

Chapter 46

ROLE OF THE FORCES COMMAND PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

Thomas A. Bryant, APA-C, MPAS

Introduction

Forces Command (FORSCOM) is the largest Army command, providing expeditionary, campaign-capable land forces to combatant commanders. Senior physician assistants (PAs) assigned to FORSCOM will contribute to shaping clinical operations and health care policies affecting training and health care of the military.

Background

Led by a four-star commander and headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (Figure 46-1), FORSCOM consists of more than 750,000 active Army, Army Reserve, and Army National Guard soldiers. For the Army of 2020, FORSCOM provides enhanced land power depth and versatility through fully integrated active and reserve component forces operating in a joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational environment. FORSCOM organizations are expeditionary, campaign-focused, and tailored to operate effectively across the range of military operations in defense of the nation at home and abroad.¹

FORSCOM trains, prepares, builds, and sustains readiness to meet combatant command requirements. The vision of FORSCOM is to have combat ready and globally responsive total Army forces that are well led, disciplined, trained, and expeditionary—ready now to deploy and win in a complex world.¹

The FORSCOM headquarters has multiple G-staff (nomenclature for organizations commanded by generals) departments and directorates. The surgeon's directorate is led by the FORSCOM surgeon, a brigadier



Figure 46-1. The Forces Command Headquarters at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

general, who may come from a variety of medical backgrounds (Figure 46-2). Figure 46-3 shows the structure of the surgeon's directorate. It consists of three divisions—clinical operations, medical operations, and operational medicine. The current chief of clinical operations is a colonel (O-6 grade) Army nurse and the deputy of clinical operations is also a colonel (O-6 grade) PA although slated as a lieutenant colonel (O-5 grade).

Due to the growing force structure of colonel PAs, Human Resources Command intends to keep a colonel PA assigned to the FORSCOM surgeon's directorate indefinitely. This PA's official title may vary depending on the need of the FORSCOM surgeon.

Roles and Responsibilities

Clinical Operations

The FORSCOM PA is intimately involved in all aspects of clinical operations affecting military medical policy and frequently interacts with members of the Office of the Surgeon General, members of the Pentagon, senior leaders at FORSCOM headquarters, senior medical



Figure 46-2. The Forces Command surgeon directorate under the leadership of Brigadier General Wendy Harter (summer 2018).

leaders in subordinate units, and other entities contributing to the military medical mission. Although maintaining clinical practice is expected and authorized on a part-time basis, providing necessary staff support to the FORSCOM surgeon is the PA's assigned primary mission.

FORSCOM PA duties and responsibilities may vary based upon rank and experience and the FORSCOM mission requirements of the surgeon's directorate during the PA's tenure. One example of an officer evaluation report support form follows:

Senior Physician Assistant (PA) to the FORSCOM command surgeon on issues pertaining to force health promotion and readiness for over 770,000 active and reserve component soldiers. Serve as the deputy to the chief of clinical operations, addressing issues that affect the operational unit health care team and their ability to maintain readiness of the force. Provide mentorship to subordinate PAs and work closely with the PA

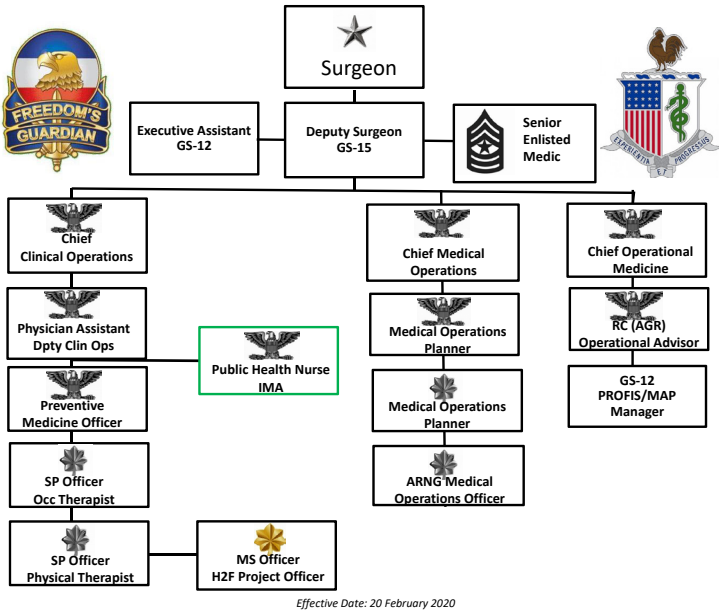


Figure 46-3. Current Forces Command surgeon directorate structure. AGR: Active Guard Reserve; ARNG: Army National Guard; GS: general schedule; H2F: holistic health and fitness; IMA: individual mobilization augmentee; MAP: modified table of organization and equipment assigned personnel; MS: Medical Service Corps; PROFIS: professional filler system; RC: reserve component; SP: Medical Specialist Corps

consultant and the chief of the Army Medical Specialist Corps to improve policies and procedures that affect the readiness, personnel, training, logistics, and other issues that impact operational medicine in support of the FORSCOM mission.

