

Overtasking and Its Effect on Platoon and Company Tactical Proficiency: an Opposing Forces and Observer/Coach/Trainer Perspective

by CPT J. Scott Metz

An opposing-forces commander at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany sits in the back of his tracked vehicle, planning his mission for the next phase of the rotation. His enemy is very similar to what he has faced many times before. It consists of a U.S. brigade headquarters, a U.S. battalion with several multinational attachments and a multinational battalion comprised of units from a handful of several different nations.

The opfor commander contemplates what his enemy will do. He knows from past experience that the Americans will probably stay on or near the roads. They will stop for long periods of time in the open with minimal dispersion. They will not effectively use their dismounted infantry and will likely leave them in the back of vehicles for too long, allowing them to be killed with the vehicle. They also will probably make little use of tactical formations and will not use terrain to their advantage. Based on the opfor commander's experience, he knows the Americans are not his greatest threat. In fact, he is more worried about several of their multinational partners.

I know what the opfor commander is thinking because I was he. I spent more than three years in the opfor at JMRC. I commanded light-infantry companies, irregular forces and battalion-sized multinational mechanized task forces against many rotational units. Now I am an observer/coach/trainer (O/C/T) at the same training center. I work closely with company commanders in the same positions as those I used to fight. My observations of training units as an O/C/T have confirmed what I learned about them as an opfor commander: many of our multinational partners are more tactically proficient at company level and below than their American counterparts. In fact, several of them are significantly better trained and more prepared for war than we are.

Based on my experience at JMRC and by talking to company commanders who come here to train, I believe **U.S. Army tactical proficiency at company level and below is lower than many of our multinational partners due to a lack of emphasis on collective training and tactical proficiency at home station** prior to training at combat-training centers (CTCs).

Top Army priority?

It isn't as if readiness hasn't been identified as a problem and priority within our Army. Former Secretary of the Army John McHugh identified readiness as the Army's top priority just before he stepped down Nov. 1, 2015. He talked about how the Army was on "the ragged edge of readiness." He explained that the standard for readiness across brigade combat teams is 60 percent to 70 percent, but the actual readiness ratings at that time were between 32 percent and 33 percent.¹

GEN Mark Miley, Army Chief of Staff, also identified readiness as the top priority for the Army. He hand-wrote on the bottom of his Army Readiness Guidance to all Army leaders for 2016-17 that "[r]eadiness is No. 1 ... and there is no other number one."²

The U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) commander, GEN Robert B. Abrams, probably said it better than anyone: "Readiness has to be, and continues to be, the number-one priority in [FORSCOM]. There is no other priority. If you ever think you're going to need an Army, if you ever think you're going to use an Army, then you better have a good one, and it better be ready."³

Therefore, according to our senior leaders, readiness is the Army's top priority. However, my experience at JMRC leads me to believe that "readiness is the top priority" is not something that's trickling down to company level. Even our ready units may not be as ready as we think they are.

I assume that most units training at JMRC fall closer to the "ready" than the "unready" category as defined here due to their readiness to deploy to a CTC. However, when battalion and company commanders come to JMRC and meet their O/C/Ts, one thing they regularly tell us is how low our expectations should be due to the minimal

amount of training conducted prior to arrival. For example, one company commander told me the only training his unit conducted above the individual-Soldier level was a “check the block” squad situational training exercise (STX). Two commanders from another battalion told me they conducted a total of six weeks of mission-essential-task-list (METL) training in the 12 months before JMRC, four of which were gunnery. Neither of them had a platoon that had moved in a tactical formation together before coming to JMRC.

Companies learn a great deal when they participate in a JMRC rotation, and they always show vast improvement while they are here. However, their lack of preparation for the rotation is evident, and they spend most of the rotation learning lessons they should have learned at home station.

Armor, infantry struggle

Infantry companies and platoons struggle mightily with fundamental tactical movement, basic fire and maneuver principles, direct-fire control measures and troop-leading procedures. In fact, almost every American unit that comes to JMRC struggles with fundamentals. One example was when all three platoons from an infantry company conducted six platoon attacks as part of STX lanes. All six were executed as frontal assaults across open areas, even though in every case there was a clear concealed route for the assault element to take that would have allowed a 90-degree flank of the enemy. There was no bounding on the objective and little use of tactical formations because they had never trained as a platoon before coming to JMRC.

Armor companies struggle with many of the same fundamentals as the infantry. I covered a tank company that had conducted gunnery through Table XII (platoon level). They were very good at what they had trained. Unfortunately, gunnery was the only training they had conducted.

