Agile Command and Control Wins at JRTC

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Figure 1. A battalion commander receives an update brief from his attached armor-mechanized team during a DATE-E rotation in second quarter of fiscal year 2023 (JRTC Rotational Photo)

I was guilty. During my first six months in battalion command, I found myself forward with two rifle companies and the tactical command post conducting an air assault during the hours of limited visibility with over 400 of my best friends. (While it is customary to write using the third person when drafting lessons learned papers, I felt that by injecting my fallacies early on that it would disarm the reader and hopefully impart some of the lessons learned through my pain instead of theirs.) Our mission: attack to seize key terrain in the vicinity of Objective Galaxy to establish a lodgment for the brigade. This lodgment would facilitate the brigade's effort to begin its combat power generation in defense of Arnland.[i] Arnland is the allied nation under the Decisive Action Training Environment – Europe (DATE-E) operational environment (OE). In DATE-Caucasus OE, the friendly nation is Atropia and in DATE-Pacific, the friendly nation is South Torbia.

I fancied myself a commander's commander and was determined to prove this theory in the flesh during our brigade's premier training event focused on large scale combat operations (LSCO) in the infamous Fullerton Training Area, aka The Box, at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

Commanders belong forward, ensuring that the unit's subordinate formations have a shared understanding of their intent and providing the leadership and direction required to gain and maintain the operational tempo necessary to complete the mission. However, being forward with my troopers created a void in my visualization of future operations with the battalion staff, which in turn created slow and untimely mission orders, minimal operational graphics for the companies, and poor transition management of the organization. I quickly learned that placing oneself at the point of friction does not relieve a commander of their responsibility to ensure their staff also understands their visualization of the fight. A staff that understands the commander's vision enables the appropriate and timely planning, orders processes, and current operations systems that sustain a battalion and propel it to success. Ultimately, any commander should be able to leave their staff and conduct battlefield circulation with well-defined decision points and triggers that enable the command to complete timely command and control (C2) of its subordinate elements.

Battalion commanders must communicate a shared visualization and intent before abandoning their staff at the main command post (MCP) or the tactical command post (TAC). Programming the required training objectives into the staff's individual and collective training is tantamount to squad, platoon, and company-level proficiency training to find, fix, and destroy the enemy. Reciprocally, the battalion staff owes the battalion commander constant refinement of its analyses across all appropriate warfighting functions to facilitate timely and accurate decision-making for the battalion commander. Often, these analyses can result in a proper reallocation of resources and assets, or a task reorganization based on risk or potential opportunities to exploit the enemy or gain momentum.

A former brigade commander defined two types of decision points:

1. Allocation and reallocation of combat power to exploit an enemy vulnerability.
2. Allocation and reallocation of combat power to mitigate a friendly weakness.

Both require brigade or battalion commander-level approval. These should not be confused with triggers. Triggers are generally an action that the staff has planned and gained prior approval from a commander for deliberate action once the established conditions are present. These triggers can be the difference in a delegated authority executing timely indirect fires into an engagement area or committing a reserve force to exploit a seam in the enemy's flank. All these planning processes, including the shared understanding of a common operating picture (COP), are critical to the science of C2 in an LSCO environment.

As an infantry battalion commander and as an infantry task force senior in the operations group at the JRTC, I have observed many of my contemporaries focused on the same mantra, "ride or die" with regards to company commanders. Meanwhile, they pay little attention to their staff. Unfortunately, this mantra often results in the battalion staff and C2 nodes struggling to accurately battle track friendly forward positions and contact with enemy elements or clear ground and air to employ indirect fires assets in an accurate and timely manner. Additionally, the planning of transitions and future operations often falls short.

Battalion commanders can influence and shape the appropriate application of violence of action and enable the maneuver of subordinate units. The application of violence of action is primarily accomplished by training battalion staffs to establish and maintain an effective COP, enforcing a transition from conceptual to detailed planning (operational graphics), and updating running staff estimates while adhering to a battle rhythm (doing routine things routinely). An often overlooked and underrated approach is through adjacent unit coordination (battalion commander to battalion commander and staff primary to staff primary). All these components are relatively simple but require repetition, discipline, and redundancy through systems and trained team members.

Common Operational Picture (COP)

Figure 2. A staff section updates the battalion COP during a DATE-E
rotation in the second quarter of fiscal year 2023
(JRTC Rotational Photo)

Army Training Publication 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations*, defines a COP as "the end product of knowledge and information activities, running estimates, and battle tracking. It is the operational picture tailored to the commander's requirements, based on common data and shared information, and facilitates collaborative planning and the achievement of situational understanding."[ii]

Additionally, this end product should be a single display of relevant data shared with more than one other command.[iii] In producing and maintaining a battalion COP, the battle captain or COP manager must not merely illustrate operational graphics from the battalion operations officer's concept sketch that was constructed during the military decisionmaking process (MDMP), but constantly update the operational graphics with bottom-up refinement from:

- Company commanders
- The scout platoon
- The battalion intelligence officer
- All applicable warfighting functions

