

Developing a Generation of Combat-Ready Leaders:

Why BCTs Must Conduct Fire Support Coordination Exercises

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“There is still a tendency in each separate unit ... to be a one-handed puncher. By that I mean the rifleman wants to shoot, the tanker to charge, the artilleryman to fire. ...That is not the way to win battles. If the band played a piece first with the piccolo, then with the brass horn, then with the clarinet, and then with the trumpet, there would be a hell of a lot of noise but no music. To get harmony in music, each instrument must support the others. To get harmony in battle, each weapon must support the other. Team play wins. You musicians of Mars... must come into the concert at the proper place and at the proper time.”

— MG George S. Patton Jr.

Address to the 2nd Armored Division
Fort Benning, GA, 8 July 1941

Replicating the realistic nature of combat is critical to maintaining relevance and readiness within the Army today. At the brigade combat team (BCT) level, nothing is more important than developing our leaders and building lethal companies, troops, and batteries (C/T/B) to increase readiness as a force. In the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 25th Infantry Division, we decided executing a fire support coordination exercise (FSCX) was a critical piece to that evolution and training path. BCTs must invest the time and energy to plan, resource, and execute an FSCX to develop C/T/B leadership, build combat readiness, and to ensure quality multi-echelon training at each level.



A mortar team with 2nd Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, sends rounds downrange during a fire support coordination exercise on 19 November 2019 at Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii. (Photos by SGT Thomas Calvert)

First, it is important to understand what an FSCX is. For many years, Infantrymen called an FSCX a “walk and shoot,” an operation where leaders would walk through a range while controlling indirect fire systems through a designed mission scenario. Traditionally, an FSCX is focused on training and evaluating fire support personnel only. Our brigade’s plan focused on the development and evaluation of the maneuver commanders along with their fire support personnel. The FSCX is a leader development exercise involving the maneuver and control of direct and indirect fires along with echelons above brigade (EAB) assets. Prior to outlining the justification for the FSCX, the planning and execution of the operation are outlined below.

Planning the FSCX

Approximately eight months prior to execution, the brigade commander gave his intent on the design of the exercise. The staff immediately launched into deliberate analysis and a planning process to determine the path to execution. The first three months focused on the design of the operation and range as well as the support requirements at a conceptual level of detail. The final five months of preparation moved the staff from conceptual to detailed planning, including weekly in-progress reviews (IPRs), multiple reconnaissance trips to the island of Hawaii, and the complete development of the live-fire exercise (LFX) range. Our commander’s intent was to develop an FSCX that included every organic indirect system within the brigade, while including available attack aviation, air assaults, and U.S. Air Force (USAF) assets. This required the staff to design a range that allowed the impact of munitions just outside of danger close, which is defined doctrinally as just outside of Area A (maneuver limit of advance per munition) (see Figure 1). The brigade commander wanted company/troop (C/T) commanders to have the flexibility to determine which assets to use throughout the range. That meant designing safety danger zones (SDZs) with overlapping weapon system limits of advance (LOAs). For example, if an enemy mortar platoon presents itself, C/T commanders could potentially employ their organic mortars, call for fire with brigade artillery, or direct AH-64 attack helicopters to engage the target. Building SDZs for all weapon systems at a danger close distance was a critical and time-consuming part of the planning process. In the end, we found this was a geometry problem based on the gun target line between the location of the position area artillery (PAA)/mortar firing point (MFP) and the location of the designated target. The brigade staff developed tremendously through the detailed planning and execution of this operation and gained incredible knowledge in fires planning and asset employment considerations.