Reliance on gunnery as the only means of training platoons and companies inevitably leads to bad habits due to safety considerations on the range. Units default to conducting on-line frontal assaults because that’s all they have practiced. Throughout the rotation, this particular unit defaulted to a frontal assault in the open without using terrain to their advantage in every engagement. In one of those engagements, a platoon sat static in the open, engaging an enemy Leopard tank. The Leopard fired some 10 times from 10 locations in 60 seconds and never stopped moving while taking concealed routes to and from multiple alternate firing positions.

I’ve never seen an American tank do anything like that at JMRC. Our units are not at the level of some of our multinational partners – again, because they are not training on maneuver at home station before coming to JMRC. Yes, American units progressively improve throughout each rotation. However, by the end of their rotation, they are still not at the level some of our multinational partners achieved prior to arrival. The problem is not that American units are making mistakes – every unit makes many of the same mistakes as it goes through the training process. The problem is that they are making mistakes because they have not trained as a platoon or company.

I’ve worked directly with elements from at least 11 nations, so I have reason to say that our multinational partners prepare better to come to JMRC at home station so they usually do not have the same difficulties. Our multinational partners come here at a more advanced stage in their training cycle.

The stark reality is that since American units rarely conduct extensive METL training at home station, the result is that units come to JMRC to conduct battalion- and brigade-level operations with subordinate units that are highly challenged when asked to execute fundamental missions because they have not trained for them. In contrast, many of our multinational partners are very proficient at the platoon and company level. They are clearly preparing for training at JMRC and for war.

Bottom line: American units are not as prepared or ready for combat as their multinational partners are at company level and below.



Figure 1. An M1A2 Abrams tank of 1st Armored Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, conducts a tactical movement during Exercise Combined Resolve VII at JMRC in Hohenfels Germany, Sept. 10, 2016. The Combined Resolve exercises train the Army's regionally allocated forces to U.S. European Command and include more than 3,500 participants from 16 European partner nations. In general, armor and infantry companies and platoons struggle more than their multinational partners with fundamentals. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Danielle Carver)

What's the problem?

Why are American units not training at home station? There are a multitude of reasons. One of those reasons is definitely *not* that company commanders don't want to train. All they want to do is train, but there is massive frustration in current and former company commanders about the lack of training opportunities provided for them and their companies. The consensus from the company-level perspective is that they are unable to conduct sufficient METL training due to overtasking, mandatory non-METL-related training and, in some cases, spending a very high percentage of the year on red cycle.

The reduced budget and size of the Army has played at least a small role in affecting our ability to train. It may be causing some units to spend a greater amount of time on red cycle than they would have in the past, which makes it very difficult to train above the individual-Soldier level. For example, one company commander who came to JMRC told me his unit was on red cycle performing post gate-guard duty during what would have been his train-up time before coming to Germany. He said his unit was going straight back to gate-guard duty as soon as they returned.

That's not a problem a unit would likely have experienced a few years ago; extra red-cycle missions due to a smaller budget have certainly had an impact on training opportunities. However, I don't think most of the problem can be attributed to this.

Overtasking, or "the deluge of requirements" as it was called in the February 2015 report, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*,⁴ is the reason American units don't train at home station. The study makes the case that the Army overtasks subordinates to such a level that it is impossible for Army units and Army leaders to do everything they are tasked to do. The report's authors further state that since non-compliance is not a viable option, leaders must choose which tasks to conduct to standard and which tasks to just "report" that they were done to standard. The report makes the case that this "deluge of requirements" has led to ethical failing within the military. That point may or may not be true, but there is no question the deluge of requirements identified by that study is negatively impacting our ability to train our companies and platoons to fight and win in war.

Overtasking is nothing new. A 2002 U.S. Army War College study tallied all training directed at company commanders. There were 297 days of mandatory requirements for 256 available training days.⁵ These mandatory requirements have a significant impact on a company's ability to train collective tasks.

I've heard many senior leaders from lieutenant colonel to brigadier general acknowledge that there are too many tasks. They usually say that leaders need to learn where they can "assume risk" and figure out what they can afford not to do. Of course, all leaders need to be able to evaluate where to assume risk; it's part of the job. However, I don't think it's reasonable for a leader to knowingly overtask subordinates and say, "figure out what not to do."

