



By Cadet John B. Douglas

During the spring 2020 semester, Army ROTC Cadets at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Naval ROTC Midshipmen at the University of Illinois adapted to the challenges posed by COVID-19 by organizing online Tactical Decisions Games (TDGs) to continue their military education.

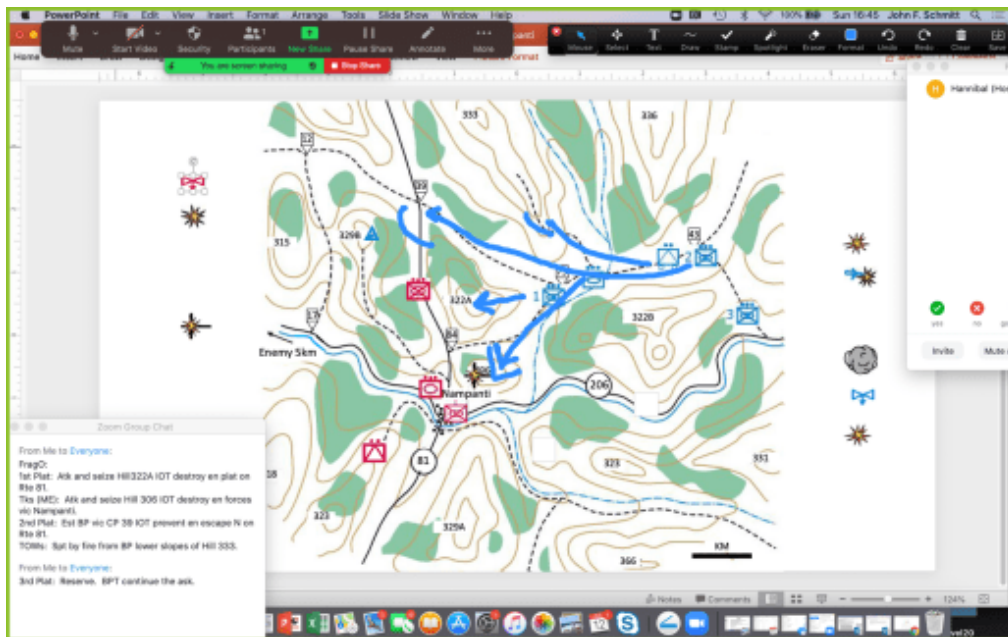
As students prepared to depart the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) campus in Troy, NY, for the 2020 spring break, they were advised to “overpack” in the event the break was extended. The gravity of the impact of COVID-19 was setting in. Spring break was indeed extended, and instruction eventually transitioned online for the remainder of the semester. At the time, I was enrolled in “Evolution of Warfare,” an elective course offered as part of the Reserve Officer Training Course (ROTC) curriculum. Transitioning to taking the course online wasn’t ideal, but it was manageable. However, I considered the outright cancellation of “Military Science: Applied Leadership Lab” a problem, as it created a void in practical training in military skills including offensive and defensive operations, and patrolling. With the realization that the remainder of the semester would be conducted virtually, I began looking for additional ways to continue my military education.

One of the first reading selections assigned in “Evolution of Warfare” was Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1), *Warfighting*. As the son of Marine Colonel Christopher J. Douglas, I was familiar with *MCDP 1* as it was a frequent topic of conversation when the two of us engaged in professional military and tactical discussions. We deliberated options for supplementing the diminished ROTC instruction.

Col Douglas contacted former Marine Major John F. Schmitt, a colleague and friend, the author of MCDP 1, and a pioneer in the use of tactical decision games in the Marine Corps, to inquire if he would consider conducting an online TDG for RPI ROTC Cadets. Schmitt was intrigued by the opportunity to mentor cadets - not to mention more than a little bored from the COVID lock-down - and offered to conduct online TDG sessions for the remainder of the spring semester. Schmitt had served as a Marine Officer Instructor (MOI) at the University of Illinois Naval ROTC and extended the invitation to participate in the professional forum to the current MOI and Marine option midshipmen there. In total, five cadets from RPI, five midshipmen from the University of Illinois, and one midshipman from Penn State participated in the online learning community. Col Douglas was a regular participant, offering insights from his own combat experiences. Also rotating in and out of the sessions were other combat veterans, cognitive scientists, other researchers, and several first responders looking to do something similar in their own field.

