



by J David Thompson

“What did we do that made us so effective?”

A few weeks after returning from a deployment to the Levant, one of my Team Sergeants asked me this question after he and his Team Leader had a chance to reflect on the past rotation. One thing that struck them: this was the most effective deployment they had ever had. They had reports reach the highest levels of the U.S. Government; multi-star General Officers and Combatant Command Commanders were reading and sharing their reports; the interagency community regularly relied on them for insights; and more. This team was not the only effective team either. In other missions Civil Affairs Captains served as Ground Force Commanders for Cross-Functional Teams (CFT) that included Special Forces and Psychological Operations; Team medics saved dozens of lives; Teams had Embassy Political Officers tasked to support them; the Department of State included a “Civil Affairs Comments” section on applicable Cables; and more. Despite this effectiveness, the Team

leadership could not identify anything beyond the basics beyond our training pathway. “That’s exactly the point,” I responded. “We did the basics very well. There’s no magic trick. We did the basics over and over until we got really good at them.”

The purpose of this article is to help capture lessons learned so that other organizations can continue to build on what we developed. The experiences gained come from my time as Commander of A Company, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Special Operations) (Airborne). However, nothing in this paper is going to be much different than what all of my peers likely know. I will not provide any one-step tricks to make organizations more impactful but feel the lessons I learned extend beyond my experiences. (One thing that cannot be replicated is the exceptional people I was able to serve alongside; the Company had outstanding Team Members and headquarters support.)

Ultimately, there are five main takeaways that can be replicated across any organization: 1) Team-led training in semi-ambiguous situations, 2) building trust with the supported headquarters, 3) understanding how civil information reaches the Intelligence and Diplomatic communities, 4) quality writing, and 5) knowing the area. While perhaps underwhelming insights, these are some of the most effective things I was able to capture that can be replicated.

Team-led Training throughout the Training Cycle. In a Special Operations deployment, operations are generally bottom-up driven. To accomplish their mission, they must be able to apply Commander’s intent to their specific area of operations with little to no oversight. None of my Teams were going to be in the same country as me. Therefore, we needed to use the training cycle to build trust between each other. They needed to be comfortable planning, resourcing, and executing their own missions. I needed to be comfortable not having complete oversight and trusting them to execute professionally. I also needed to practice communicating a clear intent so that Teams could operate towards a desired end state.

In laying out the training pathway, we had three gates: individual certification, Team certification, and Company validation. Each phase built into the next, and we maximized each event by a concept we called ‘fighting to the field.’ Fighting to the field forced us to see each event as an opportunity to work on other things. For instance: if the main event was land navigation, Teams submitted concepts of the operation (CONOPs) detailing black and gold routes on moving from the Motorpool to the training location. Teams exercised their communications PACE plan with the Civil Military Operations Cell (CMOC), who trained on battle tracking Teams. While waiting between day and night land navigation, Teams would use the time to train on other tasks. (My Teams specifically liked to see who

could create the most challenging conditions for gaining IV access, and they used a lot of the extra training time to focus on enhanced medical capabilities. This proved valuable as Teams saved dozens of partner forces' lives.)

In individual certification, the Team Leadership certified individuals on Skill Level 1 tasks. In this phase, each Team was assigned a main event to give the Team practice on planning, resourcing, and executing a collective event. Other Teams would then 'fight to the field' as part of the overall event. We used the 'Best Archer Competition' (Company name was 'Archer') as the individual certification to enable competition and have a little fun. By utilizing an iterative process, Teams had multiple repetitions on planning, resourcing, and executing training. By the time we got to Team Collective, Teams were comfortable conducting all the coordination for effective training. This phase culminated with Team Leadership providing an out-brief to the Battalion Command team, which gave them experience talking to senior leaders in a professional manner.

