



by Gary McDonald and Ron Sprang

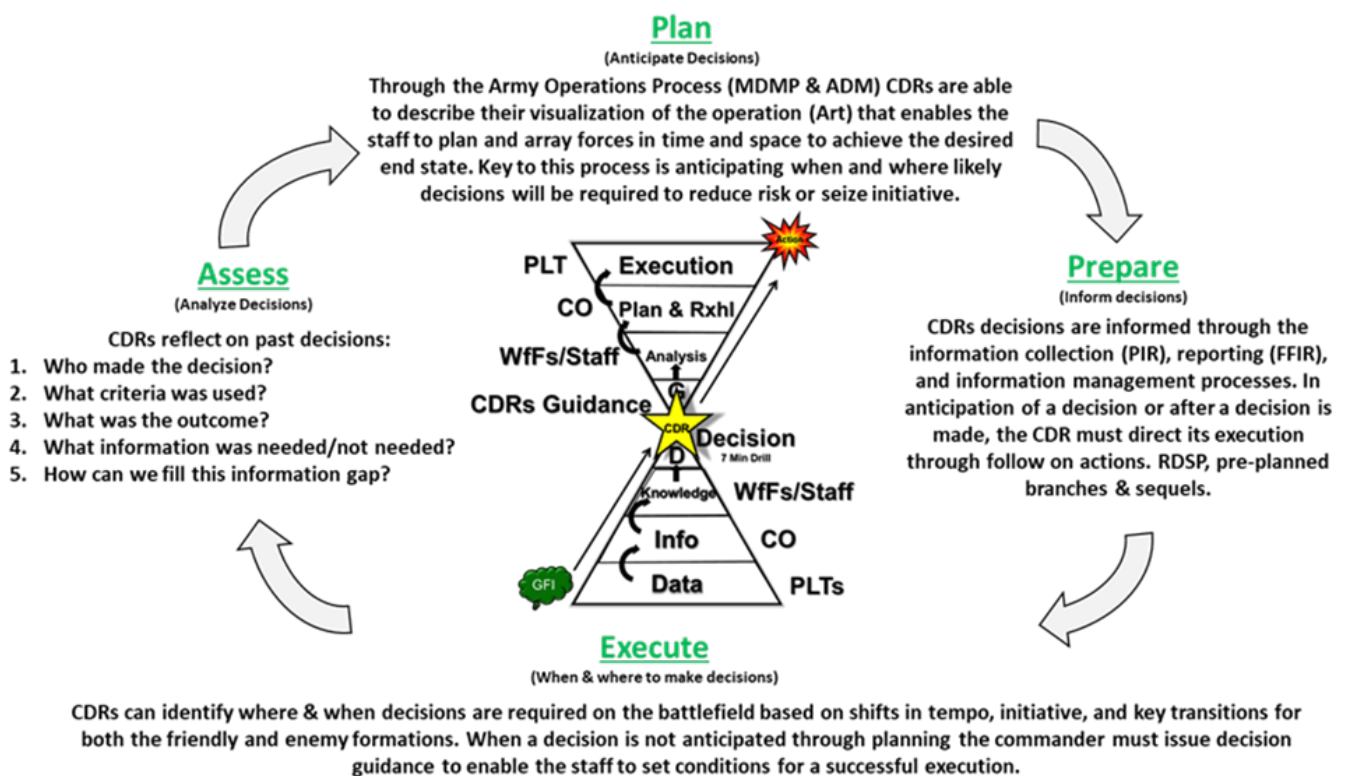
It is D-Day, June 6 1944, Dog Green Sector, Omaha Beach, the waves crash against the beach. Countless Higgins boats race to the shore to deliver the first wave of young warriors to the fight. “Clear the ramp, 30 seconds.” German machine guns and artillery break the silence, tearing through the air. Soldiers struggle to get to the beach and cover as their friends fall by their side. CPT Miller, played by Tom Hanks in Saving Private Ryan, leads his Soldiers amidst the noise, chaos of combat, stress and pressure to get off the beach. He seems locked in himself, until he is asked that one critical question, “What do we do now, Sir?”

One of the most important roles of the commander is to make sound and timely decisions with limited and imperfect information. [ADP 6-0](#) tells us that “The art of command comprises the creative and skillful exercise of authority through timely decision making and leadership.”

