Response Cell Support to a Warfighter Exercise (WFX)

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This past fall, our Brigade Combat Team was assigned responsibility for manning four of six brigade response cells in support of the upcoming Division Warfighter Exercise (WFX). This "tasking" was innocently placed on calendars without any conversation or expectations. After all, the training audience for Warfighter Exercises are the Division Commander and his staff. My very capable Brigade S3 showed me what the Division planner wanted — names for pucksters (now referred to as BSWS operators) and a 24-hour shift roster. But I remembered my first WFX experience from seven years ago. This was not a tasking, it was a BCT mission. We would need to choose our best leaders and warfighters to serve as Division's response cells.

My first experience with a Warfighter was as a battalion commander. Our battalion was tagged to simulate an ABCT in another Division's WFX. I'd made the same mistake as my Brigade S3, assuming we could meet the minimal manning requirements, place some pre-command captains in the command post, and ensure our connectivity was operational. Before the first day was over, I realized I needed to adjust my level of commitment to the Division Commander's critical training event.

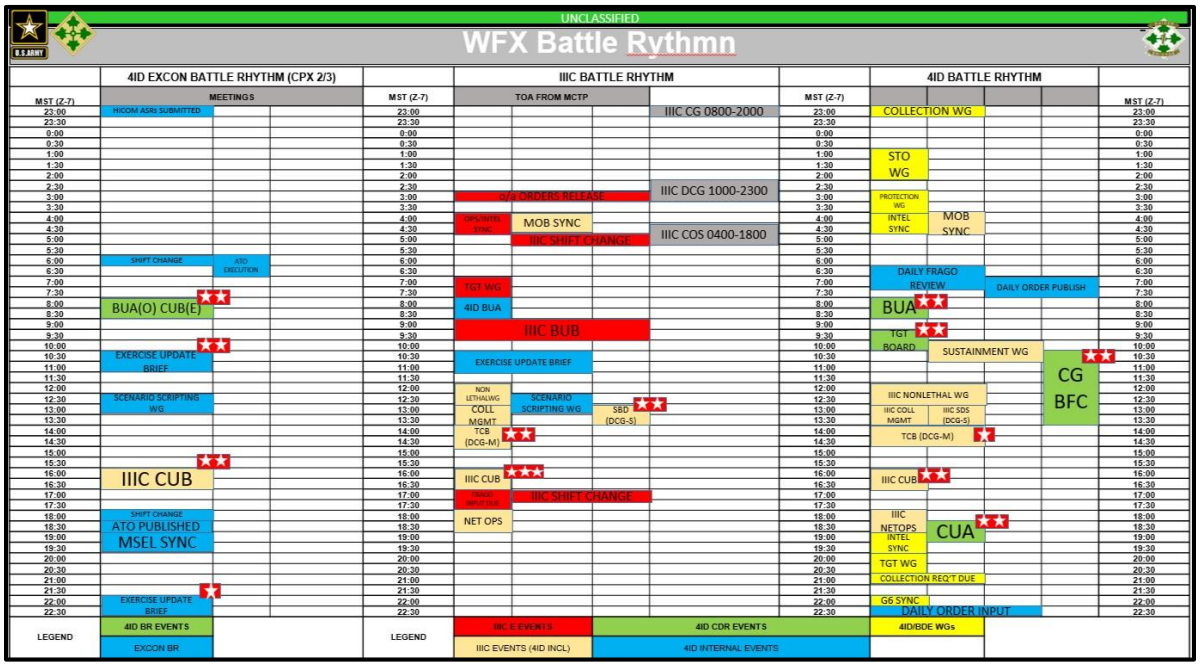
This article, written by our very capable commanders and staff, is intended for battalion commanders and BCT commanders as you prepare your teams to become a WFX Response Cell. A cursory search on the internet yields zero results for how to prepare as a WFX response cell. Our hope is that this article changes that, and others will join the conversation and contribute their recommendations and best practices to enable future commanders.

Warfighter Exercises (WFX) provide multi-echelon training value to Command Post and staffs in a condensed timeline. Multiple repetitions of the Military Decision Making Process

(MDMP) and exercising current operations and planning simultaneously are critically important to building an effective Battle Staff. Virtual exercises have enabled commanders and staff to train at scale, speed, and against an enemy in a way that is not replicable under live conditions. However, operating in a virtual environment also brings new challenges for units not experienced in simulations. Planning for appropriate Response Cell (RC) manning and training, and building a RC that combines a traditional Command Post with simulations systems and virtual operators allows Brigades and Battalions to maximize the training value of WFXs and minimize the friction of virtual and unfamiliar conditions.

