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# TRAINING FOR THE NEXT CONFLICT

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**T**he Army always prepares to fight the last war. This cliché is one that may be true at the unit level, where leaders take their combat experiences and pass lessons learned on to junior Soldiers and leaders, but as a whole it is not true. In the history of the U.S. Army, there are several examples which show the opposite has been true. Most notably, after the last major, protracted conflict (Vietnam), the Army steered away from the idea of long drawn out counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and towards a force focused on lightning-quick maneuvers designed to inflict maximum destruction on the enemy and bring down an opposing state in the quickest possible manner.

We are once again at a crossroads as our involvement in Iraq has ended, and we are winding down our involvement in Afghanistan. Amidst budget issues, personnel uncertainty, and the lack of a clear future mission, the Army is left to figure out how to focus and train Soldiers, units, and leaders for future combat operations. Depending on one's observations, an individual might conclude that COIN is done and that future wars will be fought in "conventional" means against opponents such as Iran or North Korea. Other opinion-makers look at the situations in places like Mali or Somalia, and see a continued campaign against terrorists, insurgents, and criminal threats. Depending on the scenario they see, one may advocate for returning to pre-9/11 training focused on large scale, decisive operations while others may focus on continued training geared towards countering the hybrid threats faced in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade. To put it more bluntly, in more commonly used terms, do we focus on "getting back to the way things were" or "building on all the combat experience and lessons learned from multiple deployments and years of war?"

The reality is that we have to focus on a full range of possible operations (which is also what the most recent Army doctrine tells us to do in FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*.) The world right

now has a mix of state threats and non-state organizations which seek to harm the U.S. and our allies. This is not a new world order, just one that America has become much more aware of in the last 10 years thanks as much to 9/11 as to the internet and mobile phones. So how do units prepare for essentially "anything and everything?" They have to integrate the past and the future, both recent history and forgotten history, mixed with some knowledge of world realities, to come to an understanding of what we will likely face in the future.

This is a complex idea that could be debated ad nauseam at the expense of time and focus, but there are certain truths from "the way things were" and "the lessons learned from war" that leaders should build into training plans for deployments and operations in conflicts and areas we have yet to see, much less understand.

In this article, I will present goals that should guide unit training plans and attempt to support the inclusion of those goals with current and historical evidence while also offering simplified ideas for training to accomplish these goals. Hopefully, the collection of these goals will represent an agreeable way forward between advocates of returning to a conventional approach and experienced practitioners of COIN who want to capture hard-won experience.

The ideas here are essentially threads for training operations that can be infused into every training scenario. They are a basic framework for leaders looking to maximize training for an uncertain future battlefield. Completely framing the next fight is difficult until it happens, but leaders can focus on a broad range of skills that create the conditions for success across all types of situations.

The goal in adopting these priorities is not to usurp commander's guidance, mission essential task list (METL) priorities, or other training requirements, but to give leaders a way for achieving multiple training objectives on top of those previously established training plans. They are intended to train technical and doctrinal skills as

much as they are intended to train leaders in how to be agile and adaptive leaders.

Just like previous successes, the outcome of the next major conflict will be determined in large part by our preparation. The goal of our training and themes should be to break down this complex environment into ideas that our junior leaders and Soldiers can understand.

## Training the Fundamentals

The 75th Ranger Regiment long ago adopted the "Big 5" goals for training: marksmanship, medical skills, battle drills, physical training (PT), and mobility. Put simply, these are basic skills that can be integrated into every training scenario and they are important to every level of conflict. When Soldiers don't know exactly what to expect — or simply for the fact that conflicts can quickly change based on a variety of influencers — these are core skill sets that leaders can always plan training around if they want to build a force that is lethal and survivable. Fortunately, in an era of current and future budget cuts, they are often skills which can be trained at a basic level with relatively few resources.

The best way to train fundamentals is repetition and frequency. Like any learned skill, they are perishable over time. However, training just one of these skills at a time can be very time and resource intensive. Therefore, leaders should seek to integrate these fundamentals into every training scenario and environment until infusing them into every event becomes second nature.