Team collective was the heart of our training. Each month was structured into crawl, walk, run, and R3 (retrain, recover, and refine standard operating procedures (SOP)) weeks. Each month had a specific mission essential task (MET) for Teams to train on the supporting collective tasks (SCT) under that MET. The crawl and walk weeks were entirely Team-led. Teams submitted CONOPs on their training plans. The run week was Company-led. The CMOC and I created field training exercises (FTX) that tested Teams on the SCT under the MET. We used the training and evaluation outlines (T&EO) for each SCT as the grading criteria. Teams knew what they were being tested on, which enabled them to properly structure their training. We often used outside graders to provide a fresh perspective. The R3 week was a hybrid. Teams conducted training based on shortcomings identified during the run-week. This phase culminated in a situational training exercise (STX), where Teams tested against the recurring SCTs under multiple METs (called 'Civil Affairs Battle Tasks'). The Company Headquarters and CMOC used Team Collective to train on Company-level functions. Teams then did another out-brief with the Battalion leadership before we moved into Company collective.

Company collective was the Company's opportunity to validate against the METs. In this subset the focus was more on the Company integrating with the supported Special Operations Task Force (SOTF). Teams used this opportunity to dive deeper on the problem sets they would face while deployed, integrate with adjacent units, and further mission analysis. This phase culminated with the Company conducting an external evaluation exercise (EXEVAL) with the supported headquarters.

Given that Special Operations Forces (SOF) operate from the bottom-up, I rarely gave

Teams more than an intent and desired end state. Teams received just one or two operations orders (OPORD) through the training cycle, and they were only to enable mission analysis in certain training events. While this uncertainty created some frustrations at times, it paid dividends later. Teams were comfortable stepping into ambiguous situations, figuring out their role in what needed to be done, and then executing. I also became better at providing clearer tasks, conditions, and standards.

One additional note on our structure: we rarely conducted training on Monday and Friday. Mondays were devoted to maintenance and services—with any training being focused on that equipment. Fridays were devoted primarily to personnel readiness. This allowed individuals to forecast appointments or maximize family time.

Building Trust with Your Supported Headquarters. The SOTF Commander gave me a great compliment at the end of our rotation: he told me that it felt like we should be going back to their home station (instead of our own home station, which was a different base). During our training cycle we had five significant touchpoints with our supported headquarters. These included: a communications exercise (COMEX), key leader engagement (KLE) training in target language, staff exercise (STAFFEX), EXEVAL, and mission analysis.

During several of the training events, Teams integrated with the B Teams (AOB) and Operational Detachment - Alphas (ODA) that they deployed alongside. Teams used the training events to build trust; develop CFT tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs); and socialize ideas for what they wanted to accomplish while deployed. Given that the Teams had so much integrated training, they were able to hit the ground running immediately on deployment. The ODAs and Civil Affairs Teams had mutually beneficial relationships focused on using their unique skills to achieve a common objective. Additionally, the CMOC was able to integrate battle drills to effectively integrate with the SOTF staff.

The multiple touchpoints during training was incredibly beneficial and appreciated. Multiple leaders in the SOTF stated that they had never seen a Civil Affairs Company so present during multiple training events. A lot of credit also goes to the SOTF staff for their willingness and desire to integrate early and often.

Understanding How Civil Information Reaches the Intelligence and Diplomatic Communities. The Teams' reports had unprecedented outreach. Multiple reports helped inform the highest levels of the U.S. Government. By informing senior leaders—both military and civilian—about the nature of the problem, our Teams received resources and reprioritization of efforts to help them achieve their mission. For Civil Affairs, this is something most Companies dream of reaching (we want to know that our reporting

matters). Being able to see the effects of quality reporting reinforced the importance of ensuring the reports reach a broad audience.

Early in the training, I exposed Teams to serialized reporting. We then refreshed on the process shortly before deploying. Without going into details on the process, we ensured Teams understood: 1) how to write for intelligence, 2) how to conduct a proper debriefing, and 3) the importance of serialized reporting (Intelligence Information Reports (IIR) or Cables). From my experience, I have seen quality reporting lose its outreach by only staying in the operational reporting chain. Situational reports (SITREPs) lose context and important details as they progress higher. Serialized reporting enabled the intelligence and diplomatic communities to directly access Teams' raw reports.

