Preparing for the Decisive-Action Training Environment
by CPT Aaron E. Adams

This article reviews the training and execution of operations during a decisive-action rotation at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center from the perspective of an observer/coach-trainer. This article’s intent is to outline training lessons-learned for unit leaders to increase awareness on how to best prepare and execute a DA rotation. My observations are focused on a company/troop-level organization.

As the U.S. Army transitions from conducting overseas contingency operations, units are beginning to conduct DA training rotations at our combat training centers. As with any shift in focus, many units will experience significant growing pains as they adjust to this new training environment. The standard focus for most units over the last decade has been training and conducting mission-rehearsal exercises in preparation for an upcoming deployment to either Iraq or Afghanistan. In most cases, training plans have shifted from the once high-intensity conflict to the insurgent threat to prepare our formations for future combat operations. Due to this shift, a large part of our current formation has not experienced the high-intensity training that was once normal for our formations.

As we now transition to the DA environment, we must ensure our junior leaders and Soldiers are trained and prepared to conduct decisive operations. I wrote this article to provide observations and lessons-learned from recent DA rotations and to provide a synopsis of what units can expect when attending a DA rotation. Also, this article offers recommended training techniques to prepare units to execute this type of rotation.

In the course of one year, JMRC has hosted two DA rotations in Europe. Operational design changed from the first to the second rotation. During the initial DA rotation, training was strictly focused on U.S. forces only; however, multinational partners were integrated during the second rotation. Along with the rotational unit, multinational partners from all over Europe participated to replicate host-nation forces as well as augment the opposing forces. Participating nations included Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Slovenia and Poland.

The most recent rotation was designed to be executed among the German populace, outside of the traditional training areas, in what is known as a maneuver-rights area. To accomplish this, the German government had to approve the training and agree to land use outside of the U.S. military training areas. This provided the rotational unit with an exercise that was realistic, with real-world risk and cultural considerations.

Preparation
The foundation for operations conducted at training centers are built year-round with each unit’s training plan. At the company level, units routinely build training plans that support their mission-essential task list and support their higher headquarters’ mission sets. These mission-essential tasks serve as the foundation on which the company will be evaluated at their respective CTC rotation. METL-focused training and preparation for a DA rotation should inherently occur year-round as part of any company training plan. At JMRC, it has been observed during previous rotations that some units typically do not focus on the DA threat during their training exercises before coming to the training center. This results in units attempting to build the base knowledge during situational-training exercises and then immediately execute the rotation. With the amount of personnel turnover in units, training and preparation must be sustained year-round to ensure proficiency on all METL tasks.

Once at the CTC, units draw all required equipment, including the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement Systems for both personnel and vehicles. While not required, it is encouraged that units routinely ensure their MILES equipment is both zeroed and functional. A typical trend is that units do not zero their weapon MILES, thus resulting in minimal effects on the enemy during the rotation. For mounted or mechanized forces, we recommend that units conduct MILES gunnery before executing any training lanes. This gunnery not only zeros the weapon MILES, but it also allows the unit to conduct a gunnery exercise and refine its standard operating procedures.

Following equipment draw, units conduct STX lanes while their battalion headquarters concurrently conducts a

Soldiers from 173rd Airborne Brigade conduct a rehearsal prior to executing operations at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany. (Photo by SPC Tristan Bolden)
command-post exercise. This allows staff planning to be conducted concurrently with company- and platoon-level training. It is highly recommended that units include the company headquarters in the CPX. By including the company in the CPX, the unit leadership will have visibility and understanding of their unit’s planning capabilities.

Also, this will provide company commanders more training opportunities on planning and orders production, which is something companies typically struggle with. This understanding reduces the amount of additional fragmentary orders published during execution of the rotation. Routinely, battalions issue multiple FRAGOs during the rotation, which causes confusion at company level; this confusion typically occurs because the FRAGOs are issued with a short execution time, leaving the company commander little to no time to plan and rehearse with his company. In essence, the one-thirds/two-thirds rule is essentially non-existent in these types of conditions.

Before executing the rotational mission, units conduct STX lanes at the company and platoon level. During a DA rotation, we recommend that these lanes focus on offense, defense and stability operations. The largest trend in units is a lack of understanding in how to conduct defensive operations, specifically the development of engagement areas. Commanders should ensure they include EA development in their STX concepts for a DA rotation. By executing training lanes focused on unified land operations, all service members receive training on current doctrine and are provided an opportunity to refine their SOPs.