One example of integration could be going to a range. Regardless of the mode of transportation, mobility procedures can be trained any time a unit moves personnel between two points. Soldiers should learn to conduct movement briefings, practice convoy standard operating procedures (SOPs), and familiarize themselves with various roles within the vehicle. Once at the range, Soldiers can dismount just off of a road and move tactically onto the range for occupation. This could involve a short patrol that reinforces dismounted



Photo by PFC Pedro Amador

*Rangers from 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, as part of a combined security force operating in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, prepare for extraction.*

movement SOPs, then an occupation that includes setting up overwatch and security positions. Obviously once Soldiers are on the range, they focus on marksmanship, but medics in attendance should also come prepared to conduct round-robin training as Soldiers rotate off the range.

This is only a basic example and the ways to integrate these components into every aspect of daily Soldier life are limited only by the creativity and work ethic of leaders. The key is to keep training repetitive and regular but also challenging in order to increase competency and maintain focus.

In the area of fundamentals, leaders should also consider reemphasizing field time and fieldcraft in their training plans. The nature of operations over the past 10 years has allowed the Army to live and work from forward operating bases (FOBs)/combat outposts (COPs). This will likely not be the case in future low-intensity or high-intensity conflicts, particularly at the beginning. Simple things like field hygiene, priorities of work, choices and preparation of equipment, and long-term sustainment are things that many of today's young Soldiers haven't had to think about. The transition to FOBs from field life is much easier than transitioning

from FOBs to the field, and many of the habits for living outdoors can only be built by actually spending time in the field.

### **Training Adaptable Leaders ... Who Understand the Bigger Picture**

Possibly one of the biggest failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan was a failure to understand the nature of the insurgency that was building right beneath our noses. We must train leaders who understand the varying nature of conflict, and more significantly, train leaders in the capability to adapt to the phase of conflict they are in. Similar to the Marine Corps' concept of "The Three Block War," Army leaders may find themselves moving from full scale conflict to peacekeeping operations or from stability and support operations to targeted raids to remove insurgents from the battlefield.

Inherent in getting this right is an understanding of what is going on with the population that surrounds a unit. In order to properly assess these factors, leaders must be capable of interacting and receiving feedback from the local populace, higher level staff, and their own subordinates. They can hold beliefs about what stage of conflict they are operating in, but they must also be able to have that belief challenged

in order to redirect their efforts in an appropriate manner.

Training adaptable leaders is one of the hardest things we are called upon to do simply because it is hard to develop metrics for success and is reliant on styles of thinking that may require significant adjustments for even the most intelligent, capable, and successful leaders. One of the most immediate ways leaders can train adaptability is through developing a professional reading program. In almost any environment, leaders can push their subordinates to read pieces about historical and current foreign conflict. Using these examples, units can generate discussion about how future scenarios might compare to these conflicts and how leaders did or did not make good decisions when faced with them.

### **Getting Back to Conventional Conflict**

Eleven years of war have clearly made it harder to allocate time to "conventional conflict" against a fully armed state, or what FM 7-0 refers to as "major combat operations."

In light of getting back to the planning fundamentals, we must rehearse our

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planning and execution of large-scale conflict. Yes, COIN is messy and difficult, but its success is also based largely on thousands of small interactions that are often a result of the focus areas of leaders and organizations. COIN is something that needs to be understood, but training COIN when we don't know where we'll apply it can mean a severe loss of focus, and more importantly, it could mean we train for the wrong COIN fight by setting up a hubris that makes us miss cultural nuances or what stage a particular insurgency is in.

Conversely, large-scale land warfare is also hard, and many young leaders fail to give it credit because they associate it with a rigid culture that existed while this type of warfare was en vogue. Truthfully, we need to get back to understanding and rehearsing what it looks like to fight as a company, battalion, brigade, or division element. If pushed for the truth, many company and even battalion level leaders would probably reveal that they have not been involved in any type of training that involved fighting with even company-sized formations. Moving these chess pieces can be difficult, and we are lacking in the types of fast, heavy warfare that allowed us to be so successful in Desert Storm and the Thunder Run.

