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Army units at every echelon struggle to meet mission and training requirements due to lack of creativity, critical thought, and disciplined initiative. While repetition and trauma facilitate tactical and technical competence in training, they do not help units overcome these shortcomings. As an Army, we often practice singular solutions for singular problems. For a division-level exercise, this means that we only experience one way to do a wet gap crossing. At the Company level, we practice a singular way to conduct a combined arms breach. Yet, many of the great tactical and strategic victories in warfare have come from daring innovation. From scaling the cliffs of Abraham to the cliffs of Pointe Du Hoc, from the landing at Incheon, to the Anbar Awakening, some of our greatest victories have worked outside of the traditional confines of doctrinal lessons.

Army corps and division headquarters train to meet the complex demands of Large-Scale

Combat Operations (LSCO) by way of [Warfighter Exercises](#) (WFXs). WFXs, like many Army exercises, tend to fight the same simulated enemy in familiar terrain and with consistent training objectives. The veterans of multiple rotations are often the greatest perpetrators of breaking the fourth wall and violating the performance convention sought out in these costly exercises. [Maslow's Hammer](#) is a logical fallacy that posits when one has a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Although the [Mission Command Training Program](#) curates a world-class simulation for training units, the bounds of cost, time and ingenuity constrain the training value within a ten-day exercise. Despite the Army's [best efforts](#) to replicate LSCO in a WFX, the training audience often fights the simulation rather than assessing how the simulation can more broadly inform real-world performance and decision-making.

One reason for a lack of innovative thinking is inefficient manual, time-intensive systems. Staffs are [generally overloaded](#) with the minutiae of garrison duties, antiquated paper-based staff processes, and PowerPoint-centric operational planning in an age where private sector equivalent organizations find innovative solutions using large data models, cloud-based computing, and automations. We don't have the cognitive bandwidth to develop similar solutions because we're too busy "knocking down the 50 meter targets" of daily operations. Most assuredly, any Fortune 500 company inclined to such thinking will be outcompeted and eventually bankrupted.

Similarly, commanders who frame an assessment plan for LSCO based on training leave themselves vulnerable to being 'bankrupted' on future battlefields. The credibility of an assessment plan depends not on whether the division achieved its tactical objectives in the simulation, but rather on how well the processes can translate broadly to real-world operations in wide-ranging operational environments.

Assessment is a continuous process where staff observe and evaluate the operational environment and the impact of friendly unit actions against their mission to better inform the commander. Assessments are used to evaluate the results of tactical actions and attempt to reveal biases, errant assumptions, or poor systems. With situational awareness and decision space, commanders can use assessments to fix their organization or accomplish a mission. They help the commander understand the current state of the operational environment, visualize the progress of an operation, and track if they are falling behind. The staff then compares an assessment against the stated intent and adjusts the plan, as necessary, to set conditions to achieve the commander's end state. Recent history provides [numerous examples](#) of how military and government leaders succeed or fail to change strategies in response to an evaluation of performance. Operations Research and Systems Analysts (ORSAs) are assigned to echelons above brigade in order to solve the Army's problems by leveraging data and applying analytical methods. In tactical settings, ORSAs

facilitate assessment working groups and provide the staff with more efficient tools to use and share data.

Units must build and codify systems to better leverage the staff's talents. A talented ensemble will develop creative solutions and overcome the nuances between the rapidly executed assessments in a bounded military exercise and the more variable assessments conducted in large-scale combat. To this end, creativity is bounded by the perception of factors affecting assessments, to include the utility of metrics, battlefield geometry, and the sunk cost fallacy as it pertains to planning efforts. The assessment and planning horizons are, by necessity, much shorter in a WFX to stress the staff's systems for rapid refinement in an uncertain, dynamic, and chaotic environment. Stress applied to assessments tends to induce a collapsed time horizon.

Assessments are only as valuable as they are accurate, measurable, and actionable. The staff is responsible for informing the commander's decisions by developing clear, actionable metrics. Plans teams must remain agile enough to honestly consider alternate plans, especially when preparing to execute high-risk operations in LSCO.

### **Assessment Horizon**

[Recent real-world evidence](#) confirms the effectiveness of targeting threat logistics nodes, commands posts, and service support units. Despite their success in disrupting the enemy, WFXs do not support these types of shaping operations. This is likely due to the opportunity cost of desynchronizing and degrading OPFOR's ability to project combat power. Because WFXs fall short in simulating the scale of maneuver spaces and the logistical challenges associated with stretched lines of communication, commanders and staff fail to develop an appreciation of constrained logistics. Commanders are responsible for establishing favorable tactical conditions to enable an asymmetric advantage for their subordinate units to contend with highly capable adversaries. Limited opportunities to effectively practice this art are presented during a warfighter exercise. In a LSCO fight, the amount of time available for shaping operations will be greater to balance casualties with combat power employment. More deliberate shaping operations will lead to a more detailed assessment framework. While the tempo of planning and assessment horizons in a realistic LSCO environment is variable, the rigor behind staff analysis and assessments is also proportional to the amount of time available. The Army's cavalier attitude toward casualties in training is a byproduct of the time constraints of large-scale training. The sobering realization that casualties are no longer notional in LSCO will permeate through all staff processes to create additional pressure to mitigate risk to forces. A more thorough and rigorous assessment framework in a realistic LSCO scenario will more carefully weigh minimizing casualties in

the absence of an artificial time constraint. While the Army must be prepared to fight with casualty rates as high as those seen during WWII and the Korean War, commanders must rise to the level of their creativity rather than fall to the level of training.

