request. The ELDP enrollment process reinforced the importance of trusting the organizational support system and confidently pursuing advancement opportunities.

Approximately two months after submission, selection notification arrived with a commencement date of August 2014. The ELDP journey began in Boston, Massachusetts, engaging approximately sixty civilian and military personnel across all DOD services in an intensive leadership development program. Deployments constitute a cornerstone of the

ELDP, offering unparalleled opportunities to engage with different military contexts. The program leverages these deployments to provide experiential learning alongside warfighters across the joint, combined, and international environments. For example, participating in the U.S. Marine Corps boot camp in San Diego provided firsthand insight into the Marines' physical and mental demands. Similarly, the controlled environment of the Naval Submarine Training Center's wet trainer offered a unique exposure to the challenges of submarine warfare in Hawaii. These experiences, while demanding, fostered a deeper appreciation for the complexities of interoperability and the unique capabilities of each branch of service. The ELDP culmination at the Pentagon's graduation ceremony highlighted the experience's transformative nature. The program equipped me with a stronger skillset, ethos, and appreciation for the complex nature of DOD. The presence of family, friends, and mentors at my graduation was evidence of my unwavering support network. Returning to Fort Leavenworth, I felt invigorated and eager to apply my enhanced knowledge and leadership skills in a new, challenging context. Driven to leverage my enhanced leadership skills and contribute to others' development, I pursued a GS-13 promotion at Fort Leavenworth. The chance to apply for a position at the Center for Army Leadership (CAL) led to my selection as a leader development analyst, a role aligning perfectly with my experience and aspirations. Early at CAL, my chain of command selected me to present at the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) annual conference. I seized the opportunity to share my leadership journey at the Army's prestigious AUSA conference during a roundtable forum showcasing Army leader development programs. I chose to speak about the ELDP's transformative impact, inspiring other DA civilians to consider joining the program. Overcoming my initial public speaking apprehension, I embraced the challenge as a testament to my growth. Presenting to a distinguished audience, including many Army senior leaders, proved exhilarating and empowering. I remembered how nervous I became before a public speaking event; I recognized how far I had come and the mentors who helped me hone my communication skills. While serving at CAL, organizational changes and reorganizations mirrored the Army's

transformation. We moved locations, realigned teams, and faced evolving tasks and responsibilities. A promotion opportunity became available within the new division as part of the reorganization. I was confident in my experience with the skill sets required for that

ways to make situations positive rather than negative and leverage my strengths. Honing these skills proved invaluable; when armed with self-confidence, red lights were manageable. My experiences highlight the importance of working within all three leader devel-

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position, and I felt self-assured about a promotion. Despite leaving the interview confidently, the hiring committee selected another candidate. The disappointment hit hard, leading to self-doubt and deep reflection. A massive “red light” shone brightly at this crossroads. The difficult feedback confirmed a gap: I needed to develop my strategic thinking and emotional intelligence further. I resolved to address the areas needing improvement.

The initially devastating setback became a catalyst for profound growth. I dedicated the next few years to deep self-reflection, seeking guidance from trusted peers about my values, goals, and aspirations. Their insights, combined with introspection, led to a significant perspective shift. My focus moved from solely pursuing a promotion to a more holistic vision of success. This shift manifested in two key priorities: (1) prioritizing self-love and acceptance to enhance my emotional intelligence and (2) cultivating my strategic thinking. In Stephen Covey’s *The Speed of Trust*, he articulates that self-belief is a significant performance driver. As Covey states, “The principle is simply this: We tend to get what we expect—both from ourselves and from others. When we expect more, we tend to get more; when we expect less, we tend to get less.”<sup>6</sup> I took his words of advice seriously. I received feedback from the Army Leader 360 assessment; I scheduled counseling sessions with my superiors and completed some Athena career-long assessments.<sup>7</sup> After compiling the results, I began working on several developmental need areas. I found

development domains: self-development, institutional, and operational. Self-development betterment has made me a better DA civilian, mom, friend, and person.

