

Train to Outthink, Outmaneuver and Outfight Enemy

by 1LT Hyun J. Chang

The enemy the United States is likely to face in future conflicts will be quite different from those we've engaged in recent decades. Future enemies will likely:

- Be a near-peer who possesses capabilities similar to or better than ours;
- Want to win as bad as we do, with an untethered opposing, hostile and independent will;
- Learn and adapt to how we fight;
- Need to be "hunted" through reconnaissance; and
- Will not be easy to predict.

But do we currently train to fight and win against such an enemy? No. Instead, in most of our training, we fight an opposing force (OPFOR), a roleplayer who is often scripted and told to act a certain way to enable the training unit (TU) to achieve a training objective. Our missions are usually terrain focused – to seize key terrain – with an enemy that is either on the objective or inbound.

But terrain doesn't move or think. Is there a better way to train? Yes. By conducting a free-play force-on-force (FoF) exercise where each side is precisely the enemy described above. It is the superior way to train and how we should train every time. It trains a unit to "outthink, outmaneuver and outfight the enemy" instead of "pursuing perfection in method rather than obtaining decisive results."^{1,2}

Free-play training not new

Using a free-play exercise isn't a novel concept. William Lind describes in his book, *4th Generation Warfare Handbook*, that free-play is the "best training" and that it "must constitute the bulk of the curriculum" for officers in preparation for war.³ He also wrote that "most training should be [FoF] free-play because only free-play approximates the disorder of combat."⁴

Free-play training isn't just a concept that resides in books, and it isn't new. In 1941, in preparation for World War II, the U.S. Army conducted the Louisiana Maneuvers, FoF exercises that involved about 400,000 Soldiers over 3,400 square miles. And some of the officers present later became very influential generals such as Omar Bradley, Mark Clark, Dwight Eisenhower, Walter Krueger, Samuel Anderson, Lesley McNair, Joseph Stilwell and George Patton.⁵

This article aims to demonstrate how effective free-play training is, based on an actual free-play FoF exercise called Rifle Focus, conducted Oct. 4-18, 2021, by a Stryker infantry-battalion task force (TF). From the planning phase of the exercise, it was blatantly obvious how the concept of a free-play exercise was now foreign to the U.S. Army. When planners sought support for the exercise, it was met with higher-institutional reluctance and skepticism.

Table 1. Commander's intent for rifle focus.	
<p>MISSION STATEMENT: Battle Group Poland (BG-P) conducts FoF maneuvers Oct. 4-18, 2021, on BPTA, Poland, to train company teams on all battle-group METs.</p>	
<p>PURPOSE OF THE TRAINING EVENT: To practice fighting as company teams in a realistic/competitive environment that will allow the battle group to practice, refine and validate all warfighting, interoperability and exercise-control skills.</p>	
<p>VISUALIZATION OF TRAINING OF TRAINING EVENT</p>	
<p>Mission statement two levels up Multinational Division Northeast BG-P has the mission to conduct a defense-in-depth in northeast Poland vicinity of the Suwalki</p>	<p>Battalion training objectives (cont) 4) Conduct deep and close reconnaissance and security operations to enable battle group combined-arms</p>
<p>CONCEPT SKETCH:</p> <pre> graph TD IPW[IPW] --- LoE[Increase BG-P decisive-action-proficiency line of effort LoE] MPW[MPW] --- LoE FPW[FPW] --- LoE HICON[HICON rehearsal] --- LoE Sustainment[Sustainment rehearsal] --- LoE EXCON[EXCON rehearsal] --- LoE Comms[Comms rehearsal] --- LoE Fires[Fires rehearsal] --- LoE Mission[Mission-command rehearsal] --- LoE </pre>	

corridor to gain time for NATO reinforcements.	operations. 5) Exercise distributed mission command. 6) Execute expeditionary logistics over extended distances. 7) Manage real-time risk to mission and risk to force effectively. 8) Learn and get better each day.	
Desired outcome: “winning” Leaders at echelon learned through experience and have a lasting mental model of how to train to outthink, outmaneuver and outfight the enemy.		
Training focus Improving BG-P METs through repetitions by “being in the box” and by being the coach.	Key tasks (conditions that MUST exist) -Plan the exercise using the JELC cycle. -Conduct an O/C/T academy and develop and publish an EXSOP.	<p>The diagram illustrates the flow of training. On the left, two yellow starburst shapes labeled 'RF 1' and 'Rifle Fury' have blue arrows pointing right towards a larger yellow starburst labeled 'RF 2 (CPX)'. The top arrow is labeled 'Increase BG-P decisive-action proficiency LoE'. Below this, a box labeled 'Redeploy' is connected to a fan of blue arrows pointing right towards the text 'spreads' and 'WAARNG'.</p>
Battalion training objectives (T,C,S) 1) Increase BG-P decisive-action proficiency through realistic force-on-force maneuver training. 2) Increase interoperability between NATO allies. 3) Synchronize intelligence, reconnaissance and fires.	Develop and rehearse an exercise-control mission-command enterprise. -Execute a series of rehearsals by warfighting functions. -Sustain the exercise to ensure there are no “missed reps.”	
Risk to force: Soldiers taking unnecessary risks because of the competitive environment. Mitigated through O/C/T coverage and EXSOP adherence. Risk to mission (desired outcome): Exercise control and HICON inexperience creates too much friction so exercise suffers. Mitigated through deliberate series of rehearsals prior to “game day.”		Key concern: Enough exercise control that ensures safety while achieving BG-P training objectives.

