

Closing the Digital Readiness Gap: A Case for an Integrated Signal Training Ecosystem



Sgt. Tyler Davis assembles a Tactical Radio Integration Kit as part of the Signal Digital Master Gunner course at Fort Gordon, March 18. Davis is a network communication systems specialist (25H) assigned to 442nd Signal Battalion, 15th Signal Brigade. (Photo by Laura Levering, U.S. Army Signal School)

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As the Army pivots from a counterinsurgency (COIN) footing to readiness for large-scale combat operations (LSCO), it faces a critical digital training readiness gap.

Recent trend reports from combat training centers (CTC) indicate that signal Soldiers, while technically proficient in specific systems, often lack the adaptive, high-level expertise required for complex, contested environments. This article argues that the current "one-time" institutional training model is insufficient.

The solution is not to invent new programs but to fully resource and strategically integrate existing structures into a holistic training ecosystem. We propose a two-pronged approach. First, transform Regional Signal

Training Sites (RSTS) into a "Signal Foundry" modeled after the successful Intelligence Foundry program. Second, empower the Signal Digital Master Gunner (S-DMG) as the master trainer and commander's advisor for network readiness. By bridging institutional and operational training domains, this integrated system will build and sustain the digital expertise necessary for victory on future battlefields.

Introduction: A Crisis in Digital Readiness

The modern command post is a nexus of information where commanders must synthesize data from myriad sources to make time-sensitive decisions. Still, the most advanced technology is rendered useless if the network supporting it fails and the personnel responsible for it lack the training to restore it under pressure. This scenario represents not merely a technical failure but a critical failure in training readiness.

Recent reports from the Army's CTCs offer a stark warning, noting that the force is at risk of producing "expert technicians who are novice warfighters."² This critique highlights a fundamental problem: Soldiers may be trained on the procedural "button-ology" of specific systems but lack the deep, adaptive knowledge to troubleshoot and integrate capabilities in a contested operational environment. This reality violates the Army's foundational training principle that a single, all-encompassing standard must apply in both peacetime and wartime.³ A single course at the beginning of a career is insufficient to maintain expertise throughout. To remedy this, the Army must bridge the gap between institutional instruction and operational training needs through a system of continuous development.

The Shifting Operational Landscape: From COIN to LSCO

The Army's strategic transformation from a COIN focus to a readiness posture for LSCO has profound implications for the Signal Corps. The COIN era was characterized by relatively stable network environments, system-specific procedures for Programs of Record like the Warfighter Information Network-Tactical (WIN-T), and a heavy reliance on field service representatives for advanced troubleshooting and maintenance.

The LSCO environment, in contrast, demands that signal Soldiers be more than technicians. They must be adaptive problem solvers capable of integrating new technologies, defending the network against peer adversaries, and operating effectively at the tactical edge with limited external support. Possessing cutting-edge technology is not enough. Without "the right digital skills to optimize, adapt, and fully apply the technology through innovation,"⁶ operational units will remain at a disadvantage.

While the U.S. Army Signal School has begun updating its Programs of Instruction (POI), institutional training alone cannot solve this readiness problem. The solution must extend to the home station, empowering units to build and sustain digital proficiency.

A Holistic Solution: Signal Foundry and Master Gunner

To close the digital readiness gap, the Signal Corps can implement a nested, multi-echelon training ecosystem built on two key initiatives that are already in motion but require full resourcing

and strategic integration.

1. Signal Foundry: Resourcing Home-Station Training

The Intelligence community provides an excellent model for resourced, continuous home-station training with its Foundry program. As outlined in Army Regulation 350-32, the Foundry platform provides expert-level training on advanced systems at the local level.

We propose remodeling the existing RSTS to align with this resourcing model, creating a "Signal Foundry." This mechanism would leverage centralized resourcing to disseminate best practices and lessons learned across the force while empowering local commanders to tailor training to their unit's specific mission and equipment. A Signal Foundry would provide the dedicated environment for NCOs and Soldiers to move beyond basic proficiency and achieve true mastery of next-generation digital systems.

2. S-DMG: The Tactical Expert and Trainer

The second, and most critical, component is the redesign of the S-DMG course. Modeled on the venerable M1 Abrams Master Gunner course, the new S-DMG curriculum correctly treats the network as a weapon platform, and the electromagnetic spectrum as its operational terrain. The goal of this course is to produce NCOs with advanced technical expertise who can serve as primary trainers within their formation and act as the commander's most trusted advisor on the unit's network and communication systems' readiness. The S-DMG is the linchpin of the entire



Staff Sgt. James Travis and Sgt. Tyler Davis assemble a Tactical Radio Integration Kit as part of the S-DMG course at Fort Gordon. Travis, a satellite communication systems operator-maintainer (25S), is assigned to 369th Signal Battalion; Davis is a network communication systems specialist (25H) with 442nd Signal Battalion. (Photo by Laura Levering, U.S. Army Signal School)

ecosystem – the tactical-level expert who can leverage the Signal Foundry to build and sustain the formation's digital warfighting capability. This aligns directly with the mandate in AR 350-1, Army Training and Leader Development, to develop leaders who can "operate and succeed in the complex and uncertain operational environments of the 21st century."⁵

Way Forward: A Call to Integrate and Empower

This is not a proposal to create new, costly programs from scratch. It is a call to fully resource and strategically integrate initiatives the Signal School is already developing. The path forward is clear: If the Army is serious about fixing its digital training readiness, it must invest in a robust digital training ecosystem.

The recommendations are straightforward. Fully resource the modernization of all relevant POIs, with special emphasis on the S-DMG course, to develop the master trainers required at the tactical edge. Transform the existing RSTS program into a Signal Foundry, providing dedicated resources for continuous, integrated training that closes the gap between the institutional schoolhouse and the operational force.

The CTCs have identified the problem, and the Signal School is actively building the multi-layered solution. By emulating the success of the Intelligence Foundry and empowering the S-DMG as the central figure in unit training, the Army can ensure its digital dominance on the battlefields of tomorrow.

Authors

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Endnotes

¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 600-20, Army Command Policy (Washington, D.C.: HQDA, 24 July 2020), para. 2-18c.

² Center for Army Lessons Learned, FY25 CTC Trends (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL, March 2026), 1-2.

³ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 7-0, Training (Washington, D.C.: HQDA, July 2019), para. 4-38.

⁴ Headquarters, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), TRADOC Regulation 350-71, Army Training and Education Development (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 9 January 2024), F-1.a.

⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, Army Training and Leader Development (Washington, D.C.: HQDA, 10 December 2017), para. 1-13a.

⁶ Headquarters, Department of the Army, The Army Digital Transformation Strategy (Washington, D.C.: HQDA, 2021), 14.

