Improvements You Can Make Before Your Company's Combat-Training Center Rotation

by MAJ Jonathan Buckland

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the king loses his horse in the middle of the battle and shouts, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse." At the time, the king needed this small item, a horse, and was willing to trade it for something of great value, his kingdom, to win the battle. This example correlates to conducting military training where the linchpin to a successful operation can be insignificant at any other time outside of that specific time and space. Finding out that something small is missing at the decisive point of the operation can be the difference between winning and losing.

Training for a combat-training center (CTC) rotation at company level is often primarily dictated at higher echelons to meet specific gates required to execute each rotation: platoon and company live-fire exercises, gunnery and brigade field-training exercises. Often, once a unit has entered this cycle, it is a sprint to the always-moving finish line, where completion of one training event signals another's start.

The lack of company-guided and -executed training transfers to a CTC rotation. Opportunities to gain valuable training and lessons-learned are often lost because the company did not have enough time to prepare for the minor, but critical, things that would have afforded them valuable time during the rotation.

This article identifies things companies can do at home station before arriving at a CTC. The article encompasses 10 areas:

- Sustainment operations;
- Situational awareness;
- Load plans;
- Company rehearsals;
- Reducing signature;
- Recommendations for additional home-station training;
- Signaling;
- Standing operating procedures (SOPs);
- Orders production; and
- Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) training.

Sustainment operations

Department of the Army (DA) Form 5988 (Equipment Maintenance and Inspection Worksheet)**:** How does your unit conduct and track field maintenance? Does your company executive officer print a stack of DA Form 5988s?

A recommendation would be to prepare multiple laminated 5988s with the company's administrative details for each vehicle already printed on the form. When completed, the operator can turn in one laminated 5988 to the company executive officer. The executive officer can then use this to fill out the overall company tracker before submitting all 5988s to the forward-support company, depending on your unit's procedures.

Multiple laminated 5988 forms per vehicle will make supporting the constant maintenance cycle easier and enhance continuous tracking for all the company's vehicles.

Platoon sustainment: Companies should laminate multiple platoon-sustainment request forms. A recommendation is for one to be maintained at the platoon-sergeant level, as well as another that gets turned into the company executive officer and supply sergeant. The executive officer can then keep a company sustainment report to turn directly into the battalion S-4 or executive officer. This action will prove to be a better organizational process than platoon sergeants turning in scraps of paper or providing a verbal status report to the executive officer.

Pre-formatted Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P) messages: Company executive officers expend precious time filling in the administrative information when sending JBC-P messages. Instead, take the time before

beginning a CTC rotation to prefill out these messages with recipients and class; the messages can then be populated with actual data of supplies when needed.

Situational awareness

20-minute boards: Imagine you are a rifleman or a tank driver. Some questions to think about are your understanding of the overall company, battalion or brigade operation; what you are fighting for; and how do you level the common operating picture (COP) throughout your company?

A solution is to use 20-minute boards – a concept used within the airborne community. At the 20-minute warning before exiting the aircraft, small clipboards are passed through the aircraft with operational graphics, restated mission and command-and-signal information. These boards are used as a quick refresher to paratroopers before they jump into the fight.

This same concept can prove useful in the mechanized community for dismounts sitting in the back of an M2 Bradley or Stryker. Soldiers might have been sitting in the back for 30 minutes to several hours after the ramp goes up, so a quick refresher of the current situation can ensure a clear COP across the formation.

Frequency-modulation (FM) rehearsal script: Companies often have very little time to disseminate information to the lowest level or conduct effective rehearsals. Companies are rushed to a Readiness Condition 1 status and then wait several hours for operations to start. An FM rehearsal script can maximize the use of the limited available time while waiting for operations to start.

This script allows quick dissemination of information and then allows each subordinate to talk through their actions throughout the operation. It also ensures that the unit stays organized and limits long transmissions on the company net and broadcasting signal. This rehearsal enables dismounts in the vehicles to listen to the talk-through, obtaining situational awareness and a COP over the company channel.

Load plans

Load plans are critical, especially when conducting mounted operations. Generally, while maneuvering, it is not the rollover that causes the most significant damage – it is the damage inflicted by unsecured items due to a failed load plan. Units must conduct a deliberate process when developing a known company load plan.