Commanders can use the operations process to anticipate, inform, and implement decisions during conflict. [Commanders](#), supported by the staff through command post operations,

“assess the operation’s progress, make decisions, and direct the application of combat power to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative...through assessment: monitoring current operations and evaluating progress; making decisions to exploit opportunities or counter threats; directing action: apply combat power at decisive points and times.”

Time and timing are critical aspects of the tempo of decision making and must be accounted for in the operations process. Tempo is the, “relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy.” Additional attributes of tempo that need to be considered are frequency, duration, sequencing, and opportunity.

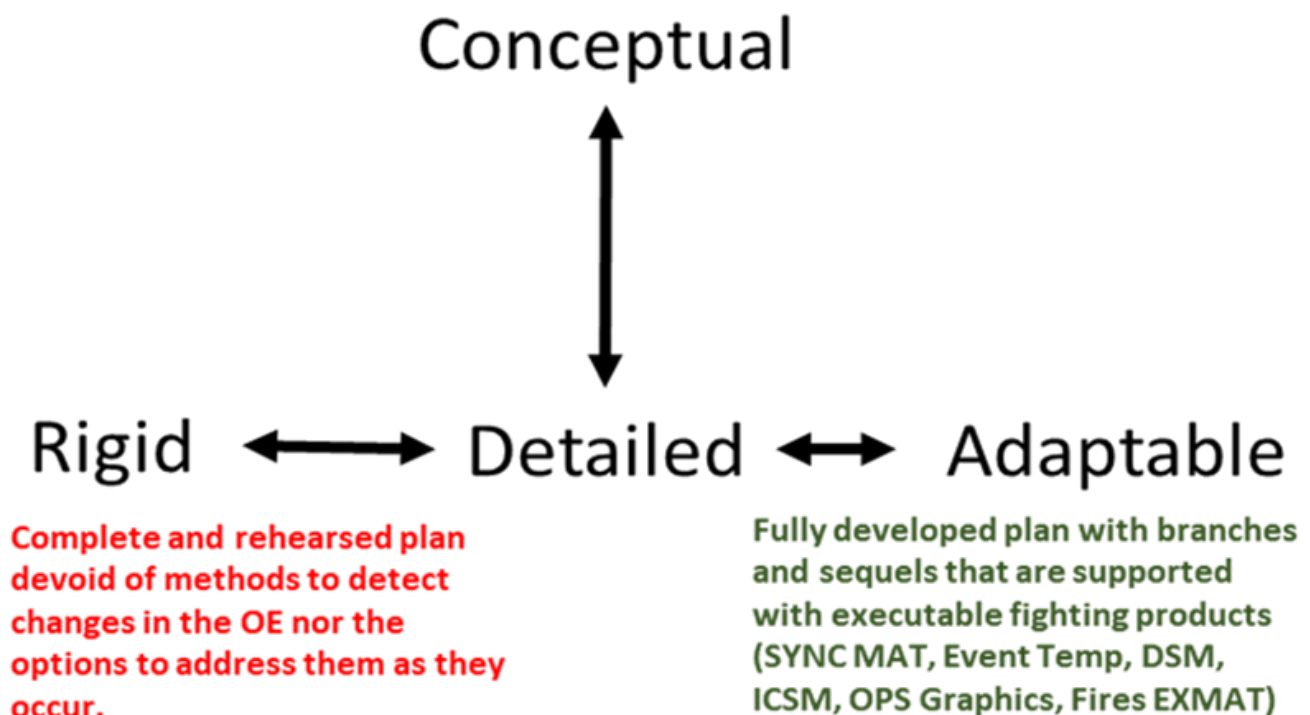


**Plan.** Planning is, “the major command and control activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation.” Planning sets the foundation upon which the rest of the operations process is conducted. Conceptual planning enables a commander to communicate their visualization of the operation based on their current understanding of the situation. The staff is able to transition the commander’s visualization of the operation into a detailed and executable plan through the Military Decision Making Process.

The fight is for time. Decisions are tied to three components of time with respect to the

operational environment (weather, geographic space and distance), the enemy (critical systems & maneuver capabilities, COA available) and friendly forces (type of operation, critical systems & maneuver forces available, COA specific). Time management is a key component to successful and productive planning at all echelons. Identifying shortcuts to the MDMP process is a way to save time and produce products quickly to maximize parallel planning for subordinate units. This, however, can have disastrous impacts to the execution of operations when the lack of detailed planning manifests itself in conflicts and friction on the battlefield. A directed COA is a method commonly used to save time in planning enabling the planning process to add detail to plans. This method works well only when the enemy fights to the plan, but what happens when the opposing force does not fight to our script? Is the plan easily adaptable to changes in the operating environment? How well does the plan accommodate shifts in friendly capabilities? Detailed plans created off of a single friendly COA analyzed against a single enemy COA often lack flexibility.