Company commanders are put in a position in which they must assume risk by choosing to ignore or finger-drill mandatory training or directed tasks to train their company for war. What will happen to that commander if he has an incident within the company that arguably could have been prevented if he had conducted the mandatory training? Will his battalion and brigade commanders back him? Some probably will, and others probably won't. Unfortunately, that commander is risking his/her career by choosing to train the company for war rather than do mandatory administrative training. It is much easier and requires far less risk to just do what he/she is told and conduct the administrative training or fulfill the requirement.

Administrative training has measurable results, at least in percentage of Soldiers trained. METL training does not because the outcome of it is measured by the commander's subjective judgment. When something goes wrong that should have been covered by some type of mandatory administrative training, a commander is at risk if he/she is not up to date on that training. It may not matter to anyone that the company is assessed as a "T" (trained) while all the others are assessed as a "P" (needs practice) in company attack if his company has a serious incident in one of these areas and he is out of tolerance.

We must decide

We need to decide as an Army what we really want our top priority to be. Many of our senior leaders said that it is readiness. However, readiness comes largely from realistic METL training. Companies and battalions that come to JMRC spend much of their time at home station dealing with the "deluge of requirements" rather than actually training for war. As a result, some of our multinational partners are tactically more proficient than we are at company level and below because they prepare for CTC rotations and for war by training at home station.

Based on talking to company-level leadership and my own experience, mandatory training is certainly the event most likely to cancel approved METL training inside the six-week company training window. However, it is only part of the problem. Even more disturbing is the lack of calendar space that is actually devoted to METL training; calendar space is devoted to the "deluge of requirements." The other requirements may be maintenance stand-downs, operation clean-sweeps or a host of other things that seem important. Our problem as an Army is deciding what important things not to do so we can devote time to the things that are really most important.

Steps in solution

The solution to this problem is not complicated or new; it is just difficult to implement. The first two steps of the solution to remedy lack of home-station training are the same two identified by Stephen Gerras and Leonard Wong needed to fix ethical fading, which was also identified as having been caused by overtasking. We must acknowledge the problem and then exercise restraint in tasking our subordinates.⁴

The third step is the most difficult and also not new. We must change the Army culture from being overcentralized, overstructured and micromanaged to a culture of innovation that invests and trusts subordinate leaders, allows a degree of uncertainty and protects company commanders from external disruptions that prevent them from training their companies.⁵

The steps of the solution:

- **First step:** I believe we have taken the first step to acknowledge the problem. The former Secretary of the Army, Army Chief of Staff and FORSCOM commander identified readiness as a priority. We now just need to take the next step and realize how overtasking is affecting our ability to train at home station and its negative impact on tactical proficiency and readiness.
- **Second step:** We must exercise restraint when issuing tasks to subordinates. "Restraint must be established in the amount of mandatory training passed down to the force," writes Wong in *Stifling Innovation*.⁵ "Instead of making lower-level leaders decide which mandatory training or directive they will ignore, leaders at the strategic level must shoulder the burden of prioritizing which directives are truly

required.” Successfully exercising restraint goes beyond just revamping or modifying mandatory training; Wong and Gerras write that we must also scrutinize “All Army Activities, policies from major commands and directives from all headquarters in regard to their impact on the cumulative load.”⁴

- **Third step:** We must change the Army culture that is now overcentralized and overstructured to a culture of innovation that invests in (and trusts) subordinate leaders, allows a degree of uncertainty and protects company commanders from external disruptions that prevent them from training their companies.⁵ We will not be successful simply by declaring that readiness and training are our top priorities.

Unfortunately, cultural change is difficult and must start at the highest level but also affect leaders and staffs at all levels. The most difficult part of cultural change is that, to be successful, it actually requires leaders to do less. “Senior leaders need to be convinced to give standards, some basic guidelines, and then let subordinate commanders train,” Wong writes.⁵ That means an end to brigades tracking individual Soldier requirements six levels down.

We will also have to adhere to our current training doctrine and stop making changes to approved training calendars. Senior leaders must assume risk by trusting their subordinates to train their units to standard. Some units will fall short. However, most will likely exceed expectations and be much better than they would have been in the current overstructured, overcentralized environment, even though they will probably not get there exactly how their higher headquarters envisioned.



Figure 2. Slovenian troops from the 45 Center for Tracked Combat Vehicles operate M-84 main battle tanks during Exercise Allied Spirit IV in January 2016 at Joint Multinational Training Center, Hohenfels Training Area, Germany. The Slovenians partnered with U.S. Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, to play opposition forces during the training. In general, our multinational partners are better prepared for a JMRC rotation than are American units. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by SGT Brienne Roudebush)

In the current requirement-rich environment, training at home station is difficult. The solution is complex and will take time to address. However, creative leaders can find a way to mitigate the impact. Leaders at all levels can begin by asking themselves the following questions.