A way to do this is over lower tactical internet (lower T/I) mediums, such as via the Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBCP) or Joint Capabilities Release (JCR).[iv]

When digital means are degraded, another way is the physical transmission of analog graphics on transparent overlays from companies to battalion and vice-versa. As a battalion commander, our battalion coined this process the "pigeon scroll." The pigeon scroll proved successful and was a simple polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pipe that carried 1:50 overlays consisting of an enemy situation template (SITEMP), operational graphics, fires overlays, and a matrix operations order shell. This carrier system was used by any and every element circulating the battlefield. For example, if the distribution platoon were conducting a mission to conduct a logistical resupply point (LRP), it would carry updated graphics or mission orders in the PVC pipe to be handed off to the company trains. Conversely, a company commander could update the battalion commander and battalion COP with their operational graphics and fires plan via backhauling the company's PVC pipe to the LRP, handing it to the distribution platoon for dissemination to the battalion TAC or MCP. All battlefield circulation was treated the same way, regardless of rank or position.

Regardless of the unit's technique, the refinement process should be codified in the battalion's command post standard operating procedures (CPSOP) sometimes referred as the tactical operations center standard operating procedures (TOCSOP)[v] or planning standard operating procedures (PSOP) manual. This process should be trained down to company command posts to continuously refine friendly positions, company boundaries, engagement areas, obstacle composition and disposition, as well as known or suspected enemy positions. A common observed mistake is a lack of designated company boundaries, whether on a movement to contact or merely in an area defense. This re-assessment will assist the battalion intelligence officer in assessing the enemy order of battle and assist the battalion operations officer and commander in determining the appropriate array of forces based on the enemy threat.

A conceptual view of the operation to detailed graphics are critical to expedient and precise control. Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6.0-5 *Command Post Organization and Operations* identifies that a COP should consist of: an area of operations, significant activities including unit boundaries and current locations within the area of operations (AO), maneuver graphics, active and planned fire support coordination measures, active and on-order airspace control measures, sustainment nodes and main supply routes, civil considerations, known and templated threats, hazards and enemy locations and activities, protection priorities, and risk assessment.[vi]

Figure 3. A Soldier from the battalion S-2 section updates the
battalion commander during a DATE-E rotation
(JRTC Rotational Photo)

Running Estimates

ATP 6-0.5 states, "Running estimates and the COP are key products for building and maintaining situational understanding. A *running estimate* is the continuous assessment of the current situation used to determine if the current operation is proceeding according to the commander's intent and if planned future operations are supportable."[vii] The criticality of this statement can easily go unnoticed until put into action, under a time-constrained, austere environment where a free-thinking opposing force, weather, and terrain get a vote. The situation is further compounded by both the time and location of where a commander deploys with their TAC. Without continuous running estimates across all warfighting functions and an up-to-date COP, a staff cannot efficiently provide accurate and timely information to the commander. Further, this complexity will muddy the waters on a staff's ability to provide timely and feasible recommendations for the commander's decision points regarding future operations.

Commanders can remedy the problem of outdated information by using all training events conducted across the battalion as multi-echelon training opportunities for leaders and staff. This allows leaders and staff members at echelon to get the multiple repetitions needed to build competency during battalion and company collective training events such as programmed Situational Training Exercises (STX), Fire Coordination Exercises (FCX), and Command Post Exercises (CPX). The battalion executive officer should drive these exercises. The exercises should include training objectives that focus on continuous running staff estimates and the routine employment of battalion command nodes, at echelon, as applicable to the Modification Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE)[viii] of the unit. During LSCO training at the JRTC, well-trained companies and battalions can generally plan 12-24 hours out to sustain combat operations. Conversely, highly trained companies and battalions can forecast 24 to 48 hours out and see through the transition of one battle period and into the next.

By training as we fight,[ix] battalion commanders should train their staff routinely by issuing written guidance (commander's intent) and then displacing themselves over time (while observing training or jumping with the TAC) to simulate friction within the MCP. This practice will first create an environment that empowers the battalion executive officer or operations officer to execute two-minute drills (or whatever is within the battalion's standard operating procedures [SOP]). The two-minute drill is basically a mini commander's update brief that allows the elements of the command post to quickly inform the requesting key leader any pertinent information as of a specific date and time. To be able to conduct these types of drills, each element must keep up-to-date and accurate information. Second, this dispersion will force the battalion commander to receive updates through redundant measures (e.g., battle rhythm, or commander's update brief via alternative means, such as frequency modulation [FM] radio or lower T/I mediums [JBC-P/JCR].) Third, this exercise will emphasize the criticality of a disciplined battle rhythm, the elusive battle rhythm.

The sooner a battalion can implement a battle rhythm via a warm or cold start, the better. If the commander cannot be at the MCP in person, no problem. The Army gave commanders an executive officer, operations officer, and operations sergeant major. The Army created platforms to enhance and increase redundant communications measures, analog COPs with running staff estimates, lower T/I, tactical satellite (TACSAT), and even FM radio.