Mounted operations: Company and platoon leadership need to develop a plan for how and where extra gear, tuff boxes and extra sustainment items will be stored. There must be a standard process for the location of sustainment and basic-issue items (BII) and how they are adequately secured within the vehicles across the company. A standard location across the company for specific items cuts down the time to search for needed equipment.

Also, before deployment, take the needed time to organize the placement of supplies and items within the company trains. This effort will allow for more rapid and easier access to items when they are needed.

Dismounted operations: Identify the aid and litter, enemy prisoner of war and Javelin teams now! Ensure they can properly carry all necessary equipment.

This preoperational planning is critical when it comes to the Javelin teams. Unless doing a Financial Liability Investigation of Property Loss on the command-and-launch unit when you return to home station is preferred, decide ahead of time how to transport the unit effectively while mitigating loss. The proper way is not merely to attach it to the missile and have the youngest Soldier carry it for the entire force-on-force period.

Figure 1. A rifleman carries both the Javelin missile and the command-and-launch unit. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Company rehearsals

Scripts: Establish a script for company rehearsals and ensure you include all forces and enablers. The script will enable you to stay on topic and not turn the rehearsal into a two-hour conference. Also, ensure all leaders and Soldiers know who is required to participate in the rehearsal.

Have a plan for how security will be conducted when leaders meet and a plan if platoons are pulled off the line to conduct their internal rehearsals. Planning for and establishing these procedures before your rotation will provide you more time to conduct your rehearsals and enhance preparation for the impending operation.

Terrain-model kits: Have a good company terrain-model kit with all the necessary items that allows for a detailed terrain model to be built promptly and properly. Having a prepared kit will prevent the need to run around at the last minute to put together a model with engineer tape and rocks. A pre-built kit will allow the company to add this to their priorities of work as soon as they occupy their assembly area, and it will substantially help the commander to provide a detailed operation order.

Figure 2. Company terrain model. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Reducing overall signature

Camouflage netting: Companies should not begin thinking about camouflage netting placement at the intermediate staging base (ISB). They should do so at home station before deploying to a CTC.

Proper mounting and placement of the netting are vital to ensuring that the nets can be safely and effectively stored when moving. Placement will prevent the nets from getting caught in wheels or tracks while ensuring successful camouflaging of vehicles.

When mounting camo netting, commanders also need to consider openings for MILES sensor gear to ensure the net is not blocking the ability to read opposing-force (OPFOR) lasers.

Company headquarters location: When establishing a company headquarters location, one of the best practices observed during National Training Center (NTC) rotations was when the executive officer and first sergeant vehicles parked with rear ends facing each other and connecting camo netting was erected between the two. This configuration allowed some concealment of the vehicles and a shaded area for meeting with company leadership. The commander's vehicle can easily link into this configuration while still providing it the ability to move more freely to higher headquarters' meetings.

Figure 3. A company commander meets with his platoon leaders in the back of his M1126 Stryker Infantry Combat Vehicle to reduce signature in having separate command setups. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Home-station training

Maneuver training does not need to occur in vehicles; in fact, that is the "running phase." Companies can start at the "crawl phase" in the motorpool or in an open field at the team and platoon level – with walk-throughs to practice crew-movement formations and teach different formation changes. Doing these slow and methodical practice sessions will ensure, for example, that the platoon sergeant's wingman always knows when he/she is going to the right or left, or that the gunner learns how to pick up a specific sector of fire immediately.

This training will help units to react immediately on contact and not waste time giving orders. Focusing on target identification (distance, direction and description), and more rapid target engagements will ultimately increase lethality.

Recovery-operations training is best conducted before an actual recovery takes place. During this process, you can ensure vehicles have the proper BII to prevent stalling operations during engagements. Training on self-recovery once a week, perhaps during motorpool maintenance, will ensure everyone learns the procedures before execution.

This basic but important training will help keep more mobility platforms in the fight during your operations. Always ensure that you have the correctly rated tow straps or tow bars for your company vehicles, and remember to ensure heat shields are present for the self-recovery of tankers.

Engineers: Training with your engineers is essential to success when conducting a breach. Do not meet your engineers for the first time at the combined-arms-breach rehearsal. Reach out to your counterparts at home station to conduct training together to build the team.