Despite the lack of external support, the TF commander, LTC Craig A. Broyles, enabled the TF staff to plan, prepare and facilitate a true free-play FoF exercise, one in which the company teams entered an arena to fight one another in a competitive environment. What was the result? CPT Trey A. Botten, a company commander who participated in the exercise, said it “was the most effective training I’ve ever experienced.”

What was Rifle Focus?

Rifle Focus was a FoF multinational maneuver exercise conducted in Poland at the Bemowo Piskie Training Area (BPTA). As the capstone training event for Battle Group Poland (BG-P), it exercised support capabilities as well as command and control. Boyles, commander of both BG-P and the U.S. TF Dark Rifles from the Washington Army National Guard (WAARNG), oversaw the entire training exercise.

Rifle Focus brought together military units of the United States, Romania and Croatia to train with the Polish Territorial Defense Force, testing them all as a combined force. The U.S. contingent was comprised of units from

3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry, 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) – called the Dark Rifles – Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 146th Field Artillery Regiment; and Troop A, 1st Squadron, 82nd Cavalry Regiment.

Why the name “Focus?” Broyles and his staff focused on training BG-P’s mission-essential tasks (METs): expeditionary-deployment operations such as alert/marshal/deploy (A/M/D), area security and defense, and attack. Special focus was placed on interoperability, or the units’ ability to integrate and operate in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) environment alongside allies.⁶

Each of the three rifle companies formed a company team, and they fought one another in a competitive environment. Company teams included all elements of BG-P, including mobile-gun-system (MGS) and anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) Strykers, a field-artillery platoon, Romanian Gepard short-range air-defense platoon, Croatian multiple-rocket launchers, U.S. combat engineers and Polish combat engineers. Our allies were eager to be a part of this competitive FoF exercise.

The 15 days of exercise consisted of three five-day rotations, where the first two days of each rotation was reception, staging, onward-movement and integration (RSOI), and later three days “in the box.” Each company team was in the box for all three rotations, two as a TU and one as an observer/coach/trainer (O/C/T) team.

Rotation 1					Rotation 2					Rotation 3				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
RSOI		In the Box			AAR / RSOI		In the Box			AAR / RSOI		In the Box		
		C Co vs. B Co					A Co vs. C Co					B Co vs. A Co		
		O/C/T: HHC and A Co					O/C/T: HHC and B Co					O/C/T: HHC and C Co		

Figure 1. 15-day exercise schedule.

Each three-day rotation “in the box” consisted of three battle periods (BPs):

- A/M/D and receipt of the mission;
- Meeting engagement; and
- Defend/attack to destroy.

In the first BP, each company team received an alert from the BG-P headquarters to deploy into the tactical-assembly area, upload its ammunition and establish a defensive posture. Then it received its order to destroy the enemy. Once each team received the mission, the second BP began. Each team began the troop-leading procedures (TLP) process and executed its mission to destroy the other team. Once the meeting engagement was over, the last BP began when both teams received a fragmentary order (FRAGO) to either defend in sector to destroy the enemy or to attack to destroy the enemy.

Since there was no Blue Force or opposing force (OPFOR) in the exercise, each team was assigned as either Gold or Black Team. All the vehicles were marked with gold or black flags on their antennas, and Soldiers wore a gold or black armband to distinguish the different teams.

Each team’s leadership from squad leader and above had an O/C/T assigned. Only six humvees were used for each O/C/T team, and all O/C/Ts for squad leaders rode inside the Strykers of the squad they coached to minimize artificiality and limit the number of O/C/T vehicles trailing the TUs.

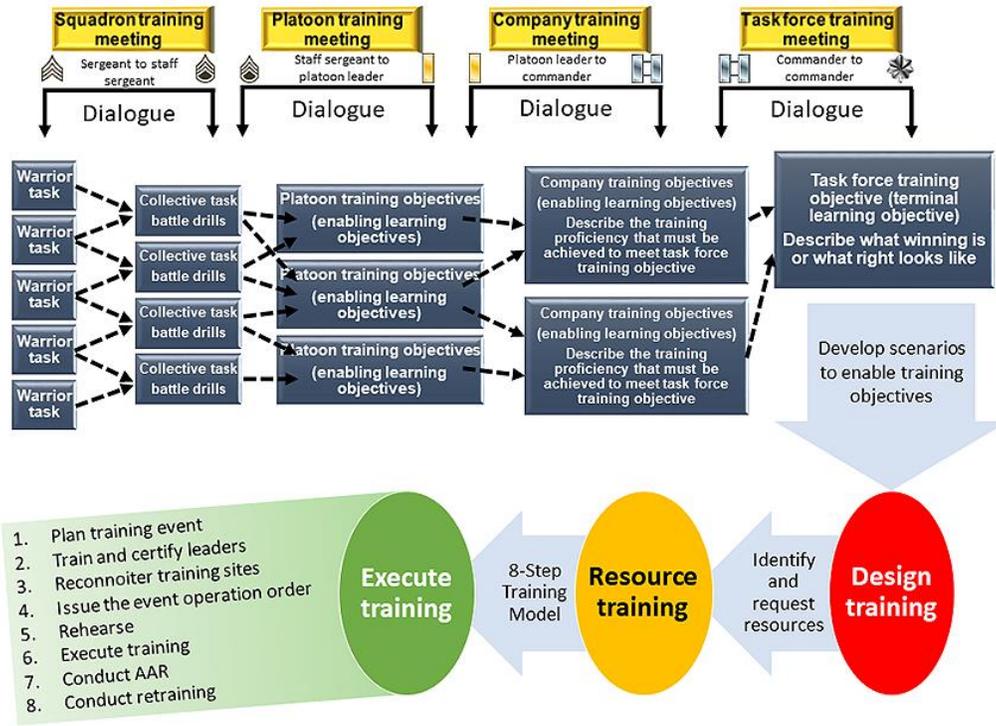


Figure 2. TF Dark Rifles training planning guidance.