Manning: Setting the Conditions for Response Cell Training

Traditionally, the Operations and Intelligence sections of the Response Cell (RC) provide the bulk of the staff's "power" during a Division-level WFX, but our Command Post Exercise (CPX) prior to WFX 21-2 helped us gain an appreciation for the varying levels of demand on other critical positions. When we developed a manning roster to simulate the 155th Armored

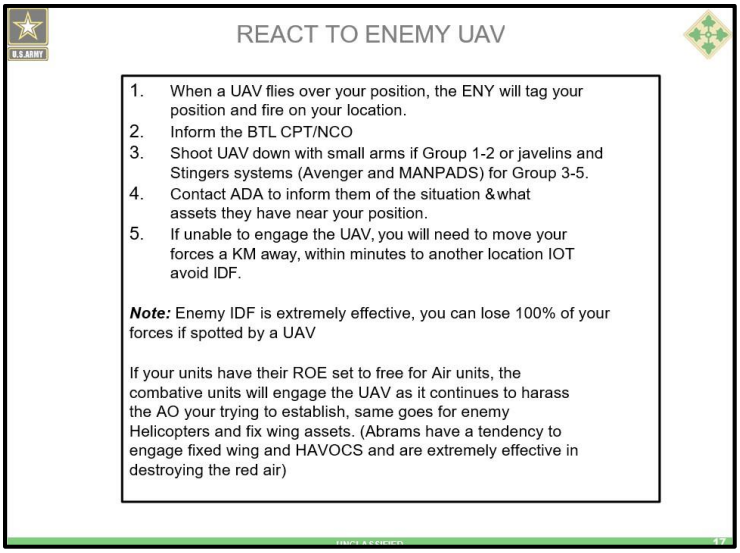


The division battle rhythm provided an outline of critical events for RCs

Brigade Combat Team for WFX 21-2, it proved prudent to assign and train additional “swing” shifts into the established Exercise Support Manning Document (ESMD). These “swing” shifts allowed our people filling mentally taxing billets to focus their efforts into a shorter shift. The additional benefit also created a redundancy in trained personnel who could substitute for those sidelined from training due to illness or competing requirements. While personnel filling certain key billets were able to operate effectively on one of two 12-hour shifts, others whose functions required heightened and continued concentration due to the dynamic nature of the exercise operated on one of three 8-hour “swing” shifts. Battle Simulation Work Station (BSWS) operators and Battle Captains, in particular, are among those whose duties required near-continuous focus throughout their shift. The frequency of reporting requirements to our higher headquarters (HHQ) and the dynamic nature of Opposing Force (OPFOR) operations necessitated the establishment of an additional “swing” shift for those duty positions. In the current COVID-19 environment, training additional personnel who were not initially designated to participate in the exercise created redundancy and operational continuity when COVID trace contact reporting quarantined or isolated primary participants. These “alternates” allowed our RC to continue to execute unimpeded operations in support of our HHQ throughout WFX 21-2.

Other adjustments made to the Exercise Support Manning and Equipping Document (ESMED) which proved beneficial to RC efficiency was the addition of a Battle NCO and the implementation of three 8-hour shifts for both the Battle Captain and Battle NCOs. Even though the WFX ESMED does not allocate a Battle NCO for RCs, our experience from the preceding CPX demonstrated that our Battle Captain can quickly become overwhelmed with maintaining communications with our HHQ (Transverse, SIPR/NIPR telephone, etc.) tracking and reporting on current operations, product creation and submission, overseeing inexperienced BSWS Operators, and updating the RC Commander. Similar to BSWS Operators, the 8-hour shift

schedule minimized fatigue and enabled our Battle Captains and NCOs to remain fully engaged throughout their shifts.



The BSWS Battle Drill Pamphlet focused on the critical tasks of our BSWS Operators to supplement BSWS training and served as a quick reference tool for operators and the Battle Captain and NCO.