This example can be used in conjunction with the preceding FORSCOM PA’s support form to tailor a narrative that best fits the current duty circumstances.

Health Care Policy

Health care policy in the military deals with all issues across the spectrum of health care, from preventive medicine and primary care

through rehabilitative care. Current initiatives include transitioning health care delivery to the Defense Health Agency (DHA), organizing the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) assigned medical personnel, modernizing the total force, and having a medically ready force and ready medical force.^{2,3}

The FORSCOM PA, in collaboration with other senior medical leaders at the Office of the Surgeon General and other senior military levels, influences needed changes in health care policies that impact all current initiatives. This ultimately affects soldiers on the battlefield and the care they and their families receive throughout the military health system (MHS).

Required Experience

To become a FORSCOM PA, the candidate must have:

- operational experience as a PA,
- staff experience at the brigade level or above,
- military supervisory experience with officers,
- clinical experience with the use of the Armed Forces Health Longitudinal Technology Application (AHLTA) and/or MHS Genesis, and
- familiarity with the Medical Operational Data System (MODS)/ Medical Protection System (MEDPROS) and Microsoft applications.

Desired Experience

The FORSCOM PA should:

- be familiar with the duties, training, and responsibilities of the combat medic;
- be a division- or corps-level PA;
- have had Special Operations assignments;
- have had combat deployment as a combat medic or PA;
- have been PA in a military medical treatment facility;
- have experience working with the Army National Guard and Army Reserve; and
- have experience working in the MHS or DHA.

Required Training and Certifications

The FORSCOM PA should be:

- currently certified by the National Commission on the Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA),
- eligible for privileging at the local military medical treatment facility (MTF), and
- an Intermediate Level Education graduate.

Desired Training

- Aeromedical PA graduate.
- Ranger school.
- Airborne school.
- Air assault school.
- Expert Field Medical Badge recipient.
- Senior Service College.

Required Skills and Attributes

FORSCOM PAs must meet all retention standards in accordance with Army Regulation 40-501, *Standards of Medical Fitness*. They must also possess the following:

- strong initiative,
- excellent communications skills in both written and spoken formats,
- comfort with public speaking and communicating with general officer (\geq O-7) staff,
- ability to work outside normal areas of expertise,
- ability to develop solutions to complex problems,
- willingness to present diverse and minority perspectives to senior officers and civilians,
- ability to rapidly expand knowledge in new areas,
- excellent organizational skills,
- ability to provide intent and delegate key tasks and functions to subordinates,
- ability to function independently with limited direct supervision, and

- knowledge of the Army Medical Department culture and organizations.

In addition to the above skills and attributes, the FORSCOM PA must have an understanding of military medicine and the business of health care from military MTFs and regional health commands to higher-level organizations such as the Office of the Surgeon General, Army Medical Command (MEDCOM), and DHA.

Lessons Learned

The FORSCOM PA position comes with many challenges. The following lessons learned may help prospective candidates integrate well within the organization:

- The FORSCOM PA is a valuable contributor to policies affecting medical training and health care of the military.
- Great relationships with colleagues and at the Office of the Surgeon General, MEDCOM, and DHA will make daily tasks easier.
- Most of the other G-staff do not understand how military medicine works.
- The FORSCOM surgeon may not be clinical.
- The deputy surgeon is not a clinician and is very dependent on the clinicians in the directorate.
- FORSCOM and US Army Reserve Command (USARC) do not have an organic PA for primary care on their manning document; Womack Army Medical Center (WAMC) provides that asset.

Tips for Success

Along with lessons learned, the following tips for success will enable the future FORSCOM PA to succeed beyond expectations and make the assignment easier to navigate:

- The PA should review the Senior Executive Service (SES) system in order to understand the civilian leadership structure of the command.
- The PA should also review all subordinate commands and direct reporting units in order to understand those supported by FORSCOM.
- The PA should stay abreast of all aspects of military medicine as

much as possible. Often, the PA will be asked to give updates on issues outside the realm of clinical medicine.

- The PA should build strong relationships throughout the command.
- The PA should ask the direct reporting units what challenges they have and how the FORSCOM surgeon's directorate can support them.
- The PA should never speak from a position of authority on the phone or email. They should always collaborate on issues and have external messages (outside the directorate) vetted through the deputy or the surgeon.
- The PA should advocate for valuable clinic hours and continuing medical education opportunities. Friday seems to be the slowest and most accommodating day for professional development.

Conclusion

Serving as the FORSCOM PA is a rewarding broadening experience and a great opportunity to grow personally and professionally within the Army health care enterprise. The FORSCOM surgeon's directorate is highly reliant on the experience the PA brings, as the person in the center of health care and readiness of the operational force. For those desiring to build and expand their career opportunities, influence initiatives that impact soldiers and families, and improve their chances of upward mobility, serving with the FORSCOM staff is sure to be a career-enhancing and life-changing experience.

References

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