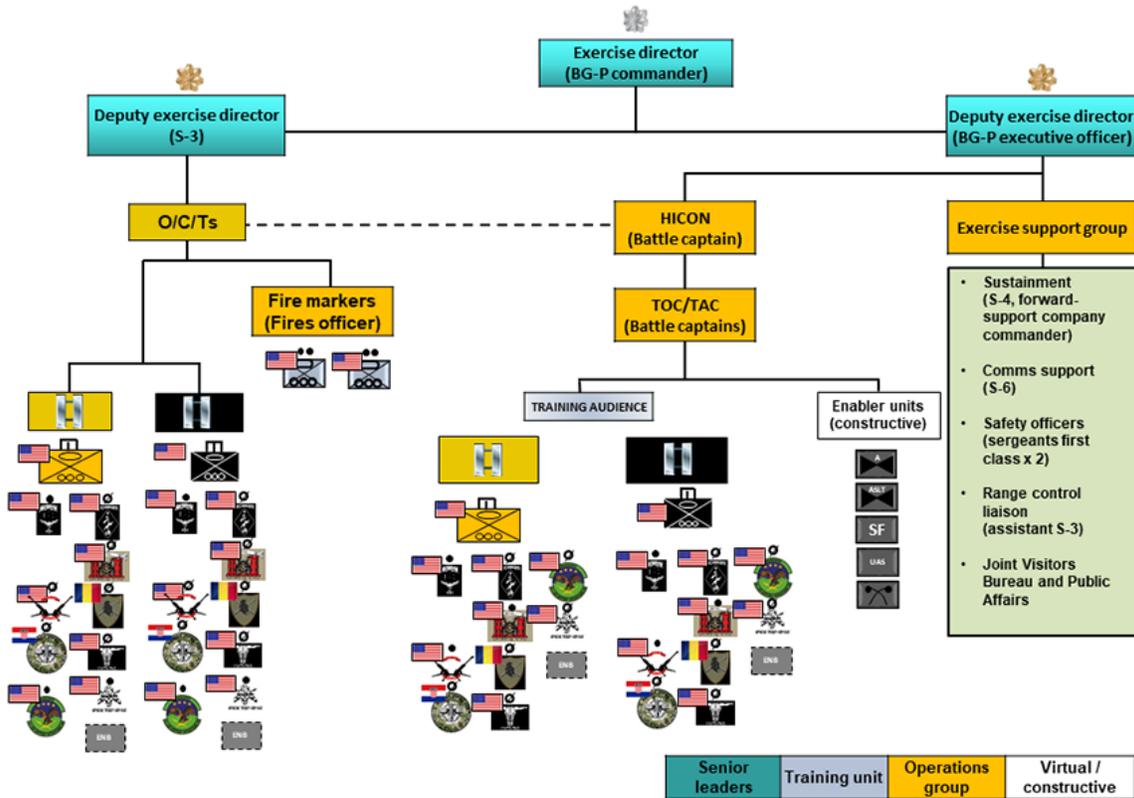


Figure 3. Rifle Focus task-organization.

Training without MILES

Rifle Focus was conducted without the use of multiple integrated laser-engagement systems (MILES). However, given the heavy vegetation on the terrain where BG-P was training to fight, MILES lasers simply wouldn't be effective. Instead, BG-P developed extensive exercise standing operating procedures (EXSOPs) that outlined how O/C/Ts were to adjudicate casualties and effects during the exercise.

In the end, exercising the adjudication process was valuable training on its own. To adjudicate accurately, each O/C/T needed to understand the effect of each weapons system, including all indirect-fire (IDF) assets, and how cover, distance, and an element's posture affects the damage done to it.

Rifle Focus based on 4 ideas

Rifle Focus was based on four ideas from the following books and article: (1) competition drives excellence (*Top Dog* by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman); (2) champions are built by consistently training at the threshold of failure (*The Talent Code* by Daniel Coyle); (3) only free-play training brings in the central element of war: free creative will of the opponent (*Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, edited by Richard D. Hooker); and (4) you learn the most when you teach others, and to teach, you must know what you're talking about (*TIME* magazine, "The Protégé Effect" by Annie Murphy Paul).^{7, 8, 9, 10}

Competition drives excellence.¹¹ Rifle Focus was designed to bring out the competitiveness in every company commander and Soldier. Months prior, we announced that at the end of the 15-day capstone exercise, there could be only one winner. They were to conduct training to accomplish the mission of Rifle Focus: to find and destroy the opponent. This allowed subordinate units to prioritize training to discover their own ways to outthink, outmaneuver and outfight the enemy.¹² Each commander assessed and trained the real needs of their element instead of checking the boxes on a checklist of things to do.

Table 2 is one company's training plan to prepare for Rifle Focus.