Simple plans are adaptable plans and, when initiated early with the right amount of emphasis, will enable the development of detailed plans. [Clausewitz observed](#) “A fast-moving environment can evolve more quickly than a complex plan can be adapted to it. By the time you have adapted, the target has changed.”



A plan must have the right amount of detail to synchronize the application of combat power, but also be easily adaptable to changes in the OE, enemy actions, or friendly situations. Planning against an enemy event template that represents multiple COAs overlaid in space and time will help expose weakness in friendly force plans. Identifying key assumptions to the plan during wargaming will help drive information collection requirements and serve as potentials for branch plans or sequels. This additional step is time consuming and often cut from the MDMP at the detriment to the plan. Time spent exposing a plan's weakness and identifying potential options during planning is time saved during execution.

Knowing how a commander makes decisions and what information he will require to make that decision can help the staff identify and refine decision points during the planning process. The Staff can reduce the number of decisions by identifying triggers that the commander is comfortable delegating based on risk. Additionally, completing the steps of MDMP will produce the fighting products that will enable the commander to make effective decisions. Critical to this process is a thorough COA Analysis that exposes the potential strengths and weaknesses to the plan, identifies both risks to the mission and opportunities, and enables leaders to understand when and where transitions will occur during the fight. Ultimately, the goal of the decision point is to provide the commander with options as the situation develops.

A way to improve efficiency and save time during MDMP is for commanders to clearly articulate what fighting products they want produced. These products will help the unit communicate the plan, maintain situational understanding across echelons, and enable the commander to make informed decisions in a timely manner. A commander's fighting products are used to track the fight, synch combat power, and inform his decisions:

- Operational Graphics
- Fire Support Coordination Measures (Fire Support Overlay, TLWS, FSEM)
- Intel Collection Synchronization Matrix (NAI Overlay)
- Enemy Event Template with a supporting EN Decision Support Matrix (DSM)
- Friendly Execution Matrix with a supporting DSM

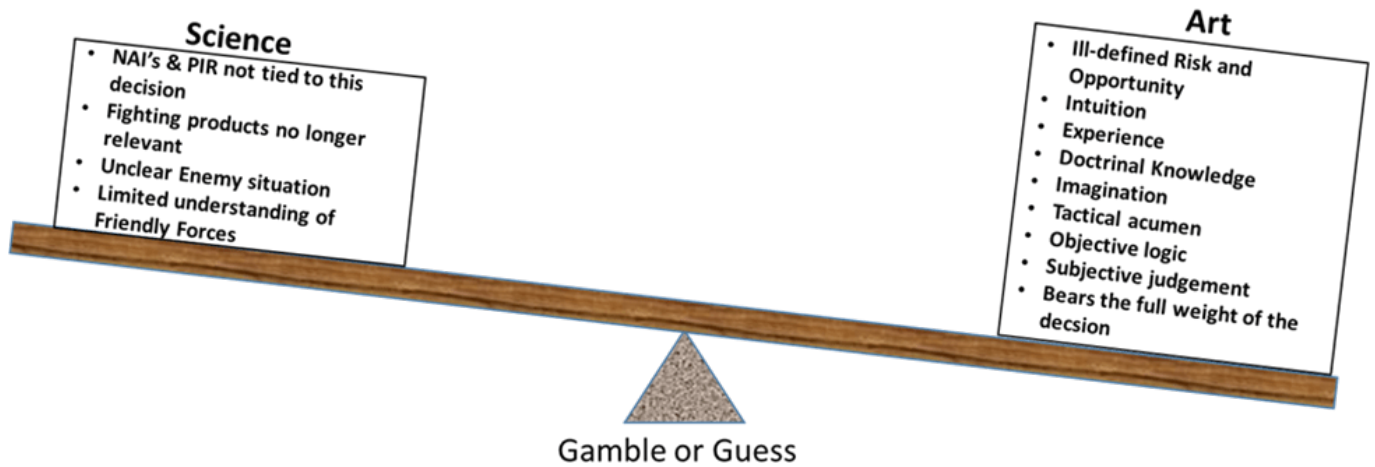
Wargaming is possibly one of the most productive processes to finalize and synchronize the plan and required fighting products. When bargaining is conducted, the staff will usually fight the enemy to reinforce the chosen COA and will avoid situations that would lead to failure, this is a form of [confirmation bias](#) (bias that results from the tendency to process and analyze information in such a way that it supports one's preexisting ideas and convictions) that brings a false sense of confidence. When the staff can wargame a plan to its points of failure they will identify, not only where the plan could fail, but also identify the