Team building can be as easy as conducting physical training (PT) once or twice a month together, or it can be more complex – for example, by having the units conduct suppress, obscure, secure, reduce and assault (SOSRA) drills using an open field. SOSRA training will allow maneuver Soldiers to see what the breach process entails and what the engineers need to complete a successful breach. This training will prevent problems like running on the wrong side of the handrail and getting caught in the concertina wire.

Routines: Good units train routine things routinely. The most sacred time in the Army should be PT. Whatever happens to the weekly or daily schedules, Soldiers know that at least from 6:30-8 a.m., daily PT is going to take place.

Use the last 10-15 minutes of PT during the cool-down period to conduct specific training throughout the week. I used a model that focused on separate areas each day of the week:
- Monday: weapons;
- Tuesday: medical;
- Wednesday: communications;
- Thursday: chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) defense; and
- Friday: tactics.

The training was always something very specific and functioned as a quick refresher course. For example, during CBRN training, we could cover how to use a Joint Chemical Agent Detector or how to disassemble and assemble an M240 machinegun.

The block of instruction also allows junior leaders to teach and demonstrate their future leadership potential to their superiors.

Signaling and marking

Vehicle markings: Vehicle markings are extremely important during a CTC rotation for both daytime and nighttime operations. Most units develop a quick solution after the first night movement or a fratricide incident. That is too late!

Some successful companies have used cut-up VS-17 panels on antennas, where the left or right dictates the platoon, and the other side represents the position within the platoon. Others have used 100-mph tape on the side, which usually lasts about a day or two in the dust or rain. Develop a system before deployment that is durable and understood within your formation, your battalion and brigade.

Degraded communications: In a degraded-communications environment, it is critical to know how you will communicate between vehicles without FM radio communications. Most units already go through a primary, alternate, contingency and emergency plan while dismounted – FM, whistle, star cluster, runner, etc. – but what are the actions when mounted? Simple solutions might include reaching back into history and pulling out those old flags for command signals or to ensure your formation is fluent in hand and arm signals.

Dismounted markings: Dismounted marking is vital at the breach and in an urban environment. Colors may vary across the Army, but usually, blue chemlights mark the breach, and green chemlights communicate that a room is clear. Foxtails (VS-17 panel tied to a rock) might indicate the shifting and lifting of fires or mark a friendly unit's frontline trace when hanging outside of the blackside (facing friendly forces) of a building.

Figure 4. Example of a foxtail, annotating that the room has been cleared. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

More questions to consider for dismounted markings include: Does your unit have a "Moses pole" and marking system for the frontline trace of friendly units clearing a trench, or will you resort to using an Advanced System Improvement Program antenna at the last minute? How will the engineers mark the handrail of the breach and where do they mark it – left or right side? The key is not developing these signals in a vacuum. They should be codified in the battalion/brigade tactical SOP (TACSOP). If your unit does not have a TACSOP, be proactive and start a conversation with your command sergeant major and develop one.

Company SOPs

Assembly areas: Does your company already have an SOP to occupy an assembly area (AA), or are you going to have a 10-minute conversation on the company net about how you want to emplace? Establish the SOPs for occupying AAs, both dismounted and mounted, before your rotation. It can be as simple as this: The lead element always has the 9-to-3 by way of 12, the second element has the 3-to-6 by way of six, and the third element has the 6-to-9 by way of six. Company trains will locate just above the six.

Whatever you decide it to be, establish it and rehearse during home-station training. Do not try to do it for the first time at 3 a.m. in the rain while in the middle of a force-on-force engagement.

Priorities of work: Is the priority of work known throughout the formation, or do leaders have to publish them every time they occupy the AA? Publish it beforehand so that drivers know to get out and immediately conduct preventive maintenance checks and services – checking track tension, petroleum, oil and lubricants. It's also important that gunners know to boresight and execute dismounted teams, and that the Javelin teams know to build fighting positions.

Plan for the safety factor as well, especially when locating sleeping areas. By doing this, Soldiers will already know where to sleep, and if drivers must move, they will know where those areas are.

Pre-combat checks (PCCs) and **pre-combat inspections (PCIs):** PCCs/PCIs is a phrase that is thrown around throughout the Army without specific guidance as to what they are or when they are conducted. Ensuring that subordinates and junior leaders understand the difference between PCCs and PCIs and what they are looking at is key to ensuring Soldiers have the right equipment for their operation.

Pre-combat inspections are actually that – an inspection, not an interview. This inspection is the opportunity for a first-line supervisor to put hands on all their Soldiers' equipment to ensure it is 100-percent ready for the mission.