We also found what could be declassified and shared in open source media. Teams had multiple projects and initiatives through the headquarters' official social media pages and in credible news outlets. People less inclined to read serialized reporting could see some of what our Teams were doing and the effect they were achieving.

Quality, Regular Writing. Writing is a skill that needs practice and feedback. During the training cycle Teams submitted weekly situation reports (SITREPs). Even though I generally knew what they were doing, the SITREPs gave them opportunities to write and gave me the opportunity to provide feedback on grammar and sentence structure.

Upon taking Command, I provided some guidelines and rules for effective writing:

1. Keep sentences to around 10 words.
2. Use active voice. Active voice is when the person doing the action comes before the action completed. Active: David wrote this sentence. Passive: This sentence was written by David.
3. Grammar matters. There's a big difference between "Let's eat Grandma," and "Let's eat, Grandma."
4. Structure for SITREP paragraphs: 1) what happened, 2) implications of operations, 3) way ahead.
5. Don't make the reader guess which lines of effort (LOE) or operational priorities your efforts supported.

After a few weeks, there was a noticeable jump in the quality of Teams' reports. The reports were clearer, succinct, and provided sufficient information. When Teams deployed, there was no lag in learning how to write effectively. They had already written effectively for a year. Their effective writing also enabled easier production of IIRs and Cables.

Knowing Your Area. The last major takeaway was telling Teams early where they were going to deploy. This helped Teams build the knowledge base to operate effectively. Teams connected with Teams two rotations prior while those Teams were still deployed. Once those Teams redeployed, my Teams were able to have quality discussions on training, equipment, and operational considerations. My Teams also observed the pre-deployment brief for the rotation preceding us. They observed the questions being asked by the headquarters, Commander's concerns, and discussions that ensued. They maintained regular discussions with these Teams throughout the predecessor's rotation. Our relief-in-place (RIP) began before our predecessors even deployed. Teams observed an entire rotation start to finish. This allowed Teams to have a solid understanding of the operating environment.

The First Sergeant and I conducted analysis before recommending where Teams deployed. We used a balancing approach that considered: Team preference; skills, knowledge, and abilities (SKAs); professional development; and psycho-social health. I generally believe people will work harder when they are excited about the mission. Therefore, I took preference into account.

For SKAs, I was fortunate to have a few native speakers in the Company. It made sense to deploy them to those countries, if possible.

For professional development, we looked at the individuals' previous rotations to see where they may have professional gaps. Training to build future leaders does not just happen in garrison.

For psycho-social health, we tried to balance deploying operating environments. If a person had a more permissive previous deployment, I was apt to suggest a more combat-heavy deployment. If the person had multiple back-to-back combat rotations, I suggested a more permissive environment. We also looked at family situations to see if anyone would need to redeploy for the birth of a child, attend professional military education, and other life events. As we balanced these factors we provided our recommendations to the Battalion Command team for their decision.

Conclusion. As stated in the beginning, nothing in this should be ground breaking. If you made it this far, I appreciate you taking the time—even if the recommendations are underwhelming. I was fortunate to have a Battalion Commander that focused on developing subordinate leaders and invested a lot in my professional education. I learned a lot from him over my 20 months of Command. He provided his Company Commanders a few reading excerpts early in Command that proved helpful. One of the [books he recommended](#) was *The*

Score Takes Care of Itself by Bill Walsh. The main thing I remember from the reading was to focus on the process. If we had a good process and did the right things well, we would be effective. Throughout training and deployment, I tried hard to focus on the process. I am sure my Team Leaders got tired of me asking “What process did we use for X?” or “Where are we in this process?” Nonetheless, focusing on the process for the things above helped us have a successful training plan and deployment. I hope it helps you.

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