**Offense**

The operational plan in the offense has traditionally called for an area reconnaissance to be conducted, followed by the unit’s main effort. This reconnaissance is designed to create time and space to allow follow-on units to successfully move from the tactical assembly areas without significant enemy contact. The reconnaissance element typically establishes passage points along a designated phase line where follow-on units conduct forward-passage-of-lines before continuing the mission. Once the FPOL is completed, units typically conduct a movement-to-contact until reaching a designated phase line. The offensive operation then culminates with the rotational unit attacking to secure a key urban area before transitioning to stability operations.

While the enemy situation is often unknown, units issue specific engagement criteria to shape the battlefield according to the operational plan. Engagement criteria are critical to the offense’s success, as they prevent units from becoming decisively engaged and weakened prior to reaching their objective.

Units tend to use high-speed avenues of approach out of their TAA. This technique allows the unit to gain maximum momentum but forces them to use traveling overwatch and sacrifice security. In one specific example, a unit encountered a small-arms ambush shortly after crossing their line of departure. Because the unit was somewhat canalized on a main road, they could not maneuver due to the restrictive terrain. The unit managed to return fire and quickly moved out of the kill zone with no casualties or battle damage. Realizing the need to get off the high-speed avenues of approach, the unit quickly transitioned from traveling overwatch to bounding overwatch and began using lateral routes that were less traveled. This adjustment proved to be a wise decision as the high-speed avenues of approach were well overwatched by enemy forces.

Once onto lateral routes with open terrain, the unit began using terrain to their advantage. The commander understood that to maintain tempo, he would also need to ensure the unit’s survivability, and this simply could not be accomplished by traveling along main roads. The commander used the rolling terrain to secure movement for the rest of the company by establishing support-by-fire positions. The terrain supported the establishment of SBF
positions as well as provided security for other platoons bounding forward.

The unit’s security was accomplished by bounding from terrain feature to terrain feature and establishing SBF positions to scan ahead to identify enemy forces. Concurrently, the company mortar section rapidly established mortaring points, fully prepared to support the company’s maneuver with indirect fires.

By deliberately moving across terrain features, this ensures the unit has an early warning of enemy forces and obstacle belts forward of their positions. This early warning enables the company to maintain survivability while also serving as a reconnaissance for the battalion, all the while maintaining the tempo of the offense.

On a different occasion, a unit made sure to use concealed routes through the dense forests and treelines to conduct their maneuver. This terrain provided concealment for vehicles and ensured the unit would not be identified by enemy ground or air forces. Maximizing the use of thermal capabilities, many of these forested areas could be observed well in advance of occupation, once again ensuring survivability for the rotational unit.

The use of terrain is an important variable in conducting a successful offense. Ensuring that junior leaders understand terrain and how to effectively use it is a task that must be trained. At company level, commanders are encouraged to conduct training exercises without troops to train junior leaders on terrain. This can accomplished through a two-part leadership professional-development exercise. One part should focus strictly on terrain and how it enables success; the second part should be the terrain walk outside the garrison environment.

In many instances during DA rotations, units that effectively maneuver with the terrain identify enemy forces before physical contact is made. This element of surprise allows the unit to establish an attack position and effectively engage the enemy force without compromising its positions. By effectively reducing the enemy threat, the unit can continue its maneuver and continue the offensive operation. In short, properly using terrain will undoubtedly maintain survivability in the offense.

Another critical skill during the offense is the ability to rapidly deploy an infantry fighting force, as this allows the commander to quickly engage enemy positions without endangering his mounted platforms. As seen in previous rotations, units struggle with effectively dismounting their infantry squads and synchronizing efforts between the dismounted force and the vehicle platforms. A recommended training technique to build this skill for any mounted unit is to conduct a combined-arms maneuver live-fire exercise before deploying to a CTC. A CAMLFX enables maneuver units to develop and/or refine SOPs that focus on integration of dismounted infantry in a mounted fight. A CAMLFX provides a controlled training environment using both blank and live ammunition to meet the training objective. Incorporating this training event into a company training schedule will greatly increase the success of the unit, both at the CTC and in combat operations.