Company level

- Am I identifying administrative requirements in quarterly training guidance (QTG) and scheduling them on the calendar so that I am not put into a position where I have to cancel METL training at the end of the quarter to meet the requirement?
- Am I taking services into account for my quarterly training plan?

- Am I being creative in how and when I conduct mandatory training? For example, maybe I could cycle one squad or platoon at a time through the training while everyone else is on gate guard.
- When unexpected requirements arise causing me to lose personnel, am I immediately canceling planned training or do I conduct it as best I can with the personnel I have available?
- Am I maximizing the use of digital training resources when other resources are not available?
- As part of the quarterly training brief (QTB), do I send up reclaims for directed requirements that will negatively impact approved training?
- When I reclama, am I effectively articulating the real impact of that requirement on my training proficiency and readiness as a company?

Battalion level

- Are we issuing QTG?
- If so, are we using the military decision-making process (MDMP) in its creation?
- Are services and other similar requirements covered in QTG and the QTB?
- Given that there are more mandatory requirements than can be conducted in a given year, are we specifically identifying which ones our subordinates should conduct in a given quarter?
- Are we doing our best to honor approved training schedules as a contract between company commanders and the battalion commander?
- Who is the approval authority for additions and subtractions to the training schedule inside of the six-week window?
- When short-suspense requirements arise, are we conducting real analysis on who can support it with the least impact to planned training, or are we equally tasking all subordinate units?
- Are we conducting real analysis on short-suspense requirements prior to passing them to our subordinates to identify whether we should instead submit a reclama?
- Are we seriously analyzing reclaims submitted by our subordinates and advocating for them when a requirement is going to affect their METL proficiency?

Brigade level

- Are we issuing training guidance to our subordinates?
- If so, are we using MDMP in its creation?
- Are we blocking off time for subordinate units to conduct METL before we fill the calendar with other requirements?
- Given that there are more mandatory requirements than can be conducted in a given year, are we specifically identifying which ones should be the focus?
- Are we doing our best to honor approved quarterly training as a contract between commanders?
- Who is the approval authority for additions and subtractions to the approved training calendar outside of about an eight-week window?
- When short-suspense requirements arise, are we conducting real analysis on who can support it with the least impact to planned training?
- Are we conducting real analysis on short-suspense requirements prior to passing them on to our subordinates to identify whether we should instead submit a reclama?
- Are we seriously analyzing reclaims submitted by our subordinates and advocating for them when a requirement is going to affect their METL proficiency?

Take-aways

We were once considered the undisputed best maneuver force in the world. We probably still are the best army in the world due to our unique ability to project power. However, many of our allies, and likely some of our potential enemies, are now tactically better than we are at company level and below because we do not train enough at home station.

The problem is primarily the overwhelming amount of non-training tasks we place on our subordinates. This conclusion is based on my experiences at JMRC and discussions with other junior leaders. They do not have the

time to truly prepare their units for war. We must acknowledge we have a problem with a lack of home-station training that is affecting readiness. Senior leaders at all levels must exercise restraint when tasking subordinates, taking into account the cumulative load of requirements.

Finally, we must change the Army culture to allow subordinate leaders to have flexibility to train their units based on commander's intent rather than a long list of specified requirements. If we want to be the best-trained army in the world, we must make readiness through METL training the priority that takes precedence over all other requirements.

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Notes

¹ Michelle Tan, "Interview: U.S. Army Secretary John McHugh," *Defense News* (on-line), Oct. 21, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/leaders/interviews/2015/10/21/interview-us-army-secretary-john-mchugh/74341166/>.

² GEN Mark A. Miley, *Army Readiness Guidance, Calendar Year 2016-2017*, January 2016.

³ Michelle Tan, "Abrams: Army needs 'realistic training' for readiness," *Military Times* (on-line), Oct. 12, 2015, <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/defense/show-daily/ausa/2015/10/12/abrams-army-needs-realistic-training-readiness/73807692/>.

⁴ Leonard Wong and Stephen J Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015.

⁵ Leonard Wong, *Stifling Innovation: Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002.

Acronym Quick-Scan

CTC – combat-training center

FORSCOM – (U.S. Army) Forces Command

JMRC – Joint Multinational Readiness Center

MDMP – military decision-making process

METL – mission-essential task list

O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer

QTB – quarterly training brief

QTG – quarterly training guidance

STX – situational training exercise