BSWS Operator Integration into MDMP, P2P, and AARs

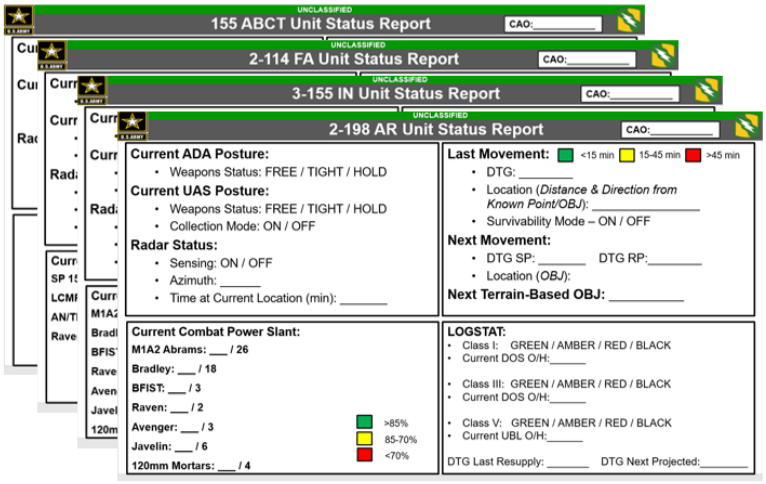
Figure 1 - Raider Brigade conducts Mission Analysis Brief to MG Matthew McFarlane

Credit – 1/4 ID PAO – CPT Dan Parker

To ensure superior support to the training audience (Division HQ), our RC staff integrated BSWS Operators into mission analysis and planning, treating them as the "commanders" of their virtual formations. BSWS Operators participated in the Mission Analysis Briefs, Course of Action (COA) Briefs, FRAGORDs, and OPORDs to to help them achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the mission and our role in the Division concept / scheme of maneuver. Our BSWS Operators, who spanned the ranks from Specialist to Second Lieutenant, came into the exercise at varying levels of experience. Taking

the time to ensure they had achieved a foundational understanding of the approved COA and commander's intent by phase facilitated their ability to understand guidance, provide feedback, and execute the mission. By playing a role in planning and understanding the "why" behind the RC commander's guidance and intent (CCIRs, HPTL, etc.), BSWS Operators were more combat-effective and self-sufficient. Although the WFX ESMED does not dictate a rank requirement for BSWS Operators, it's highly recommended that these positions be manned by leaders with experience conducting company and battalion-level operations (i.e. Officers and NCOs in the rank of Sergeant First Class and above).

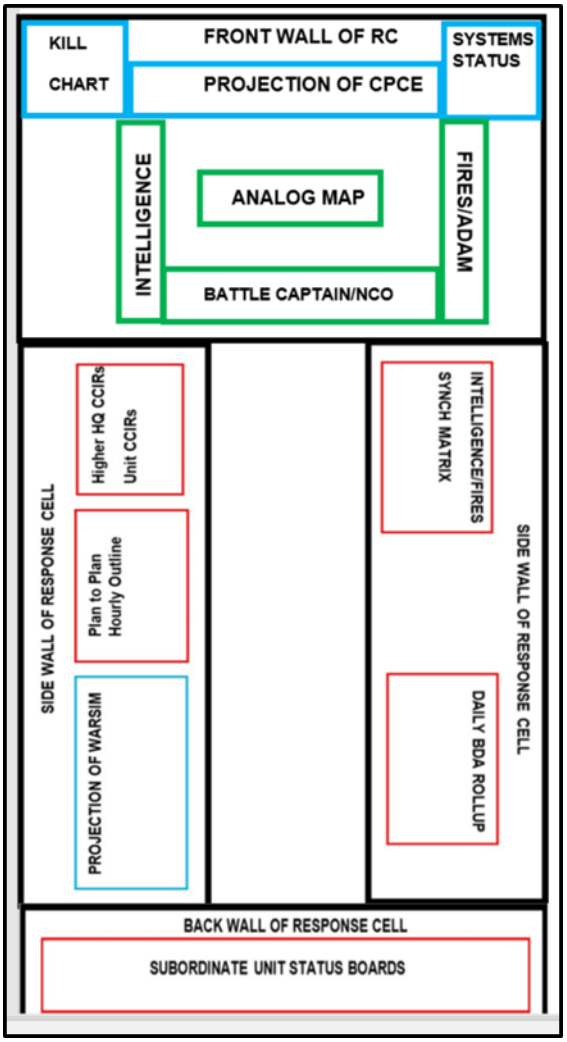
Unit Status Reports allowed the RC Commander to maintain situational awareness of the critical information of our Brigade and make rapid decisions during execution.



