



Last month, I had the chance to sit down with COL Robert Born, the commander of Bastogne Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division and talk about his experience as a brigade commander during his recent Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation. He also shared some great insights on mission command, leading at the brigade level, and training in a COVID-19 environment.

Joe: What was your biggest concern coming into your recent JRTC rotation?

COL Born: One of my biggest concerns coming into our JRTC rotation was our brigade's ability to simultaneously plan, prepare, and execute operations because in garrison we have time. Take your typical collective training event. The brigade or battalions take time to plan it in advance on the training calendar. They take the time to conduct leader certification. Then the unit executes the event. Sometimes these steps overlap, but for the most part, they happen sequentially.

In combat and at our training centers, this isn't the case. Units need to be able to do all of

these things simultaneously. And to do this well, you need to develop systems and plans so that your headquarters isn't quickly overwhelmed. For example, at JRTC we had to plan the defense, while preparing for multiple movements to contact and to expand the lodgment, while executing joint forcible entry through vertical envelopment.

So, my goal coming into the rotation was for the brigade to be able to plan 72-96 hours out, prepare 48-72 hours, and execute 24-48 hours out.

Joe: How did you train for that? Did you have SOPs?

COL Born: Normally, a brigade staff doesn't get the opportunity to exercise all of its systems until the brigade field training exercise. So, I asked the division to help. We asked them to support a brigade certification exercise earlier in our training pathway. They provided a great level of exercise support to include serving as our observer controllers and our higher headquarters for the exercise. They also took the place of our maneuver battalions so we could work through our command post functions.

One of the challenges that a brigade commander faces is how to train the brigade staff without disrupting crucial collective training at the battalion level and below. When a brigade staff conducts any kind of mission command exercise, typically the battalions are required to provide personnel to support it. We didn't want to disrupt the training of the cavalry squadron and infantry battalions, so we allowed them to focus on their collective level training.

Instead, I leaned on the artillery battalion who was much further along in their certification process than the maneuver battalions. I also relied on support from the engineer and sustainment battalions.

In the end, we were able to focus on planning, current operations, communications, targeting, fire support planning and execution, and sustainment operations. Having the division's support allowed us to work through the friction of exercising the brigade staff in this type of training environment.

Between this certification exercise, the brigade FTX, and LTP, we were able to get multiple training repetitions in prior to JRTC. I could not have imagined going through that rotation without that training.

Joe: What other benefits did you gain by doing this training before your CTC rotation?

COL Born: Across the brigade, our field grades became more efficient and optimized for purpose. One of the problems you have in most units is that the lanes are muddled between the S3 and XO. In CTC training environments, those two need clearly delineated lanes. Otherwise, it's easy to become quickly disorganized and overwhelmed when the operational tempo increases. So, these training events forced our field grades to figure out who is doing what during the operations process.

Another benefit of these training events was that our planners at the brigade level were able to figure out where to focus their efforts in planning. They learned what fights are brigade fights and what fights are battalion fights. For instance, if you try to get into the weeds and plan every detail of conditions that need to be set in an operation, you will run out of time, and the battalions won't get the time they need to plan their operations.

Finally, these events provided me the opportunity to work on how I communicate intent and guidance during operations, which I found extremely beneficial.

Joe: How important is commander involvement in the planning process?

COL Born: It is absolutely critical that the command be involved in the planning process. I thought it was extremely important to be able to sit down with my staff and describe my vision for how I saw them apply the warfighting functions to the tactical problem we were given.

The trick is to find when to convey guidance to the staff. I found it helpful to give initial guidance before the staff even got started on mission analysis.

No matter how many courses of action I directed my staff to develop, I made sure we wargamed the plan against the enemy's most likely course action. This was where we synchronized warfighting functions in time and space for the operations and developed the details needed to execute.

Joe: What were some of the major differences you found between leading a brigade and leading a squadron at your CTC rotation?

COL Born: Three things stand out: detail, experience, and time. The level of detail that you have to provide to the staff at the battalion and squadron level is much greater than what you have to provide at the brigade level. Additionally, a battalion staff doesn't have the same level of experience as a brigade staff. Finally, the planning timeline is much more compressed at the battalion-level because battalions are often waiting on brigade.

For me, as a brigade commander, I found it challenging to prioritize the decisive operation because of the fluidity of operations. I struggled with where to prioritize my resources. Do I put them with the infantry battalion that is about to execute the decisive operation or do I put them into regenerating the artillery battalion that suffered heavy losses but is critical for the next phase of the operation.

Joe: What advice do you have for field grades getting ready to serve as operations officers or executive officers?

COL Born: One of the first things I tell majors is to give their boss exactly what he or she is asking for (unless they are asking them to do something that is illegal, immoral, or unethical). If the expectations are unclear, seek clarification. A battalion commander has a finite amount of time and when they provide commander's guidance, this time needs to be embraced. Commanders will be out fighting with their companies, they will be out doing battlefield circulation, and they will be attending briefings and rehearsals at the brigade command post. So, they aren't going to spend a lot of time in the battalion command post.

One problem in the field grade ranks is that they are often back in the command post monitoring the fight, or working with the staff on planning. They think they know better than the commander so they deviate from the commander's plan without talking to them first. This is how I've seen organizations become desynchronized.

If they plan to give their commanders something other than what they asked for, I tell them to communicate with them quickly and explain why. In doing so, it prevents the unit from wasting critical planning or execution time and keeps everyone on the same page.

Joe: What did you learn while training your brigade in a COVID-19 environment?

COL Born: I learned patience.

Commanders will have units that suffer unexpected impacts because of the virus, and you have to lead through those.

I also learned that you have to develop thoughtful and measured approaches to training. For example, many commanders want to jump into training as soon as you get back from a leave period. You can't do that with COVID-19. When a unit comes back from a leave period, I would recommend 100% telephonic screening for COVID-19, and then for the first 96 hours only allow key leaders to come back to work. After that, get people tested as required, and start bringing everyone else back in.

Finally, I learned that if you properly screen your folks, take proper precautions, and get Soldiers who had a higher risk of exposure tested, you can go to the field and do some amazing training without having a major breakout during the exercise.

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