This professional learning community had three goals: (1) improve the tactical decision-making skills of the cadets and midshipmen; (2) improve knowledge of tactical concepts, weapons characteristics and employment, terminology, and symbology; and (3) practice issuing combat orders - all in a virtual environment that included ambiguity, uncertainty, unpredictability, changeability, time-pressure, and competing/changing goals. At first it was intimidating for students to have to make tactical decisions, and then defend them, in front of their peers under such conditions. But they were all interested and committed to the opportunity to expand their knowledge, develop their skills, and interact with other like-minded students. Participating students were provided with an invitation to connect and login to a virtual learning space Schmitt created using Zoom. During weekly engagements, participants received a combat order, generated a tactical plan with limited time, rapidly developed a fragmentary order, and awaited a turn to issue a fragmentary order and defend the rationale for their course of action.

Schmitt created a collaborative battle space using Zoom that included chat, voice, and an annotatable map with movable unit symbols.



A screen capture from the TDG, “Contact at Nampanti.”

The focus was always on teaching the students *how* to think, not *what* to think. Students were always expected to explain their decisions and assessments. The most common question Schmitt asked was *Why?* “Why did you decide that?” “Why do you think that?” Schmitt used the scenarios to introduce key tactical concepts like fix-and-flank, tempo, main effort, commander’s intent, the reserve, and surfaces and gaps.

We followed three rules:

- *If you’re in the room, you’re in the game. There is no hiding. It’s important that you feel like you could be put on the spot at any moment. This rule also brings all participants into the conversation and invites all perspectives on the TDG so we all learn from each other.*
- All decisions must be in the form of the orders you will issue. Providing decisions in the form of an order allows for cadets to develop experience, confidence, and competence with this technique as they prepare for issuing combat orders as military officers. There is also a moral element to taking responsibility and acting.
- Leave your rank at the door. It is important that all members speak candidly regardless of rank. The only thing that matters is the quality of your decisions and the strength of your reasoning. As a result, all members use personal call signs to address each other as peers.

Throughout the remainder of the semester, all students developed an enhanced ability to decide, communicate, and act. Schmitt provided feedback on tactical planning, order development under time constraints, and techniques for issuing orders. Fringe benefits included learning doctrinal terminology, map symbology, and weapons capabilities. The weekly TDGs were supplemented with occasional professional articles.

While the ROTC curriculum provides a framework for instruction with respect to Army Regulations (ARs), Field Manuals (FMs), and standardized reports, executing TDGs in this manner enabled interactions and immersion that required critical analysis and synthesis in order to communicate and execute a mission. Lab/field exercises, which grant cadets on-the-job training, are an important facet in cadet development; however, lab can become too linear and predictable. Weekly, cadets receive their missions on Monday, receive operations orders (OPORDS) by Tuesday, attend lab/field training on Thursday (executing a standard yearly curriculum) and conduct an after action review (AAR). As a result, lab can become a check-the-box exercise. Conversely, TDGs, at least as we have done them, are fluid, open-ended and ever changing, offering a greater opportunity to develop critical thinking. The experience has been like no other training I have received.

Shortly after the end of the semester, the Illinois Marine option midshipmen departed for Officer Candidate School, but the RPI cadets requested the opportunity to continue with the training experience. The training continues and has since expanded to include a force-on-force exercise to simulate the chaotic and unpredictable dynamics of two hostile, intelligent forces trying to impose themselves upon the other.

The cadets that participated in these TDGs have expanded our knowledge of military tactics and increased our ability to recognize patterns, assess situations, make decisions, and communicate orders to subordinates. In a recent article, [“Why We All Need to Develop a Daily Habit of Reading,”](#) Army Lieutenant Colonel Joe Byerly states, “The outbreak of war typically catches a nation and its armies by surprise. None of us know if or when we will be called upon to lead formations in battle. This is why time is so critical and we need to make it our ally.” This concept has not been lost on the cadets participating in TDGs for the last four-plus months. Although the on-campus platform of instruction and learning ended in early March, our preparation to become Army officers has continued through challenging TDGs and coaching from seasoned military officers that enabled us to develop tactical skills and competence.

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