As rotational units conduct offensive operations over multiple days, they typically establish TAAs for their units to occupy overnight. TAAs have recently been an issue for units conducting DA rotations. Assembly areas can be occupied using two methods: deliberate occupation and occupation by force. To properly occupy an assembly area, units use a quartering party to reconnoiter the area, organize the area based on the commander’s guidance, mark entrances and exits, and mark tentative vehicle locations. During previous rotations, units rarely used quartering parties and typically occupied by force—units occupy assembly areas by force simply because (1) they do not know how to properly occupy an assembly area or (2) choose not to because occupying by force is simpler and requires less time.

Commanders should include occupation of assembly areas into every training event at home station. When a company goes to a range or training area, occupy an assembly area to train your SOPs; this will ensure a better knowledge base during execution during a DA rotation.

**Defense**

Following the offensive and stability operations in a DA rotation, the rotational unit typically establishes a defensive posture to prepare for the ene-
my counterattack. This is no different than what we have observed during training events at JMRC. While securing the brigade or battalion objective, units will establish defensive positions and begin developing their EA.

EA development in the defense is critical to the operation’s success. The process to develop an EA applies to any type of organization or unit. During previous DA rotations, units typically struggle with EA development. The trend is that units seem to lack the doctrinal knowledge of the process to develop EAs.

The three key points of failure for rotational units are emplacing weapon systems, establishing fire-control measures and conducting an EA rehearsal. Units tend to emplace weapon systems without completing range cards for their positions. They further fail to identify dead space and fail to ensure fires interlock. This seems to be a recurring trend in units conducting training rotations.

Soldiers at the lowest levels must understand the importance of range cards and sector sketches, as well as have the skills to accurately complete them for their weapon systems and positions. This will eventually translate to the company sector sketch, which will identify failures in the defense. The main issue during rotations is that this is not being completed at the company and platoon level.

As with traditional defenses, combat enablers need to be integrated into the planning and execution to be successful. Some of these enablers include engineers, fire-support assets, air support and surveillance platforms. Units that are conducting a DA rotation typically have some, if not all, of these assets available during their rotation.

The main point of failure for integration of enablers at the company level has traditionally been with the engineer platoon. Units have routinely wasted critical time emplacing obstacles and preparing battle positions simply because they did not fully understand the engineer platoon’s capabilities. In one recent rotation, the company received the engineer platoon at 1 a.m., yet no work began until 8:30 a.m. – the company wasted more than seven hours trying to figure out the engineer platoon’s capabilities and how to emplace their obstacles. This issue could have been reduced if the engineers were tied into the battalion and company planning process.

Integration of enablers begins at home station, not during a rotation. Units should receive capability briefs from their supporting units before training events to ensure a greater understanding of the support that can be provided. This can best be done as an LPD for company-level leadership, as this provides a good venue for the supporting element to answer any questions the maneuver units may have. This can be applied for all enablers, including fire-support and military-intelligence assets.

Once in a defensive posture, units usually plan to establish blocking obstacles in their area of responsibility as well as battle positions for the platoons to defend from. Also, company commanders may plan to emplace turning obstacles to turn the attacking force into the main EA. This defensive concept, built around the terrain, allows for the dismounted teams, in concert with the mortar section, to attrit the initial reconnaissance force of the enemy, thus leaving minimal targets to engage. Primary, alternate and subsequent battle positions are then prepared for each platoon to use during the engagement. Units that have not been training on DA operations or who have experienced significant personnel turnover struggle with establishing and synchronizing a good defensive plan.

Once the engineer platoon completes obstacle emplacement, they typically transition to preparing battle positions for the company. Primary, alternate and subsequent battle positions are typically prepared for the rotational unit; these are dug-in positions and are not notionally. Since battle positions are prepared, freshly disturbed terrain is noticeable around these positions. This requires fieldcraft at the lower levels to conceal these positions using natural foliage surrounding the position. It also requires fieldcraft in concealing vehicles that will be positioned in these battle positions. Far too often units do not use foliage for concealment; rather, they are content with occupying the positions as-is and prepare to defend them. This leaves not only the positions visible to the enemy, but also the vehicles that occupy them.

Use of terrain for cover and concealment greatly increases the unit’s survivability unit throughout DA rotations. Over the last decade, our force has become accustomed to entering into an operation “as-is.” The fieldcraft our junior Soldiers once mastered no longer exists at the lowest levels of our formations. Teaching junior leaders and Soldiers in our formations the skills to conceal vehicles and dismounted positions by using their natural surroundings may mean the difference in an operation. When enemy forces have a capability to observe and engage from the air, camouflaging vehicles and positions becomes extremely important.