### **Measures of Effectiveness: Accuracy vs. Utility.**

The analysis performed by an Assessment Working Group at the division level requires trust and empowerment from the Chief of Staff. Because an assessment working group is a whole-of-staff effort, the Chief of Staff is uniquely suited to direct staff energy. Trust is even more important because assessments must assume the risk of being forward-looking. An assessment must be both accurate and actionable to provide value to the commander. Additionally, it must be given far enough in advance to adjust plans, coordinate for support from higher HQ, mitigate risk, and exploit opportunities. As assessments are evaluated further out in time, the probability of an assessment being correct decreases. The accuracy and actionability of an assessment must therefore achieve the appropriate balance in the context of the operational environment. The assessment team must be willing to assume the risk of being incorrect to provide the commander with [decision space and maintain staff planning horizons](#). An excessively risk-averse Assessment Working Group will ultimately generate a greater risk to mission by degrading planning horizons and limiting the Commander's flexibility.

### **LSCO at a distance**

The U.S. Army's [most recent occurrence of LSCO](#) over an extended distance and time occurred during the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. The forces and distances employed in the invasion of Iraq are a similar approximation of the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Official assessments indicating the [premature culmination](#) of Russian Ground Forces in Ukraine were reported to result from the inability to [mass combat power and sustain forces](#). This demonstrates the criticality of securing lines of communication, logistical support elements, and command posts against threats in the rear area. Even the US Army's largest CTC, the National Training Center, provides an insufficient training corridor to practice contested logistics and operations in the rear area. While a [Warfighter simulation](#) provides sufficient battle maneuver space, the scope of the exercise does not provide adequate space and time to apply logistical stress due to the previously mentioned mutually exclusive training objectives covered during a ten-day WFX. WFXs occur in an operational area [smaller than what should be reasonably expected](#) of a division or corps in an actual LSCO. Despite past success, the US Army lacks experience in distance and time to address the lessons informed from emergent threats. While the [DEFENDER-Europe](#) annual large-scale training exercise will help establish a greater understanding of the influences,



circumstances, and effects of a regional LSCO environment, the ability to practice interoperability and build preparedness within a division is overshadowed by the broader strategic objectives of a U.S. Army and NATO-led joint exercise.

### **The Dilemma of Practicing High-Risk Operations**

Wet gap crossing and combined breaching operations, which are the most difficult and sometimes necessary operations conducted by the Army, are often primary training objectives for LSCO preparation. Yet in our desire to focus on these tasks, we teach a singular solution for complex problems. While the importance of practicing these high-risk operations cannot be understated, leaders must avoid substituting confidence and competence in performing arduous tasks with the common sense and pragmatism of seeking an [alternative](#) course of action. Maslow's hammer can lead to parochial thinking and an over-reliance on familiar patterns of training. While rehearsing high-risk operations will lower residual risk to force, commanders and staff must see beyond the problem in front of them in a rigidly defined area of operations. Consider all available options such as deception, additional time, or coordinating enablers from higher to further shape force ratios. Must you conduct that high-risk wet gap crossing or air assault or can you coordinate to have the division boundaries redrawn to obtain a better maneuver corridor? While an aggressive tempo can overwhelm and limit the enemy's ability to mass combat power and concentrate fires, the achievement of the operational end state should also be considered through a creative lens in the interest of preserving a larger proportion of combat power for future operations.

### **The Lifeblood of Creativity**

Information gleaned through assessments must be viewed as a currency to be gladly exchanged for preserving combat power. By integrating the entire staff into the assessment process, leaders are provided with better analysis and a more holistic understanding of how to see ourselves, our adversaries, and the myriad of variables influencing an operation. Creative thinking emerges from this level of shared understanding. While a warfighter exercise teaches organizations how to fight, a lack of metacognition and operational discernment will only allow units to get more efficient at achieving a predictable level of mediocrity. As commanders and staff coalesce to become more lethal through the stimulus and stress from a LSCO simulation, the systems and processes must be agile and robust enough to translate to a broad range of realistic operational environments. Leaders who understand how to leverage assessments within their organizations will find themselves with a communicative and cross-functional staff aligned in purpose and focused on applying their creative energy in an effective medium.

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