Figure 4. A company commander updates the battalion commander for the adjacent unit, which will be assisting his battalion in securing the brigade's main objective, Sagacite, as well as the commander from the attached multi-national partner (JRTC Rotational Photo)

Adjacent Unit Coordination

Help solve your brigade commander's problems by talking to your fellow Soldiers on your left, right, and to your front and rear. It seems simple, right? But, like you, the brigade commander is often torn on where they should be during the point of friction. Ideally, depending on the situation, the brigade commander's focus, besides the synchronization and integration of their reconnaissance and intelligence enabled fires plan, is looking at the next fight. Specifically, posturing battalions to transition and sustain their operational reach.

Additionally, the added complexity of distance to accomplish commander-to-commander dialogue and communicating their visualization can potentially hinder some commanders to engage on frequent dialogue. Frequent and constant shared visualization from battalion commander to squadron and fellow battalion commanders can mitigate the tactical risk of losing tempo. Ideally, shared visualization will enable disciplined initiative based on the brigade commander's guidance and enable battalion commanders to provide timely and feasible recommendations. These recommendations can come in the form of suitable battalion boundaries and engagement areas and often lead to identifying gaps and seams that could potentially call for a change in task organization.

If physical battlefield circulation is not possible or feasible due to time, terrain, or enemy; alternative means are sufficient, such as FM and lower T/I. However, in my experience and observations, the employment of point-to-point over-the-horizon communication systems, such as via the Global Rapid Response Information Package (GRRIP),[x] can save hours and facilitate quick, concise communication between battalions and squadron, and from battalion commanders to the brigade commander. Moreover, this equipment does not require network infrastructure during a time of increased emphasis on lower T/I because of expeditionary requirements of tactical C2 nodes. The GRRIP was designed specifically for light and airborne formations as it provides a rugged, secure, beyond-line-of-sight voice and data communications without the need for local network infrastructure, so Soldiers can communicate anytime and anywhere on the planet.

In summary, a battalion commander can wear out their organization by focusing on too many facets while training for a unit's mission essential tasks supporting LSCO. Focusing on implementing systems, expeditionary battalion and company command posts, and personnel proficiency within the approved command post systems can make all the difference concerning timely decision making and execution in an LSCO environment. Additionally, the personnel training investment requires the battalion staff to be disciplined, constantly updating the battalion COP, battalion staff estimates, and through subordinate and battalion-level adjacent unit coordination. This staff discipline will significantly put any maneuver, combat support, or combat service support battalion on a competitive playing field in The Box at the JRTC.

More importantly, at all echelons, these systems and trained personnel will better prepare any battalion for combat in LSCO. A well-organized and maintained COP not only enhances situational awareness across the staff and subordinate units, but when appropriately constructed, a COP can be the difference in the employment of timely and accurate fires, direct fire employment, and gaining and maintaining momentum. All these components enhance C2 and reduce the risk of fratricide. C2 during a LSCO environment is an art and a necessary science to warfighting against a near-peer threat.

Bio:

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Lieutenant Colonel Farmer commanded the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) from March 2020 to June 2022. His previous assignments include the 2nd Battalion, 9 Infantry Regiment (M), 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment (AASLT), the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment (L), and over three years as a strategic and operational planner on the Joint Staff and U.S. Africa Command.

[i] DATE Knowledge Base, OE Data Integration Network, version 2.11.1, Training and Doctrine Command, Department of the Army, https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/DATE (accessed 27 February 2023).

[ii] Army Training Publication 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations,* Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 01 March 2017, Para 3-51.

[iii] ATP 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations,* 01 March 2017, Para 1-10.

[iv] The multitude of C2 platforms that the modern leader must deal with is substantial. To name but a few (oldest to newest): Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2), Blue Force Tracker (BFT), Joint Capabilities Release (JCR), and Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P). All these platforms provide ease of communication throughout all echelons over lower tactical internet mediums.

[v] While the tactical operations center standard operating procedures (TOCSOP) is technically being phased out of doctrine for the newer doctrinal term, command post standard operating procedures (CPSOP). Due to the duration of the Global War on Terror where the use of TOCSOP became common due to the utilization of the tactical operations center (TOC), TOCSOP is still in common use vernacular.

[vi] ATP 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations,* Appendix C "Command Post Communications," Para C-34 to C-36, Table C-1 "Common Operational Picture Checklist."

[vii] ATP 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations,* 01 March 2017, Para 1-9.

[viii] FMS Web, Army Force Management School (AFMS) Web, *G-3/5/7 Operations, Plans, and Training*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., Last Updated 09 March 2023, https://fmsweb.fms.army.mil/protected/secure/tools.asp (CAC Authorization Required.)

[ix] "Training as we fight" is one of the four principles of training in accordance with Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 7-0, *Training,* Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 31 July 2019. (ADP 7-0, *Training*, is in the process of being updated as of the writing of this article.)

[x] PEO C3T, *Satellite Communications: GRRIP,* Program Executive Office Command Control Communications-Tactical, Department of the Army, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, https://peoc3t.army.mil/tn/grrip.php. (accessed 27 February 2023).