



By Larry Kay

Any Soldier who has been on a division or corps staff knows the value and importance of a warfighter exercise (WFX). For those that do not, a WFX is the principle training event for division and corps staffs; a warfighter is to a division or corps what a CTC rotation is to a brigade. As a result, when a headquarters is scheduled to conduct a warfighter, staffs must prepare for it like brigades and battalions prepare for a CTC. Below are some helpful observations for officers assigned to division and corps staffs preparing for a WFX.

1. **Strategic Context.** The WFX's strategic context is usually consigned to the oft-

ignored “Road to War” PowerPoint slide, which appears at the beginning of the operations order brief. However, the strategic context informs the command and staff about more than just the operational environment. It sets the gravity and tone for the exercise. Most WFX scenarios involve joint, multinational, multi-corps, multi-domain, large-scale combat operations in overseas operational environments. In other words, a WFX simulates warfare on a scope and scale of hundreds of thousands of service members from multiple countries, involving billions of dollars in equipment. For a moment, consider the simulated decisions which would have preceded warfare of this scale: congressional authorization; possibly a declaration of war; mobilization of the National Guard and the reserves; countless intergovernmental resolutions; and depending on the location, it may even require an invocation of NATO’s Article V collective defense resolution. Leaders should consider and reflect upon these facts and assumptions when planning in a WFX.

2. **Theory of Victory.** Everyone thinks they know how to win a battle, but it does not matter unless the staff (and unit) understands how to win the battle they are currently in, against the enemy they are currently facing, in the operational environment they find themselves, and with the forces they have been assigned. Therefore, before starting any gated training strategy for a WFX, the commander and staff require a clear “theory of victory,” which is essentially a hypothesis describing, ‘If we apply these resources in this way, in this environment, we will achieve our stated objectives.’ Clearly articulating the logic and risks in this theory of victory is essential to the development of coherent plans. However, the theory of victory is only as good as it is understood, and therefore a socialization plan should be incorporated into the train-up, especially if the WFX will have National Guard and reserve units participating. Once the theory of victory is developed, every member of the staff, and every subordinate unit (!), must understand it and actively incorporate its logic into their staff work and plans. One way to do this is to make it the first page of your TACSOP and title it, “How 9th ID fights.”

3. **Operational Reach.** As an element of [operational art](#), operational reach involves maintaining the natural tension between endurance, momentum, and protection. Warfighters are not lost or won in decisive battles of the Napoleonic era. They are lost or won slowly, painfully, and ingloriously in the rear, because commanders cannot maintain an aggressive tempo at the expense of the protection and security of their support and [rear area](#). A light infantry battalion assigned to the MEB is never enough. Therefore, when economizing forces, smartly apply more, not less, combat power and mobility to the rear area. One way to look at a warfighter is that it is the Army's test to see if commanders and staffs understand the importance of maintaining operational reach. One way to extend the limits of operational reach is to move the division support area (DSA) forward, towards the forward line of troops. The DSA is the single most important sustaining activity for the division. When the mission and operational variables are supportive, planners must consider the timing of the move and the associated risks and rewards.
4. **Experiment and Risk.** Multi-domain operations (MDO) still puzzle Army leaders. How leaders conduct MDO - whether they do what they have always done or they try something new - remains unclear. However, WFXs present the perfect opportunity to experiment, combine old tactics, research and replicate historical anomalies, and create something new, whether it be tactical, organizational, or technical. Units should demonstrate mastery of the fundamentals and their TACSOP, but once complete - manage and accept risk, for it is only by daring, especially when the stakes are so low, that we can extend the frontiers of the possible. Finally, focus on the effects - even though they might be "white carded" - because most potential conflicts begin and end with information operations, non-kinetic effects, and cyber-electromagnetic warfare that current simulations cannot replicate.
5. **Use the HHBn.** Corps and division staffs have a lot on their plate during a WFX. Maintaining an effective targeting cycle alone is time, resource, and manpower exhaustive. Each corps and division has a staff within a staff: the headquarters and

headquarters battalion (HHBn). Approximately half the size of a typical battalion, the HHBn can still plan and manage its own operations, the most important of which is to sustain the division staff and command posts: division main, division TAC (DTAC), and rear command post (RCP). However, they can do more. Assign the HHBn with the responsibility to plan and execute the displacement and emplacement of the command posts. Require the battalion commander to chair a displacement working group, which coordinates and integrates with the G3, G5, DIVARTY, CHOPs, RCP, DTAC, MEB, CAB, and the sustainment brigade. This will divest some burdens from the G3 and plans sections, while orienting the HHBn on its primary purpose.

6. **Plans to Operations Transitions.** With the exception of the targeting process, the [plans to operations transition](#) is the most important process in a warfighter. Nothing self-induces more staff resentment than a handful of planners in a tent who hold on dearly to an imperfect plan only to finally share it with everyone else by the time it is too late. It is absolutely vital that the COS and G3 ensure that plans are: (1) socialized by, with, and through every functional cell; (2) transitioned from the plans to future operations cell based on the plans horizon and not the quality of the plan; and (3) ensure that the current operations (CUOPS) cell understands the plan before execution. Most divisions and corps have a series of staff exercises or command post exercises prior to their warfighter. Structure aside, the plans to operations transition must be practiced tactically and in garrison in order for it to work in the warfighter. It requires months of failing to communicate effectively to learn to communicate effectively. Practice now, often, and always -operationalize your headquarters in a garrison environment to condition success in a tactical one.

7. **Leader Development Plan.** Command and control (C2) of the division staff and its subordinate brigades, imbued with the mission command philosophy, is the bread and butter of the division staff. Therefore, the initial phase of any division-level leader professional development program should be to develop the staff to execute C2 through the operations process. Once the staff can demonstrate basic proficiency of

the operations process, then it transitions to tactics. Leader development is a *continuous* and purposeful process that can include assigned professional readings, and staff rides. Ultimately, however, the division commander schedules leader development activities that incorporate the mission command philosophy and discuss responsibilities within the operations process. [These activities](#) focus on the principles of mission command and systems that synchronize activities to enable the commander to balance the art of command and the science of control. It is the institutional professional military education's responsibility to describe what wet-gap crossings and combined arms breaches are, but it is the division and corps responsibility to instruct and discuss how they will be executed, by focusing on C2.

Warfighters are as demanding as they are rewarding. However, staffs must take warfighters seriously, challenging themselves and the organization to win our nation's wars. At the same time, commanders and staffs can expedite the shared understanding required to achieve desired objectives if they condition the staff with a theory of victory, articulating how they intend to fight. Moreover, the profession of arms requires - demands - that commanders and staffs understand the principles and elements of operational art which history reveal as prerequisites to victory. As commanders and staffs explore tactical opportunities within the simulation, they should also consider how what they do in this exercise may influence how the Army does business in the future. Therefore, test tactical boundaries, try something different, see EW from an engineer's perspective, use deception, even though it might discomfort you, and then share your discoveries and failures with the rest of the force. Additionally, maximize everyone in your headquarters, sharing the burden of the fight with other field grade officers and commanders. Finally, let the expression "cradle to grave" go to the grave, and enforce the importance of integrating cells in ensuring the operations process operates as intended. This is not an exclusive list, because thousands of officers have participated in warfighters for many years. However, I have confidence in saying that if a staff executes in accordance with the aforementioned recommendations, then their warfighter will be a greater and more fruitful experience.

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