Table 2. Bear Company's training plan leading to Rifle Focus. (Editor's note: a <i>bronegruppa</i>, meaning an armored group, refers to a group of fighting vehicles, such as Strykers, when the Soldiers have dismounted and the vehicles are occupied only by the driver and the gunner. The <i>bronegruppa</i> is usually commanded by the company executive officer and can be used to provide direct-fire support to dismounted troops.)		
DATES: Aug. 2-5 LOCATION: Tank range TRAINING: Platoon gunnery and short-range marksmanship PURPOSE: Certify crews in platoon live-fire gunnery employing <i>bronegruppa</i> and incorporate dismounted weapon squads to clear enemy observation posts. FOCUS: Crew qualifications, Stryker/squad integration on non-static range, anti-tank weapon employment. RISK TO TRAINING: Weather, ammunition supply, range-coordination conflicts.	DATES: Aug. 17-20 LOCATION: Klusy TRAINING: Squadron FoF situation-training exercise (STX) PURPOSE: Squadron capable of employing overlapping sectors of fire in islands of resistance. FOCUS: Ambush, knock-out bunker, engagement-area (EA) development, range cards, direct-fire control measures (DFCMs), obstacle employment, battle drill development, peer O/C/T. RISK TO TRAINING: Ammunition restrictions.	DATES: Aug. 24-27 LOCATION: Klusy TRAINING: Platoon FoF STX PURPOSE: Employ islands of resistance at platoon-level planning for indirect fires and integrating Strykers into our defense. FOCUS: EA development, DFCMs, obstacle emplacement, <i>bronegruppa</i> , moving from inaction to action, peer O/C/T. RISK TO TRAINING: Ammunition restrictions.
DATES: Sept. 7-9 LOCATION: Wyreby TRAINING: Machinegun stress shoot PURPOSE: Fighting to a position of advantage to employ automatic fire based on terrain/threat DFCMs. FOCUS: Ambush mentality, terrain/threat-based DFCMs. RISK TO TRAINING: Co-use with Company A.	DATES: Sept. 18-23 LOCATION: South Hills TRAINING: Platoon live-fire exercise PURPOSE: Provide realistic, scenario-based live-fire training in wooded / restricted terrain enabling fighting to positions of advantage/DFCM according to terrain and threat. FOCUS: Live-fire <i>bronegruppa</i> , safe / fast / aggressive battle-drill	Rifle Focus

	employment, simulated casualty treatment and evacuation. RISK TO TRAINING: Existing targetry supporting scheme of maneuver.	
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During training meetings, commanders briefed their training plan to prepare their units to be more efficient at fighting the opponent. The entire TF, including sustainers and staff, were intent on meeting the objectives of the capstone training event, either to fight to destroy the enemy or to enable company teams to do so. The focus was on “obtaining decisive results,” not “perfection in method.”¹³

The competitive environment not only created effective training plans but created excitement and motivation among the formations. CPT Brandon G. Legg, commander of the field-artillery battery, said that at the end of each rotation, his Soldiers were “discussing how the battle went, often leading to discussions about how one platoon or gun was faster than the others and how many times one platoon was able to take out the other platoon.”

Results, not process

Rifle Focus incentivized results, not the process. The winner of the 15-day exercise was determined based on who was most efficient at destroying the enemy. The scoring system was developed to incentivize destroying the high-payoff targets that will cripple the enemy, rather than just killing more troops/vehicles.

Table 3 is the scoring matrix. Once personnel/vehicle were killed, the regeneration process began, where personnel killed or vehicles destroyed had to conduct movement to the personnel holding areas and wait four hours until released back to the exercise.

Table 3. Scoring criteria for Rifle Focus. The winner was the Bear Company, 3-161 Infantry. Each company team competed in two three-day battle periods during the exercise, and the winner was awarded to the team with the highest cumulative points. The exercise was designed to reward results, so points were awarded when personnel/vehicles were destroyed, with personnel/vehicles of higher importance gaining higher points.					
Per vehicle destroyed		Per person killed		Bonus points	
Infantry combat vehicle	+5	Rifleman/scout	+1	Recon elements detect other team first	+5
Mobile command vehicle / remote vehicle	+20	Team leader	+2	Excellence observed by Top 5 (commander, command sergeant major, executive officer, S-3, ops sergeant major)	+10
Gepard (air-defense artillery)	+20	Squad leader	+5	Intel exploitation	+10
Command vehicle / load-handling system / wrecker	+25	Platoon leader or platoon sergeant	+10	Trauma intervention	+10
MGS / ATGM	+25	Commander or first sergeant	+25	Faster start point out of motorpool	+10
Volcano / M777	+50				
Fueler	+55				

During Rifle Focus, it didn’t matter if company teams completed all the correct steps and processes. The only thing that mattered was if they could accomplish the mission to find and destroy the enemy. The company commanders and platoon leaders weren’t restrained to and graded on a checklist such as all the correct elements of the TLP process. Instead, as soon as the commanders received the battalion order, they were free to immediately begin reconnaissance (or not; the choice was theirs) and develop and issue an order as extensive or bare as they felt would optimize their chance of winning combat.

Training at threshold of failure.¹⁴ Rifle Focus was designed to train the companies at the threshold of failure by creating a training environment they’d never experienced before.¹⁵ First, all missions during the exercise were

based on destroying the enemy. For the first time in their careers, company commanders were fighting a real peer-threat with the same capabilities as theirs, free-thinking and with an untethered opposing will. No one knew where the enemy would be or where the battle would occur. Each team had to “hunt” (outthink) the other team using reconnaissance.