Pre-combat checks are the ability for leaders to conduct spot-checks within their formation to verify that inspections have been conducted. A standard checklist needs to be published at the company level to guarantee all

leaders know to confirm the same equipment. This way, if a squad is attached to another platoon, the leaders have the same expectations.

Figure 5. Example of a Javelin battle position. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Orders production

How will you develop a company operations order (OPORD) at 2 a.m.? Is your executive officer going to brief sustainment operations? Is your first sergeant going to brief the medical portion? Who is present at the commander's OPORD? These are all questions you should ask now, before deployment, to ensure you are prepared to give a detailed and timely OPORD. The OPORD should provide enough information so that everyone knows their mission and responsibilities while ensuring subordinates have enough time to issue their orders.

There are many templates you can use; the key is finding the one that works best for you. I have seen a commander use his computer to type up orders and use downloaded maps to make graphics. It was a great technique until he ran out of paper and ink.

An option is using carbon-copy paper to write the order and issue the copies to your subordinates. Another practice is to have laminated order templates that every leader can fill out while the OPORD occurs. Whatever method you choose, practice it before your rotation to the operational environment.

WARNO __1__ **TO**

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OPORD __ASSASSIN RAGE__

Initial Task Org:

Effective: **05I500FEB20**

HQ   1/A   2/A   3/A   FMT

1. SITUATION: General Enemy Overview: Donovian forces have crossed the international boundary into Atropia in the past 72 hours. Atropian Forces have been unsuccessful in repelling the Donovian offense and have ceded substantial terrain. The Donovian 801st BTG is currently staged vic. Brown/Debman pass and is expected to advance South to Razish by 07 FEB and further South to the Whale Gap by 08 FEB. They are supported by DTG Recon, SPF, OBS.

Who the CO/TM is fighting:
2-4 x DTG recon ops (2-4 BRDM-2 and 1-2 BRM-3K) and 1x Mechanized Infantry Company mobile and responsive throughout the AO. Assessed to be at 85% strength.

AO: Valley of Death/Tiefort
North 13 Northing (ASR IA DRANG)
South 96 Northing (PL DEBBIE)
East 57 Easting (Porta Potti Wadi)
West 28 Easting (ISB)

AI: Erdabil Province, Atropia
North 28 Northing
South 94 Northing
East 62 Easting
West 18 Easting

BCT Mission: NET 080600FEB20 TF RAIDER attacks to destroy the 801st BTG in zone from PL SCOTT to PL COURTNEY IOT protect 2/52 ID's flank. O/O TF RAIDER defends along PL COURTNEY IVO BP3A, BP3B, and BP3C to destroy elements of the 80th DTG IOT prevent the envelopment of 2/52 ID with PL DEBBIE as the no penetration line.

BCT Cdr Intent:
Purpose: Defeat 801st BTG to compel Donovians to withdraw
Key Tasks: 1. Destroy ENY recon
2. Neutralize ENY IADS, IDF, RSTA, and ENG to enable FoM
3. Secure, Isolate, o/o clear Guba and Nabran
4. Protect LOCs   5. Transition into hasty defense
ENDSTATE:
1. Defending along PL COURTNEY, 2. Recon destroyed 3. 801st neutralized 4. Atropians in control

BN/TF Mission:
2-7 IN suppresses ENY on OBJ STEWART IOT allow FoM for the BDE DO (3-69 AR).

BN/TF Cdr Intent:
Purpose: Enable restoration of international boundary
Key Tasks: 1. Destroy ENY recon to enable FoM
2. Mass combat enablers at decisive point
3. Mass and control tempo of fight; preserve CBT PWR; population unable to impact BDE
ENDSTATE:
Key Terrain Controlled, 801st BTG destroyed; counterattack defeated

2. MISSION: Upcoming Task and Purpose or **Type of Operation/General location:** A/2-7 attacks to seize OBJs IVO Valley of Death and o/o suppresses OBJs east of Tiefort mountain range IOT enable the BN DO to suppress ENY forces opposing the penetration of 801st defenses. (SO)

3. EXECUTION:
Movement Instructions/**Movement to initiate:**

Our Current Location: __ISB (RUBA)__
Our Next Location: __ATK POS ABLE (vic. 3497)__
Objective Location: __TBD (vic. Valley of Death)__

Recon Team: 1x section + 2 SQDs of 2/A with ASSASSIN RAVEN in support

Recon Tasks/ **Recon to initiate**
1. Map Recon (oriented vic. Langford Wells, Bowling Alley Pass, Valley of Death)
2. 2/A conduct coordination with 2-7 Scouts to determine scheme of maneuver and collection plan.
3. Prepare RAVEN for flight within first 48 hours of operation.

