

The Top 10 Things I Learned as a Battalion Operations Officer at the National Training Center



by Blair W. Downey

Editor's Note: Over the next week, we will be running a series of articles from 4-70 AR on their lessons learned at the National Training Center (NTC). Each article is unique in that it will present a different perspective from the organization's key staff members. Our hope is that these articles will help prepare you for success in your current or future roles in your organization.

The following are a few ruminations summarizing hastily scribbled notes in my notebook between after action reviews (AARs) and clashes with Blackhorse from the turret of my M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle. I served as the Battalion Operations Officer within an Armored Brigade Combat Team during a scorching summer training session. As I came to realize during the rotation, nearly every one of my S3 peers faced similar challenges and it is likely future S3s would face the same problem set. Time was the critical mission variable I could never get enough of during the rotation. As a battalion, we learned to economize our time through defined roles, staff processes, and fighting products. Hopefully, you can learn a lesson or two from my experience before your own rotation to NTC.

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1. **Field Grade Synergy:** The Battalion Executive Officer (XO) and Operations Officer (S3) are the driving force for staff action and must agree (at least in public). Do not fall into the trap that the S3 plans and executes while the XO focuses on sustainment functions. Have the conversation as peers and with the Battalion Commander on the expectations. A successful technique for our unit is the XO runs MDMP as a process, runs the rehearsals, and fights the Main Command Post (MCP). The S3 develops the operational guidance into a detailed, executable plan, supervises the creation of the Information Collection Plan and Fires Plan, manages transitions, and fights from the Tactical Command Post (TAC). Do not devolve into the fallacy that your roles are exclusive. They overlap and are mutually complementary.
2. **Enforce Clarity in Orders:** I tried not to wince after every OPOD brief when the Company Commanders were asked for questions. Questions from subordinates are not frustrating; it may mean your order is not cogent or complete. Time is constrained and no order will ever be as complete as you would like it to be. We attempted to focus on the minimum products the companies needed to execute the mission; operational graphics, direct fire control measures, fire support control measures, fire support execution matrix / target list worksheet, an execution matrix and a conditions check prior to mission execution. This helped us focus limited time into areas requiring detail and economize areas where conceptual planning would have to do.
3. **Coach the Staff:** You and the XO have the most experience with the MDMP - leverage that to raise the band of excellence in staff products and analysis. I joined the Battalion just before NTC and after most of their collective training was complete. I assumed the staff was hardened from multiple planning sessions in the MDMP. While they had familiarity, they still needed coaching throughout the process. Remember that you cannot "set and forget" the staff and assume you will come back to a completed order. Expect running estimates to miss relevant deductions and war-gaming to go slowly. The staff may not be smooth in MDMP at battle period one, but if you invest the time throughout to coach, they will be by the last battle period.
4. **Checklists Enforce Completeness:** Early in the rotation, we would vaguely reference "once conditions are set" but fail to concretely describe those to subordinates. Eventually, we developed a Conditions Checklist that established GO/NO GO criteria prior to every mission. This simplified priorities of work for the companies and ensured the Battalion was positioning assets to enable mission accomplishment. This evolved into a radio netcall very akin to a scene from NASA's Mission Control where companies would report, "GO." A few items to consider: are our mortars in the MFP that supports this phase? Where is your Role I established? Have graphics been distributed on analog and digital? Do the companies have the updated version of the graphics and fighting products?

5. **Enforce Separation Between FUOPS and CUOPS:** Transition the plan so your planner can focus on the transition to the next fight. We were successful in producing an order and rehearsing during every battle period. This was enabled by a strict focus on planning transitions. For us the planner wrote the first FRAGO after the OPOD Brief and the CHOPS executed the rehearsals and conditions checks with the battle captains. Not only did this free the planner to begin the MDMP, but ensured the team executing the plan understood the triggers and sequence of the fight. Ultimately, if you fail at this your companies will not have much time to develop their own plans and orders - give them their time.
6. **A COP is Worth Everything.** Find a common way of referencing the terrain. Early in the rotation, we littered our graphics with too many control measures. It clogged the map and added too much for the Company Commanders to manage. Our Brigade spent the time developing a useful 1:50,000 map with common checkpoints similar to a TIRS/GIRS map. Referencing these known points made it simple to utilize ground control measures (GCMs) only when needed and we plotted many checkpoints, ambulance exchange points (AXPs), and target reference points (TRPs) from these common graphics. It also made it simple to operate from the same map and develop graphics commonly down to the platoon level. Spend the time before the rotation agreeing on a common map, produce numerous copies, and fight from it.
7. **Iterate the Details of the Plan with the Commander Often.** The commander understands how he/she wants to fight the plan probably during the brigade OPOD brief. Prior to each step of MDMP, we formed a cabal of the XO, S3, and Planner to receive the commander's refined guidance as he developed greater fidelity on the future fight. This prevented wild plans forming or deviating from the planning guidance and allowed the commander to course correct the staff quickly. Ultimately, it prevents you from going back to the previous step and wasting precious staff time.
8. **C2 Node Transitions:** When the TAC splits from the MCP, it bifurcates capabilities, reporting and situational understanding. That could lead to furthering the fog of war if a deliberate process is not observed to manage the transition. Ultimately, the capabilities that remained with the MCP were based on the need for network connectivity. Our Advanced Field Artillery Targeting and Direction System (AFATADS) and Intelligence systems craved bandwidth to inform the current fight. When jumping the MCP it created a gap in those systems we needed to mitigate. Deliberately plan when you transition the MCP during the fight to ensure you are not coordinating for non-organic fires when the network is on the move.

Moreover, transitioning in time and space on the battlefield is the easy part. Ultimately, you will need to handover information that ensures common understanding of the operational

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environment while the other node is jumping. A good technique is a warfighting function update on the battlefield followed by the locations of friendly units, an updated enemy picture, location of fires assets, new control measures and changes to the plan. Develop and spend the time rehearsing this transition so that it is routine.

9. **Rehearsals:** If it is worth doing, it is worth rehearsing. I learned too often that the OPORD made sense to me because I was a part of creating the plan but it was not the case for the whole staff. Not only did rehearsals serve to practice the expected outcome or contingencies, but also it ensured the group executing the order understood the sequence and when we had deviated from the plan.
10. **OC/Ts are on Your Team:** Everyone knows this, but the OC/Ts are not targeting you to point out failures. Sometimes it stings to hear the areas you could be doing better and it may seem like the negatives are outweighing the positives. Your Critter Teammate is not there to lord knowledge over you. They do have the benefit of seeing the same thing happen a few times and can anticipate the likely outcome.

The demands of an NTC rotation on young-field grade officers is not tribal lore, it truly is a crucible. The success of your rotation is not the sum of the tactical victories in “the box”. As a Battalion S3 and field grade officer, you have the unique opportunity to be a principal trainer to the staff. Preparation of yourself, the staff, and your mutual products will save effort during time constrained operational windows. Ultimately, your role is to generate shared understanding with higher headquarters, subordinate units, and across the battalion staff. Time spent sharpening the operations process before you enter your turret is time well-spent!

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