Secondly, more stress was added by giving company commanders troops and equipment in an amount they'd never commanded before, increasing “the number of decisions [they] must make.”¹⁶ Each company team included its own MGS and ATGM Strykers, a field-artillery platoon, Romanian Gepard short-range air defense, Croatian multiple-rocket launchers, a U.S. long-range surveillance team, U.S. combat engineers and Polish combat engineers, totaling about 40 vehicles and 200 Soldiers. Each commander had to fully exercise mission command and decide how to do it on his own – what extra responsibilities to entrust to the executive officer, first sergeant, fire-support officer and other subordinate leaders, and how autonomous to make their attachments.

That meant attachment leaders had to recommend to company commanders how best to use their capabilities and areas of expertise. An example of this was how to properly employ the remote anti-armor mine/area-denial artillery munition family of scatterable minefields (FASCAM). The U.S. combat-engineer squad leader attached to each company was required to use the 17-line scatterable-minefield request for proper FASCAM authorization. This typically would be completed by the engineer platoon leader/platoon sergeant to support the maneuver commander or coordinated by the TF engineer.

Placing these tasks on the engineer squad leader challenged this leader to perform at a higher level of responsibility, and the maneuver commander in turn gained experience in how combat support can shape his scheme of maneuver. Through multiple repetitions of employing FASCAM over the course of the exercise, each echelon of leaders gained a better understanding of the planning and coordination necessary for enabler authorizations from higher headquarters.

Lastly, more mental stress was imposed on the commanders by constant pressure to provide reports to paint an accurate picture of the battlefield to the TF commander. By design, each team wasn't the main effort in their battalion's mission. That meant if they wanted to request battalion assets, such as unmanned aerial systems (UASs) from the Polish unit that volunteered to join the exercise, or constructive close air support from the Joint terminal attack controllers, each commander had to articulate to the TF commander through accurate reports why he should grant them more assets to support the battalion mission.

Operating 2 battalions with 1 staff

The idea of training at the threshold of failure was equally true for the staff. To make the exercise work, every staff section had to solve for “yes” with a great attitude, usually resorting to a new and creative idea that hadn't been tried before. The exercise was planned using the Joint exercise lifecycle (JELC), and staff officers were taught and coached by the TF commander about the process.

During the planning and preparation processes, staff created two battalion orders and two Road to War / warning order (WARNO) / operations order (OPORD) / FRAGO briefs. Staff also task-organized to be able to battle-track and support two teams. Sometimes a single person had to wear two hats, such as to be the S-2, S-4 or S-6 for both Gold and Black teams.

After rigorous assessment by appointed safety officers, an exercise map was created with battalion checkpoints and phase lines, then the S-2 created a world for company teams to fight in. To eliminate as much artificiality as possible, all boundaries and restricted areas had to make sense – labeled as the area of operations (AO) for adjacent units, enemy minefields, etc.

Due to the safety measures and coordination in place, the 15-day exercise was conducted without any serious injuries or accidents. There were real-life vehicle-recovery situations, but they all added to the training value by providing opportunities to use recovery assets/personnel and by placing stress on the command teams in coordinating recovery during combat.

Facilitating the exercise required creativity, especially from the S-6 section. They engineered the Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P) system so each team could not see the other teams' locations on their JBC-P. The tactical-operations center (TOC) and tactical command post (TAC) had to monitor and receive reports from both

teams with one set of battalion equipment. To make this happen, the S-6 shop instrumentally used parts from the command-post (CP) platform vehicles to establish two CP systems. They supported both TUs with one retransmission (retrans) team, and they created two communication plans.