Unfortunately, training these kinds of maneuvers requires extensive time, dedication, and resources. The ability to facilitate this type of training often lies at the brigade level and above, but this doesn't mean it can't be trained at the company and battalion levels. Leaders at these levels must plan training that accomplishes company-level tasks that are a part of these operations. They must also be willing to step outside of their comfort zone and learn through reading

### **“Soft” Engagement Matters as Well**

The fear of many young leaders is that the imperatives for training conventional conflict will absorb the skills required and acquired over the last 10 years for engaging with a population. This includes everything from human terrain mapping, to key leader engagements (KLEs), to cultural understanding, to patrolling, to developing networks both for understanding and engagement. Whatever our next mission is, no matter how small or how large, these components will be a requirement.

Conducting humanitarian operations requires engagement with local leadership but so does the aftermath of major combat operations. In a time where our relationships and reputation matter, there is a good chance the U.S. military will continue to be involved in exerting soft power by looking like the “good guy” in helping out where we are needed around the world. However, in the event we have to execute hard power by launching an invasion or similar action, we are sure to need a plan for after the fact and that plan will certainly involve the skills of “soft” engagement. If the last 10 years have taught us anything, it's that we can't expect to win with might alone.

Therefore, these skills should be continually integrated into training plans for all types of operations. On the back of a combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX) or combat training center (CTC) rotation focused on high intensity conflict, leaders should engage in KLEs, network analysis, and cultural engagement that mimics what a post-conflict environment might look like. Training these scenarios is not necessarily straightforward, but it also isn't necessarily resource intensive.

Perhaps one of the most often ignored requirements for any type of warfare, but particularly one that requires engagement with a population or non-uniformed enemy, is enemy and terrain analysis. Units should make efforts to build training scenarios against all types of enemies, from those using tanks to those using improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They also need to spend time building the capability to analyze populations, engage with official and unofficial leaders, assess security situations, and otherwise identify the capacity and shortfalls involved in creating a stable security situation.

Commanders should look for opportunities to put these practices to work through building thought capacity. Though less nuanced than efforts to understand a foreign population, young leaders can apply network-mapping techniques and soft engagement skills simply by looking at the environments that surround them at home station.

### **Understanding Technology**

The deployed environment offers maximum exposure to the U.S. military's many technological developments that have

occurred over the past 11 years. Enabler elements, which may be located across the country, are suddenly integrated into everyday practices, and concepts for their use become practical realities. Through often unfortunate circumstances, the deployed environment also gives Soldiers a chance to see enemy technology up close and personal. As the Army transitions out of Afghanistan, we must continue to not only capture lessons learned but also continue to integrate advanced technology into training. Today's young Soldiers grew up with the internet, tablets, and cell phones. They can learn military technology quickly if they are just given the chance.

This is perhaps the most difficult aspect to train for and anticipate, particularly because our younger Soldiers who are even just 10 years behind current company commanders, are often much more adept at using technology than those determining training goals and plans.

Looking at individual experiences over the last 10 years could lead one to focus training to a certain type of area at a certain period of time, as could looking back to the Cold War. The reality is that Iraq was different from Afghanistan, Ramadi different from Baghdad, 2007 different from 2010. To train for the next war, we need to focus on skill sets adaptable to all phases of conflict. If we look at the entire last 10 years, that becomes apparent. Understanding the imperatives of high-intensity conflict led to successful invasions (they were successful in overthrowing existing governments, regardless of the merits of their intentions or the success of the aftermath), but understanding how to transition from violence to peace also became important. Sustaining those gains towards peace through engagement with locals and training host nation forces also proved to be the linchpins for removing U.S. forces from the situations. The key to training for the next fight, whatever it may be, will be training focused on all phases of conflict. Those leaders who understand phased conflict, as opposed to being validated on their ability to conduct violence, will be the leaders who create success for U.S. forces.

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