condition (enemy, terrain, and friendly) and timing (windows of opportunity) that will lead to success and reaching the desired endstate.

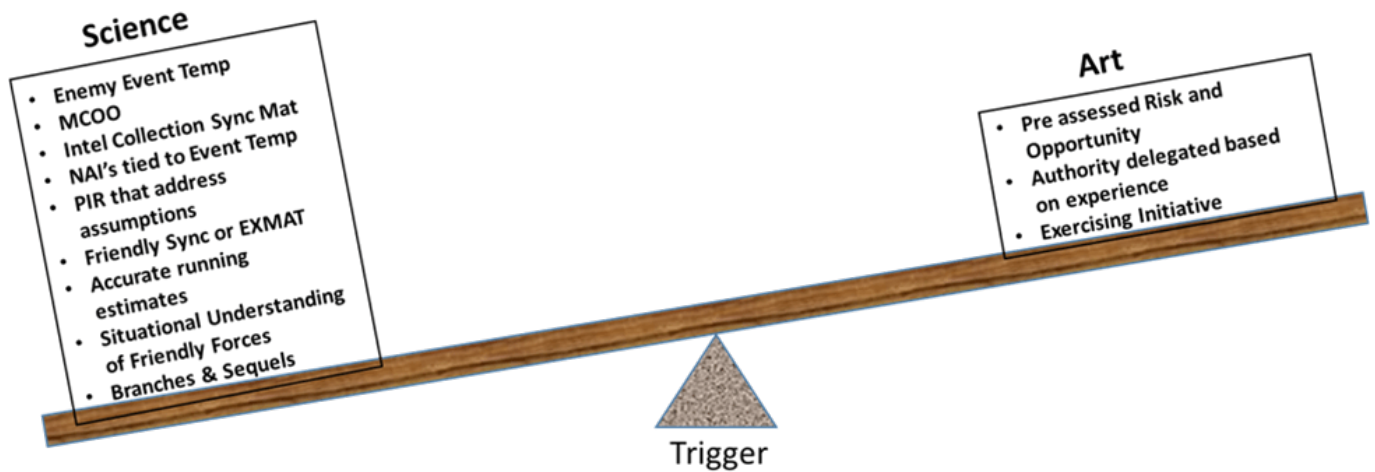
Further refinement of the conditions that lead to failure will produce the indicators that feed the information requirements for a commander's decision or trigger a contingency plan as well as the timing of when the IR will be answered (ETIOV/LTIOV). Overlooking this critical step will fail to add the detail required to synchronize effects at critical moments and will add rigidity to the plan. When wargaming is done correctly it will push the staff to anticipate friction, validate time/distance analysis, and plan for contingencies to prevent the failure or capitalize on opportunities. The required fighting products act as a script, note taking tool and updated outcome to validate the COAs during the wargaming process.

There is a balance between the amount of information that is required and the number of assets available to collect. Prioritizing assets and limiting decisions will help the staff prioritize collection efforts where they are needed most and confirm a primary and alternate to collect against each IR. Simplicity also matters, reducing the complexity of operations as well as the number of contingencies can increase the organization's ability and speed to adapt to change.

**Prepare.** With planning complete, commanders can shift the focus to rehearsals and preparations. Central to this process is being able to understand and manage the collection of information requirements that will drive decisions. The fighting products created during planning and validated during wargaming now drive the preparation process. As there may be information and reconnaissance requirements prior to brigade mission execution, those requirements will need to be inserted into the current operations OPS/INTEL synchronization process. The ultimate goal of preparing for decisions is to reduce the unknown through information management and collection. The more an organization is able to rely on the anticipated decision points backed by thorough operational products (Science) exercised and reinforced through an effective battle rhythm, the less it will have to rely on the commander's experience and intuition to make dynamic decisions (Art).