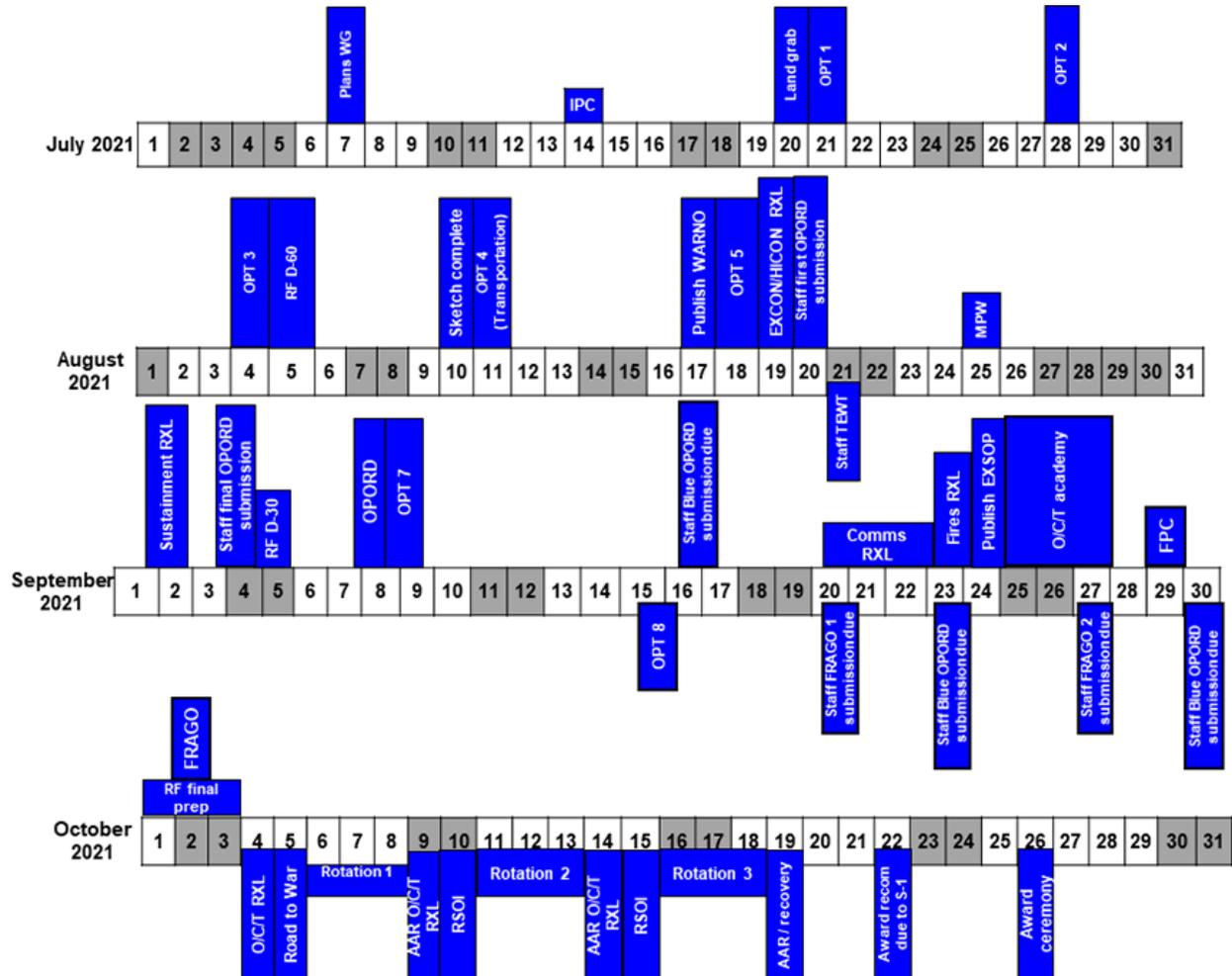


Figure 4. Rifle Focus JELC timeline.

Despite all planning and preparation, once the exercise commenced, S-6 had to adapt to unanticipated changes such as thick vegetation in the AO, forcing retrans to collapse inward to support the vastly limited range of very-high-frequency communications. When one TU's communication plan was acquired by the other team, S-6 had to quickly create another one (although the exercise director rewarded a TU's capture of intel by awarding points and allowing the capturing unit to exploit the other side's communication card for several hours). Overall, the unpredictable nature of the free-play FoF exercise created abundant opportunities for the staff to solve problems under pressure.

Fighting a free-thinking enemy.¹⁷ Every effort was made to make this a true free-play exercise. Other than safety measures in place to ensure the exercise could be executed safely, everything was in play. Companies were given their constraints and restraints during the orders brief, and then they were allowed to use their creativity to find and destroy the enemy.

Executing a true free-play exercise had many unique characteristics, one being TUs' experiencing the difficulty of finding an intelligent, moving enemy that was trying to avoid detection in a massive, heavily forested training area. Since there was no OPFOR who was alerted of the approaching TU, sometimes TUs circled each other or fought a ghost enemy they assessed to be at a certain area – which would be realistic when fighting a real enemy. In such cases, the exercise director played a role in keeping the momentum going.

As an example, once TUs spent enough time being pressed by the TAC to determine the enemy's location and intent, the TF commander would occasionally inject enablers. The enablers provided intelligence to the TU with better reports of an assessed enemy's commander's intent. Or, sometimes, the TF commander shifted the main effort to a TU and set a no-later-than time to attack across a phase line, forcing a decision in combat.

Teachers learn the most.¹⁸ Lastly, Rifle Focus was based on the idea that you learn the most when you teach others.¹⁹ Rotations were intentionally built to give every company an opportunity to become the O/C/T. All leaders knew they had to train and coach by the rules, so leaders at all levels intently studied the EXSOP. And to everyone's surprise, the idea that O/C/Ts are hated proved untrue, as all O/C/Ts did their best to coach and facilitate the exercise, and the TUs cooperated, each knowing their turn to trade places was coming. Since everyone knew they had to be O/C/Ts at some point, leaders showed respect and professionalism toward their peer O/C/Ts.

The effectiveness of O/C/T teams was made possible by the three-day O/C/T academy, conducted with full participation of all team leaders and above. All leaders were of the same understanding that "there may be a lot of friction points, but we're going to figure it out." It was required of all peer O/C/Ts to be fair and impartial professionals.

Results

Rifle Focus accomplished precisely the training objectives of the exercise: to become better at outthinking, outmaneuvering and outfighting the enemy. As the exercise unfolded, each company team learned to be better at incorporating fire and maneuver, using reconnaissance to find the enemy, then using IDF assets to attack the enemy's critical vulnerabilities. Company teams drastically increased their emphasis on finding the enemy. They fully used infantry to conduct reconnaissance missions, and they called for fire. During the exercise, more than 150 fire missions processed, and this also fully exercised the logistics assets by creating the need for logistics packages and caches.