Information Requirements
1. OBJ Locations
2. Unit boundaries
3. PoF and fire support tasks
4. BN triggers for movement and direct fire engagements

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Figure 6. Example of a laminated company warning order. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Operational graphics: Once you have published your order, how will you publish operational graphics? Do you have your overlays available from higher for your subordinate leaders to copy?

Operations graphics allow units to communicate clearly and quickly in a complex operational environment. Battle boards or hard backings that maps mount to with clear overlays that show obstacles, targets, target-reference points, battle positions or adjacent unit locations are common in the mounted community. These boards are just as easy to make within the light community.

They are compact enough to fit in a rucksack or cargo pocket. Building these boards before an operation will ensure that leaders can copy graphics with the expectation to use them during a rotation.

Figure 7. A company commander conducts a company OPORD brief with company leadership. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*

Make MILES effective

Every rotational unit that comes through a CTC thinks that the OPFOR cheats somehow with their MILES gear. The reality is that the OPFOR is lethal in the MILES environment because they regularly use and train on the equipment to ensure its lethality against an opposing force.

You should not be using your MILES gear for the first time at the ISB or the rotational-unit bivouac area. Draw the equipment at your home station and incorporate it into your training. Become proficient with it, and lethality against an opposing force will follow suit.

Do not just draw MILES for your individual weapons. Train with MILES on your Stingers and Javelins so that you can be lethal against Red air and armored formations as well.

The same home-station training should be conducted for mounted MILES – boresight and zero both your M1 Abrams or M2 Bradley. You can conduct lethality checks on your lasers all day in the box, but if you have not boresighted or zeroed out to the range you think you are going to engage the enemy, it is a waste of time.

These techniques will tip the scales in your favor for a more successful rotation. Rotations are infinitely more fun when you win.

Takeaway

This article is not intended to provide company-level leadership with all the information needed to prepare for a CTC rotation. It is meant to start a dialogue within the company leadership to think through their SOPs and determine areas where the company is lacking. If these areas are addressed before deployment to the CTC, it will allow the company and its observers/coaches/trainers (O/C/Ts) the opportunity to focus on other areas that need to be improved during your rotation.

Enjoy your time during your rotation with your company. Always ask for feedback from your O/C/Ts. You are there to make your team better, and to do that, avoid wasting precious time learning things you could have thought about and practiced before deployment to your CTC rotation.

If you ever get the opportunity to serve at a CTC, take it. It is one of the most rewarding and professionally developing assignments in our Army!

MAJ Jonathan Buckland is a student at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, with a follow-on assignment to 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, GA. His previous assignments include O/C/T, Tarantula Team, Operations Group, NTC, Fort Irwin, CA; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, NC; commander, Company B, 2nd 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 2nd IBCT, 82nd Airborne Infantry Division; assistant operations officer, 2-508th PIR; and assistant operations officer, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), Fort Myers, VA. MAJ Buckland's military schools include Airborne School, Ranger School, Infantry Basic Officer Leader Course, Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Bradley Leader Course and Jumpmaster Course. He has a bachelor's of arts degree in English from the Virginia Military Institute. He is currently pursuing a master's of arts degree in international studies from the University of Kansas.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AA – assembly area
BII – basic-issue item
CBRN – chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear
COP – common operating picture
CTC – combat-training center
DA – Department of the Army
FM – frequency modulation
IBCT – infantry brigade combat team
ISB – intermediate staging base
JBC-P – Joint Battle Command-Platform
MILES – Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System
NTC – National Training Center
O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer
OPFOR – opposing force
OPORD – operations order
PCC – pre-combat checks
PCI – pre-combat inspections
PIR – parachute infantry regiment
PT – physical training
SOSRA – suppress, obscure, secure, reduce and assault
SOP – standing operating procedure
TACSOP – tactical standing operating procedure

Figure 8. A company commander briefs his platoon leaders. *(U.S. Army photo by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)*