Time invested during the planning process is time saved during the execution of the operation. Development of detailed commander's critical information requirements (CCIR) will enable the staff to align the limited collection assets within the organization against these requirements and collect data early in the operation. Information collected will refine running estimates, and manage the organization's information flow to ensure decision points are identified quickly. When possible commanders should identify opportunities to identify decisions that can be delegated as triggers when the correct information is answered. A tactical trigger is 'the maneuver-related event or action that causes the commander to initiate fires. This event can be friendly or enemy-based. The tactical trigger is usually determined during course of action development." Decision triggers are similar in that they are maneuver-related events or actions that cause the commander or delegated staff representative/commander to initiate a decision and can be based on either friendly, enemy or impacts of the OE.



Detailed planning in a time constrained environment while in contact during LSCO will challenge even the most experienced staff. The inability to produce complete plans prior to conducting unit rehearsals impacts the synchronization of the operation and often fails to address the commander's decision points. Key to overcoming this pitfall is producing planning/fighting products during the steps of MDMP that enable parallel planning across the organization. This will allow subordinate units to address information gaps and provide bottom up feedback throughout planning. Parallel planning is a key component to conducting a successful combined arms rehearsal (CAR). When subordinate units are not able to complete their own planning process prior to the CAR, the event will quickly turn into a wargame where the participants are deconflicting the plan. [Decision time and timing](#), effort spent during planning will reduce decision time and confusion during execution.

**Execute.** No matter how hard an organization works to remove uncertainty from an operation, chance will creep in and have an impact. Developing planned and rehearsed branches and sequels are always the best option to building a contingency plan in contact. Commanders can identify where & when decisions are required on the battlefield based on shifts in tempo, initiative, and key transitions for both the friendly and enemy formations. When a decision is not anticipated through planning, the commander must issue decision guidance to enable the staff to set conditions for a successful execution. "Continual change and the need to respond to it compels the commander to carry the whole intellectual apparatus of his knowledge within him. He must always be ready to bring forth the appropriate decision. By total assimilation with his mind and life, [the commander's knowledge](#) must be transformed into a genuine capability."

Staff battle drills, specifically the two minute drill, is an excellent method of maintaining situational understanding within a command post. As information pours in from the

operation, WfFs can quickly become overwhelmed and start to miss or pass along key information that is needed to drive a decision or trigger an action. Executing the two minute drill early and often will ensure all information is shared and updated within the unit's common operating picture.

When leaders encounter an unanticipated event it is beneficial to take a moment to determine what this means and what is required. It is helpful to view both from the enemy and friendly perspective. What opportunities and threats does the unanticipated event present to the enemy commander and our commander?

Commanders need to assess whether this is such a dramatic change that it requires reframing the problem and plan through the Rapid Decision Synchronization Process (RDSP). Or is the new situation close enough to the plan that we can simply make in-stride adjustments? If the latter is the case then it is beneficial for the commander to take time to understand the situation, visualize a change to the plan, describe his guidance for the change, direct staff and subordinate unit action, then apply leadership to the execution.

A way to do this in a crunch is to pre-frame questions that need to be answered by each warfighting function prior to implementing the change, here is an example of what this might look like:

## **1. Movement and Maneuver**

- Does the situation require a change to the task and purpose of the executing unit?
- Do we need to re-orient recon assets on a new NAI? (PIR)
- Does the change require updated Graphics? (COP)
- Do we need to resynch? (SYNCHMAT)
- What are the impacts to ATK/Lift AVN assets location and support capability?
- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from M2 perspective- Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in the OE?

## **2. Fires**

- Does this require an updated fires plan and who needs a copy? (Fires Overlay, FSEM)
- NLT time for mortars or artillery in position ready to fire? (TLWS)
- Adjustments required to non-lethal fires (primary IRCs-MISO, MILDEC, OPSEC, EW, CA, Cyber)
- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from fires perspective (lethal and non-lethal)? - Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in



the OE \*analyze all IRCs available

### **3. Intel**

- What are the new intel/reporting requirements and who needs to know them?(ICSM)
- Develop an intel update for subordinate elements, how does this change the anticipated enemy situation? (Event Matrix)
- Do we need to re-orient recon assets on a new NAI? (PIR)
- Impacts to Shadow location and GCS
- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from intel perspective? - Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in the OE  
\*EN collection plan and assets