Company teams learned the importance of operating dismounted and of conducting anti-armor ambushes. Dismounted ambushes abounded in later rotations and were the primary way direct-fire kills were achieved. In one of the rotations, a platoon sergeant from Cobra Company, SFC Schuyler D. Sampsonjackson, led his platoon dismounted through thick vegetation, found the enemy commander's Stryker, destroyed it using AT-4 and Javelin fire, and then called for fire to mask his exfiltration out of the area – outthinking, outmaneuvering and outfighting the enemy.

Rifle Focus demonstrated how a free-play FoF exercise is a superior way to train. Every company team experienced growth from its first rotation to the next. They weren't afraid to learn from each other, taking what worked and immediately implementing it to improve how they operated. One example was how one company team reduced its time to A/M/D from almost four hours to 52 minutes in just two days. That required meticulously fine-tuning how its Soldiers drew weapons from the arms room, completed communications check and moved 40-plus vehicles and 200-plus Soldiers out of the motorpool. That illustrated how our formation was capable of figuring things out to win the race and outmaneuver the enemy.

The true value of Rifle Focus was the opportunity to genuinely assess our units. Each rotation reflected the effective nature of our past training. After each rotation, each unit had internal after-action reviews (AARs) at squad and platoon levels and facilitated AARs at the company-team level. During each AAR, the focus was on identifying what we're good at, what we need to train at each echelon, what it meant for our way forward and how we should drive our future training based on our self-evaluation. Leaders were focused on how to change the outcome – how to be better at outthinking, outmaneuvering and outfighting the enemy. The focus was on making ourselves better as an organization, not the exercise.

"Rifle Focus was different from other exercises simply because we had the opportunity to be creative," said Botten, commander of Bear Company, the winning team of Rifle Focus 2021. "It was the first time in my military career when I was not limited to a lane, a scenario, or left and right limits. I had the opportunity to employ different forms of maneuver at different periods of the battle, exploit when able, retrograde when required and was only limited by my imagination and combat power. It was a tremendous opportunity to test my strengths and

limitation in task-organization of enablers, and I had the opportunity to think critically how my opponent would fight, then find a way to beat him.

“This was the most effective training I have ever experienced, and I am grateful my company had the opportunity to be a part of it,” continued Botten. “We gained a better understanding of terrain sense; how to separate the mundane from the important; how to build a common operating picture through reporting and mission-command systems; and how to fight an opponent that wanted to win just as much as we did. We also had the opportunity to employ decentralized methods to achieve my intent due to limitations of operational timelines and changes of the battle period. This forced me to move away from the traditional TLP process and get back to [Field Manual] 3-0 tactics in finding the enemy, identifying the opponent’s intent, developing and executing a course of action – as opposed to going into the fight with a well-refined, well-rehearsed plan.

“As a commanding officer, I was the training audience and was tested in every capability – training at the threshold of failure,” Botten said. “The competitive atmosphere encouraged us to take the training seriously and give every ounce of effort at every echelon to win. I did everything I could to determine the opponent’s course of action, develop a plan to beat him and then impose a creative will against him. It was awesome.”

Free-play FoF training to this scale wasn’t something soldiers from other nations were used to, especially since they were training with other nations. Even when some soldiers had multinational training, it was usually limited to experience of other nations’ weapon systems.

“Rifle Focus was all about how competition drives excellence,” summarized Broyles. “Soldiers knowing they are competing against their peers rather than an assigned OPFOR intensified their preparation and execution. They really experienced what fighting a near-peer adversary would look like. The intent was combining competition with external peer observers in a free-play exercise that created as close to a real combat environment as possible. The outcome was deep experiential learning of lessons our Soldiers would never forget.

“‘You really do win by reconnaissance,’ I heard a senior leader say to his company, for example. What I learned from Rifle Focus is we have developed comfort and a natural tendency to attack and seize terrain objectives, but the skills and techniques to find and destroy an enemy formation are different,” Broyles said. “I and my formation had lost the art of a movement-to-contact, then maneuvering to destroy an enemy rather than seizing terrain. Post-Rifle Focus, we revamped our entire training plans to consolidate and build on our lessons-learned. The outcome was better than I had ever imagined. Competition drives excellence.

“Rifle Focus was also all about integrating/cooperating with our NATO allies,” said Broyles. “We are never going to fight alone, and enemies exploit seams, gaps and joints. Therefore it is imperative we seal up those gaps created when two different armies operate side by side. We practiced this over and over by fully integrating our forces with allies and practicing taking advantage of their capabilities we did not have. In the end, our leaders understood the value of our NATO allies we and have consider multinational solutions in all we do.”

“Rifle Focus was a great opportunity to work with our allies in [the] field to test our tactics and find the best possible way to work together and achieve victory on the battlefield,” said Croatian Army 2LT Luka Pavičić.

“It was the last exercise for us here in Poland and I enjoyed it a lot,” commented Romanian Army 1LT Bogdan Toma. “In the exercise I learned about U.S. capabilities, Croatian capabilities. It was great. I hope that we will have this kind of exercise more.”

Conclusion

Contrary to all doubts, once the exercise commenced, the entire BG-P began operating like a single unit, engaging and using every part of the machine. It required flexibility at all echelons, from the rifleman to staff, and all the way to the TF commander. Leaders at all levels learned to adapt and figured it out to keep going and accomplish the mission.