Units should incorporate fieldcraft into regular training events. Simply establishing a battle position is not good enough if all the defending forces can be observed from the ground and air. Training should include techniques for camouflaging positions that aid in concealment while not hindering any vehicular or weapon system. Through sustained training, fieldcraft will once again become second nature in our formations.

When planning battle positions, it is important that units ensure they have interlocking fields of fire in the EA. This is typically not an issue within a company-sized formation, but is an issue with adjacent units. Coordination with adjacent units in a defense is critical in ensuring there are no gaps for the enemy to exploit. In recent rotations, units have failed to properly conduct adjacent unit coordination with sister companies to ensure all areas are...
covered. This trend has led to enemy forces exploiting gaps between company AORs and resulted in the enemy successfully breaching defensive lines.

Additional focus should be placed on adjacent unit coordination at the company and platoon level. On several occasions throughout rotations, severe breakdowns in situational awareness occurred because platoons were not communicating with adjacent units located a few hundred meters away. Platoons most often relied on the company/troop headquarters to coordinate with adjacent units and relay the information back and forth. Shorten the link by training platoons to coordinate with other elements outside the organization. By making this a focal point, junior leaders will have the confidence and initiative to make recommendations and decisions for the betterment of the organization.

The battalion/squadron normally establishes engagement and displacement criteria for the defense; this synchronizes the defensive effort for all companies defending. An example of engagement and displacement criteria are: engage when three or more enemy vehicles enter your EA and displace when three enemy vehicles have been destroyed. This same displacement criteria works from the alternate and subsequent battle positions. Under this concept, the commander can calculate the destruction of no less than 27 enemy vehicles before displacing from their subsequent positions back to their final defensive line. With adjacent companies operating under the same engagement/displacement criteria, the battalion can conceivably defeat 81 enemy vehicles before making the final defensive stand.

Fires planning for the defense must be stressed at the battalion level as a priority and cannot be thought of as a secondary security measure. Indirect-fire support is a key enabler during a DA operation. Having the ability to employ accurate and timely indirect fires often means the difference in the operation’s outcome.

Rehearsals seem to be another critical issue for rotational units. Commanders fail to provide adequate time to conduct rehearsals with their platoons before defending. In most cases, rehearsals are limited to radio rehearsals, which prove inadequate during the exercise. Commanders should incorporate rehearsals into their planning process to ensure enough time is allocated to conduct a terrain walk with their key leaders and rehearse actions on contact; this will translate to a successful defense once the engagement begins.

Most of our leaders have never conducted defensive operations and are therefore not proficient in EA development. By conducting TEWT lanes at the battalion/squadron level, we can ensure our commanders and platoon leadership is trained and ready before a DA rotation. We can further use the same model to certify leaders prior to executing a DA rotation, similar to how we certify leaders prior to conducting live-fire exercises.

Lessons-learned

Throughout these training exercises, there are many lessons-learned that should be the focus for any unit preparing to conduct a DA rotation. As with all operations, proper training and rehearsals make the key difference for success in all we do. Commanders should focus their efforts in not only doctrine but also on the basic skills at Soldier level to ensure wide-based knowledge and understanding of how to successfully execute operations in a DA environment. Some key areas that units should focus training on before conducting a rotation are terrain, employment of fire-support assets, use of dismounted teams, cover and concealment, planning timelines and coordination with adjacent units.

A larger emphasis should be placed on conducting training events that support the unit’s actions and roles in a DA environment. Company training plans must evolve to incorporate these skill sets into training year-round to ensure Soldiers maintain their proficiency in these areas. With integration of DA training into year-round training plans, incoming personnel will also have the opportunity to be trained and indoctrinated with the unit SOPs and will therefore be better prepared for a DA rotation. Simply relying on STX lanes to train our formations is unacceptable and inadequate. As the guardians of our nation, we must always be ready to deploy and assume the mission we are given. We owe it to our country to be the best-trained fighting force possible, ready for all situations and threats.

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**Acronym Quick-Scan**

- AOR – area of responsibility
- CAMFLX – combined-arms maneuver live-fire exercise
- CPX – command-post exercise
- CTC – combat training center
- DA – decisive action
- EA – engagement area
- FPOL – forward-passage-of-lines
- FRAGO – fragmentary order
- JRMC – Joint Multinational Readiness Center
- LPD – leadership professional development
- METL – mission-essential task list
- MILES – Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System
- SOP – standard operating procedures
- STX – situational-training exercise
- TAA – tactical assembly area
- TEWT – training exercises without troops