The similarities between military and civilian correctional systems are interesting and relevant.

M ost American prisons, jails and law enforcement agencies use a military model for their chain of command. What makes this the model of choice? Why not, for example, use a traditional government agency model found in most departments and divisions? Or even a corporate model?

The answer is obvious and insightful. The military model works remarkably well in areas key to corrections professionals: enhancing performance in dangerous situations; identifying rank; developing loyalty within our small groups such as shifts, departments/divisions, etc.; and providing strong support for both large and small groups action. Experience using this model is a key reason veterans are often successful in the civilian corrections arena.

One major difference between working conditions in the military and working in corrections is that military personnel often face combat danger apart from the dangers inherent to corrections. Military personnel often operate confinement facilities in combat areas, both for combatants and for other kinds of detainees. But an Army or Marine corrections specialist can just as easily find themselves working as a convoy gunner or in a ground unit that has nothing to do with jails or prisons — a possibility discussed in one of this issue’s articles. That same article discusses military personnel working in hostile zones, even as they train other-nation staff in ways to improve their own national corrections systems — a challenging mission at best.

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Regarding promotions, expertise, ethics and professional conduct is critical to advance everywhere. There is no substitute for knowing one’s job. But the military requires even more steps to move ahead: leadership evaluations; management schools at key career points; and physical fitness and weapons scores that prepare soldiers for combat. These are military qualifications, but not necessarily correctional qualifications.

There are also differences between military prisoners and civilian prisoners. Our military prisoners are part of the same small group we come from. Some were also impacted by deployments in that same hostile environment. They have the same training in weapons and use of force that the staff does. Many military prisoners are hard, dangerous criminals, just as in the civilian world, but some of them are members weakened or damaged by their military experiences. Senior military leadership does feel a need to try to treat these prisoners, even as we ensure their security and everyone’s safety. Some of the treatment efforts will be discussed in the article on treatment in special housing units.

Part of the impact of having both prisoners and staff share similar backgrounds such as training, career paths, culture and structure is that military correctional facilities often operate in some ways that are similar to more normal commands in regard to procedures and discipline, etc. This is discussed in the article that combines a military model with direct supervision and unit management — three concepts that are oddly alike in many ways in the military world.

Another interesting article in this issue explores the world of military parole and clemency, which is very similar to civilian parole in many...
ways, yet very different in others. Many of the processes, concerns and supervision requirements are the same. Parolees are supervised by U.S. probation officers, just as federal parolees are, and many release conditions are the same. But there is a uniqueness to the military system — ensuring equity in sentencing among small unit members who jointly commit crimes; considering the impact of the location or combat situation; and reviewing the potential message being sent to our larger military personnel population.

The messages we send are important because there is one underlying, very significant difference between military and civilian corrections — that the underlying core, the heart of military corrections is to provide support for the military “good order and discipline” that is required to win wars. That is everyone’s mission, including corrections personnel, and it creates both subtle and obvious differences which are explored throughout this issue of Corrections Today.

The similarities between military and civilian correctional systems are interesting and relevant. We in the military look to the American Correctional Association as our “go to” for corrections — our benchmark of where we are, and where we need to go. ACA has been a staunch ally and friend to the military for many years, and it is a relationship we treasure and trust. ✶