Rifle Focus created precisely what Lind described as the ideal training to produce adaptive leaders, placing leaders in “difficult, unexpected situations, then [requiring] them to make decisions and take action under pressure.”²⁰ Above all, it created and engraved in future leaders a mental model of what effective training should look like: a

free-play FoF exercise. Once you experience it, you won't want to go back to situational-training exercise (STX) lanes. Everyone should train like this.

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Notes

¹ Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, Headquarters Department of the Army: Washington, DC, Aug. 23, 2016.

² Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and Airland Battle*, New York, New York: Presidio Press, 1994.

³ W.S. Lind and U.S. Marine Corps LTC G.A. Thiele, *4th Generation Warfare Handbook*, Castalia House, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Louisiana Maneuvers," Wikipedia; retrieved Oct. 30, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Louisiana_Maneuvers&oldid=1042011463.

⁶ LTC Craig A. Broyles, "Dark Rifle 6 Training Guidance," 2021.

⁷ Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, *Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing*, New York, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014.

⁸ Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown*, New York, New York: Random House Business, 2020.

⁹ Richard D. Hooker, editor, *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, New York, New York: Presidio Press, 1993.

¹⁰ Annie Murphy Paul, "The Protégé Effect," *TIME*, Nov. 30, 2011, <https://ideas.time.com/2011/11/30/the-protege-effect/>.

¹¹ Bronson and Merryman.

¹² ATP 3-21.8.

¹³ Leonhard.

¹⁴ Coyle.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Army Doctrine Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*, Headquarters Department of the Army: Washington, DC: July 31, 2019.

¹⁷ Hooker.

¹⁸ Paul.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lind and Thiele.

Acronym Quick-Scan

AAR – after-action report

A/M/D – alert/marshal/deploy

AO – area of operations

ASLT – assault

ATGM – anti-tank guided missile

ATP – Army techniques publication

BPTA – Bemowo Piskie Training Area

BG-P – Battle Group Poland

BP – battle period

CP – command post

CPX – command-post exercise

DFCM – direct-fire control measure

EA – engagement area

EXCON – exercise control

EXSOP – exercise standard operating procedures

FASCAM – family of scatterable mines

FoF – force-on-force

FPC – final planning conference

FPW – final planning work group

FRAGO – fragmentary order

HICON – higher control
IDF – indirect fire
IPC – initial planning conference
IPW – initial planning workgroup
JBC-P – joint battle-command platform
JELC – Joint exercise lifecycle
LoE – line of effort
MET – mission-essential task
MGS – Mobile Gun System
MILES – multiple integrated laser-engagement systems
MPW – mid-planning workgroup
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
O/C/T – observer/coach/trainer
OPFOR – opposing force
OPORD – operations order
OPT – operational planning team
RF – Rifle Focus
RSOI – reception, staging, onward movement and integration
RXL – rehearsal
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team
SF – Special Forces
STX – situational-training exercise
TAC – tactical command post
TEWT – tactical exercise without troops or training exercise without troops
TF – task force
TLP – troop-leading procedures
TOC – tactical-operations center
TU – training unit
UAS – unmanned aerial system
WAARNG – Washington Army National Guard
WARNO – warning order
WG – working group



Figure 5. SPC Michael Schwader, a Soldier assigned to 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, pulls security during Rifle Focus with a M240B machinegun Oct. 16, 2021, at BPTA, Poland. Different companies competed against each other as part of Rifle Focus, Battle Group Poland’s two-week-long capstone maneuver exercise. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Jameson Harris)



Figure 6. SGT Sig Johnson, a Soldier assigned to 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, aims an inert M3 Carl Gustav anti-tank rocket Oct. 16, 2021, at a designated target during Rifle Focus at BPTA, Poland. Different companies competed against each other as part of Rifle Focus, Battle Group Poland's two-week-long capstone maneuver exercise. *(U.S. Army photo by SPC Jameson Harris)*



Figure 7. U.S. Army National Guard SSG Vireak Sok, with 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, leads a Soldier through a forest during Rifle Focus at Poland's Bemowo Piskie Training Area Oct. 8, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland, supporting two U.S. infantry

companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance.
(U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 8. U.S. Army Soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, prepare a .50-caliber M2 machinegun on a Stryker during Rifle Focus at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Oct. 6, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland supporting two U.S. infantry companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 9. U.S. Army military vehicles with 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, take defensive positions during Rifle Focus at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Oct. 6, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland supporting two U.S. infantry companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 10. Croatia Land Forces Privat Ivan Kudric from Storm Battery takes fire elements on a Multiple Rocket Launcher System sighting device during Rifle Focus at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Oct. 8, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland supporting two U.S. infantry companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 11. Croatia Land Forces soldiers from Storm Battery respond to a simulated alert to deploy during Rifle Focus at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Oct. 6, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland supporting two U.S. infantry companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 12. Romanian Land Forces soldiers from the Sky Guardians receive a call for fire during Rifle Focus at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, Oct. 8, 2021. Rifle Focus is a force-on-force U.S.-led training exercise that involves allies from Battle Group Poland supporting two U.S. infantry companies. This exercise measures command-and-control and maneuver tactics to support the NATO alliance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)



Figure 13. U.S. Army SGT James Wright, a combat engineer assigned to 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, teaches Polish Territorial Defense Force soldiers how to use soft demo explosively formed projectiles during Rifle Focus Oct. 16, 2021 in Bemowo Piskie Training Area. This demonstration was one of many opportunities NATO allies had to work together and learn from each other during Rifle Focus, enhancing interoperability. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Jameson Harris)