#### **Fourth Green Light: Army Expeditionary Civilian Workforce (AECW)**

“Will you answer the call?” The seemingly innocent question in an email announced an AECW deployment opportunity worldwide supporting the warfighter. I began investigating how the AECW selection worked by reviewing an Excel spreadsheet of possible deployments scattered across the globe. The spreadsheet articulated the various job locations and position descriptions. My skills and experiences paired well with a planner position in Germany and an analyst position in Africa. I decided to submit my resume and required documents for the AECW application process. The idea of contributing to something larger than myself, of making a tangible difference in another organization, resonated deeply. In July 2024, I received official notification to serve as an AECW member. Germany, here I come! These “Green light, go!” moments never get old. I was excited and terrified to serve as a strategic planner at the U.S. Army Europe and Africa headquarters for a one hundred and eighty-day assignment focused on capability development for warfighters. Pre-deployment images of the living conditions had admittedly sparked some apprehension. Still, my commitment to gaining experience at an Army service component command and contributing to the strategic Army removed any

doubts. The accommodations, a repurposed warehouse designated a twenty-four-hour quiet zone, presented unique challenges. The enforced silence meant to foster sleeping conditions for shift workers and demanded constant headphones for simple tasks like checking my phone or watching a show. This constraint, understandable in a deployed environment, nevertheless imposed logistical and social limitations. The AECW position pushed me out of my comfort zone and forced me to embrace a different routine. However, serving in this capacity was very rewarding. The deployment forged both personal and professional growth, challenging my resilience the entire time. Personalizing my living area with family photos and creating a leisure area for puzzles fostered a sense of normalcy and facilitated post-work relaxation.

Initially, I struggled to grasp the team's specific mission and tasks within U.S. Army Europe and Africa. I conducted independent research to understand the underlying intent and objectives and sought guidance through coaching sessions with experienced colleagues. Toward the end of my deployment, I synthesized the organization's operations to the Army's overarching framework. As time passed, I assisted the team with several tasks and improved

their efficiency in capability development, incorporating relevant, current technology solutions and lessons learned from the Ukrainian War.

## Conclusion

Now, back in Fort Leavenworth, I find the entire Army undergoing significant transformation. Potential reorganizations and mission restructuring will shape the Army's future, creating a sense of anticipation and uncertainty. However, I'm hopeful. My experiences, including my time with AECW, have prepared me to navigate these changes and contribute positively to the Army's evolving role.

My journey continues, and I will forge ahead, creating my version of success. I hope this article inspires my readers to find your path to a green light—don't let yellow and red lights deter your determination or dreams. Reflecting on my DA civilian career, one lesson resonates: the path to success is rarely linear, often paved with unforeseen challenges. Yet, these moments of adversity reveal true strength and resilience. By embracing a "never give up" attitude and believing in ourselves, we can navigate professional complexities with courage and an unwavering commitment to achieving our full potential. ■

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## Notes

1. Army Techniques Publication 6-22.1, *Providing Feedback: Counseling—Coaching—Mentoring* (U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2024), 59.

2. Dick Winters, *Beyond Band of Brothers* (Berkley Publishing Group, 2006), 290.

3. Charlie Mackey, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2019), 62.

4. Field Manual 6-22, *Developing Leaders* (U.S. GPO, 2022), 1–3.

5. Army Civilian Career Management Activity," Army.mil, <https://civilians.army.mil/CivilianDevelopment/TalentDevelopment>.

6. Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (Free Press, 2006), 122.

7. "Career Long Assessments: Athena," Army.mil, <https://usacac.army.mil/organizations/centers-of-excellence-coe/mccoec/center-for-army-leadership-cal/athena>.

**Heidi Stotzel** began her service in 1998 as an Army 88M transportation specialist, serving in the 82nd Airborne Division stateside and in Germany until 2006. She transitioned to a Department of the Army civilian role in 2006, progressing through roles in resource management and program management. Most recently, she completed a deployment with the AECW in Europe. Stotzel values the relationships built with colleagues and enjoys football, spending time with family – especially her son Austin and her seven nieces and nephew!