RESPONSE CELL LAYOUT

As with building the RC manning roster, the RC layout must be functional to ensure that the RC can respond to current operations effectively and provide proper support to the HHQ. Our RC benefitted significantly from projecting the Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE) imagery, which was our HHQ's primary platform for communication and portraying a Common Operating Picture (COP), on the wall of the RC's Command Post. However, there is a delay between Warfighters' Simulation's (WARSIM) feed and the CPCE, which drove us to project the WARSIM display to maintain real-time situational awareness of subordinate and adjacent units. This allowed the commander and staff to fight the RC more

effectively. Ultimately, this redundancy facilitated increased situational awareness and allowed our RC's warfighting functions to process information and react to friendly and enemy actions more efficiently.



Planning the layout of a response cell provides the commander and staff a quick update of the COP and ease of access to the warfighting functions responsible for battle tracking and drills.

Conclusion

In summary, preparing for a DIV WFX response cell requires full commitment, intellect, a willingness to adapt to the operating environment, and the leadership to follow through. Sounds

a lot like conducting combat operations, doesn't it? These recommendations, we believe, will serve you well as you prepare to accomplish the mission as a response cell and to do all they can to support their Division and grow as much as we did in our training experience.

1. Do not abbreviate MDMP; hard work done on the front end of the exercise will pay off during execution. MDMP is a whole-of-staff process.
2. Have a backup to the COP. Do not rely upon only analog or only digital as a means to execute the training objectives. The RC may be pushed to do a CUB/BUB digitally and, if that is not properly updated, the RC might be unable to execute.
3. The BSWS SOP and operating manual are critical to understanding how to react to OPFOR actions and how to effectively maneuver in the WARSIM.
4. Do not rely on higher headquarters to dictate execution. If the response cell is ready to execute a critical event, then continue to engage with your higher headquarters on recommended action.
5. Technical problems with the WARSIM need to be adjudicated quickly at the lowest level. This will minimize the unnecessary negative impact on the training audience and does not place undue focus on "gaming the system."
6. Constant communication with BSWS operators on status of critical assets, such as bridging equipment, keeps the focus on what current and future operations main efforts are.
7. Reconnaissance can be conducted via air or ground. Most RCs have units that fill reconnaissance roles within their respective formations and do not rely upon ISR at higher echelon to execute missions.
8. Execution of the main effort during decisive action can overwhelm a Fires section inundated with requests for fire support. Detail in your HVTL by (phase of the operation) will provide clarity to commander's intent.

9. The Intelligence Collection Plan (ICP) should be laid out in a methodical manner that takes into account the capabilities and limitations of how IC assets can assist in keeping your units in the fight for the duration of the exercise.

10. Always have more personnel trained in order to provide redundancy in case of unforeseen events or circumstances pulling personnel away from the exercise support.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

1. MDMP only conducted by the Operations/Intelligence section of the RC. A whole of WfF support to MDMP provides better shared understanding and visualization to the commander and staff.

2. Having too few personnel to support the RC. Take into account the number of meetings, rehearsals and ad-hoc huddles that require participation.

3. Each RC produces a fire support plan in a vacuum and synchronization does not occur until after the exercise begins. Instead, the RC should coordinate fires in order to support adjacent units.

Much like a football team's offensive line doesn't call the plays, score points, or make the headlines, the BCT and BDE response cells are enabling the Division's success. Our preparation can lead to tremendous training gain for the Ivy Division and our own team.

This article was written by the staff of 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. The staff includes MAJ Andrea Kaman BCT S1, MAJ Paul Aitchison, BCT S2, MAJ Reed Markham, BCT S3, MAJ Phillip Neri, BCT FSO, MAJ Nicolas Greco, BCT S4, MAJ Alex Bullock, BCT S6, MAJ James Marione, BCT XO and COL Ike Sallee, BCT CDR.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155 ABCT Unit Status Report.pdf


155 ABCT_Plan_to_Plan_CAO


155 Status and Event Tracker v2.pdf

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