### **4. Sustainment**

- Do we need to Refit? (LOGSTAT)
- Impacts to BSA jumps/FSC/FLE locations
- ROLE 1 Set ready to Receive? AXP's updated? MASCAL RXL? (MEDCOP)
- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from sustainment perspective? - Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in the OE  
\*Sustainment=tactical/operational tempo

### **5. Command and Control**

- Retrans required? Time to emplace? (Comms Architecture)
- Updates to PACE? Will the commander move the TAC? (COMSTAT / PACE by Phase and WfF)
- Command Post Transitions and impacts to Upper & Lower T/I and planning process
- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from C2 perspective?  
- Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in the OE \*How will this impact EN CP location, PACE plan, retrans and critical asset placement to maintain C2 and his decision making

### **6. Protection**

- Do we need mobility / counter-mobility support? (Obstacle Overlay)
- Any change to force protection posture?
- CBRN-Decon plan/Reconnaissance requirements
- ADA- task org/location and integrated protection plan

- Reverse WfF- What opportunities does this present the EN CDR from protection perspective? - Consider changes to EN COAs and HVTL/HPTL placement in the OE  
\*EN ADA, critical engineer assets for breaching in the offense, protection in the defense

**Assess.** Reflection on the decision process and outcome will enable more accurate planning and anticipation in the future. Additionally, this is a valuable process for commanders to analyze their own tendencies and preferences for decision making. Ideally a good post operational analysis of the decision process will lead to refinement in the unit's internal planning process and enable the staff to better forecast decisions and develop triggers in the future. The AAR also needs to analyze all the fighting products that were used to determine utility in enabling decisions. Additionally, the information flow process needs to ensure the information requirements were clearly understood and the PACE plan supported reporting. Finally, analyze the time and timing of the decisions made. Critical introspection into systems and processes will enable improvement for future operations and learning about the enemy and their decision processes.

#### **Ways to reflect on past decisions:**

1. **Who made the decision?** Was the authority retained at the appropriate authority level with consideration to risk? Could the decision have been delegated to a lower echelon? And could the decision have been organized and refined to a trigger?
2. **What criteria was used?** Knowing that perfect knowledge is not always attainable, did the commander have enough of the required information and time to make the correct decision? Was it risk based (Friendly or terrain) or opportunity based (Enemy)?
3. **What was the outcome?** Did the decision made produce the desired or anticipated outcome and why? Was it a gamble based on chance or a best guess based on available information?
4. **What information was needed/not needed?** What were the information gaps and why did we fail to identify the requirement? Was there information considered that was not helpful?
5. **How can we fill this information gap?** Was it a process gap or capability gap that prevented the collection of information?

["War is a human endeavor"](#) - a clash of wills characterized by the threat of application of force and violence, often fought among populations. It is not a mechanical process that can be precisely controlled by machines, calculations, or processes. Nor is it conducted in carefully controlled and predictable environments."

There is no way to remove uncertainty from battle, commanders at all levels have to make vitally important decisions in the midst of the unknown. Organizational staffs have the responsibility to help commanders sort this confusion through their planning to identify the knowable-unknowns and to incorporate collection and reporting activities to address them. Leaders who seek first to understand the situation and the options available to them will more often than not meet with success. How else can a commander describe a clear vision of their approach if they lack understanding? Taking time to reflect on decisions made will help staff identify gaps in their planning process as well as lead to understanding on how their commander makes decisions. Multi-Domain operations during LSCO will require commanders and staff to understand the interdependency of time, reporting, and cross-WFF synergy to enable decision making against a peer competitor. Temporary windows of opportunity to exploit will be fleeting and must be planned for with enough flexibility to adapt to the fog and friction of war.

*LTC Ron Sprang is a career infantry officer, with over 20 years of active service, currently serving as the Task Force Two Senior Observer, Coach, Trainer (OCT) at The Joint Readiness Training Center. His most recent assignment was as battalion commander for 2-12 CAV, 1st Cavalry Division. He was commissioned through the United States Military Academy in 2002 and holds two Master's Degrees.*

*LTC Gary McDonald is currently serving as the Task Force Four (Cavalry Squadron) Observer, Coach, Trainer (OCT) at the Joint Readiness Training Center. In his 20 years of active service, he has held various command and staff positions in both Cavalry and Infantry formations, most recently he commanded 3-61 CAV, 4th Infantry Division. In 2002 he was commissioned through the University of Utah ROTC program and holds a Master's Degree from the School of Advanced Military Science.*

## Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
-  [Pin it](#)
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)