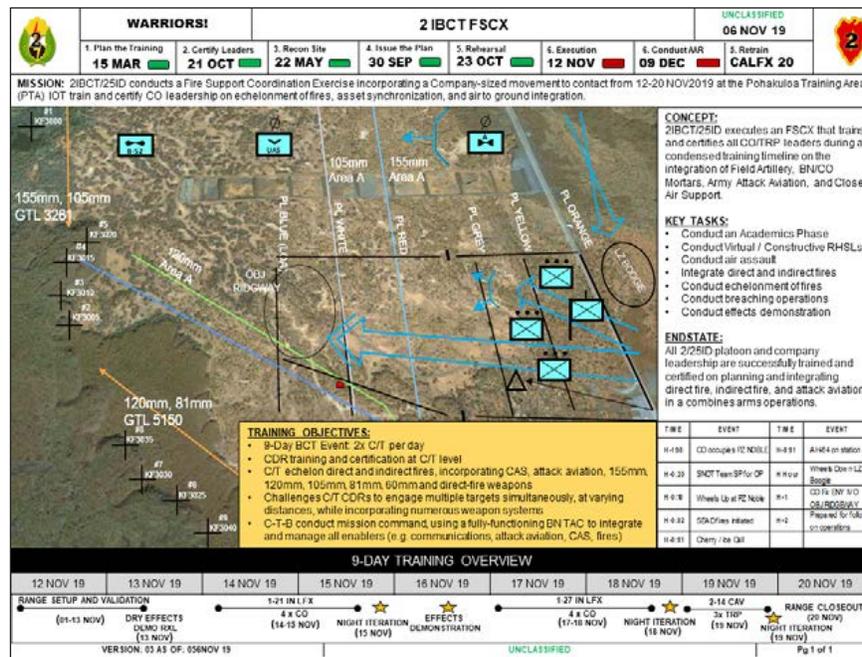


Figure 1 — 2/25 IBCT FSCX Concept of Operation



A Soldier with the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division plans out fire missions during a fire support coordination exercise on 19 November 2019 at Pohakuloa Training Area.

Execution: 12-20 November 2019

The brigade executed the FSCX at Pohakuloa Training Area (PTA) on the island of Hawaii. This range allowed for the inclusion of all organic mortars, artillery, attack aviation, and live USAF B-52 Stratofortress sorties. The operation occurred over a 10-day period where each battalion/squadron was given two days to execute its portion of the FSCX. Two companies executed the FSCX each day with one selected for a night operation. Prior to the start of each battalion's iteration, the brigade staff and brigade commander led a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT). The TEWT began at the start of the range and ended at the LOA. The brigade staff covered safety requirements, locations of direct and indirect fire targets (TGTs), and the LOA for each weapon system.

Three weeks prior to execution, the companies/troops received the tactical operations order and attended an academics week. This allowed all units to arrive to the FSCX with a deliberate plan and baseline knowledge of indirect fire tasks, air-to-ground integration, and maneuver concepts. Task organization for each C/T was platoon sergeant (PSG) and above, all C/T fire support teams (FiST), a two-man sniper team, and a 12-Soldier weapons section led by a weapons squad leader (approximately 38 Soldiers per C/T). The weapons section forced the maneuver commander to simultaneously control direct and indirect fire weapon systems in addition to a multitude of external assets. The external assets available to the commanders included attack aviation, low level voice intercept (LLVI) team, electronic warfare, Puma small unmanned aircraft system (UAS), and a Shadow (medium UAS). Each battalion executed a TEWT, which was led by the brigade commander and staff. The TEWT was the only opportunity to walk the range before executing live, which made this operation a "cold-hit" live fire, meaning no dry or blank fire iterations were conducted. We mitigated the risk by observing all C/T combined arms rehearsals (CARs), conducting the battalion TEWT, utilizing pre-command captains as observer-controller/trainers (OC/Ts) assigned to each platoon, and minimizing direct fire systems to only the 12-man weapons section. The greatest mitigation/control measure was executing the operation through the brigade tactical command post (TAC). The TAC consisted of the following personnel: brigade commander/command sergeant major (CSM), fire support coordinator (FSCOORD), operations officer (S3), intelligence officer (S2), fire support officer (FSO), and the brigade aviation officer (BAO). The brigade commander and S3 controlled the operation, pace of injects, and complexity. On separate exercise control (EXCON) nets, the brigade FSO cleared all indirect missions prior to their execution, and the BAO did the same for AH-64 missions. During fixed-wing iterations, the USAF joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) walked with the brigade commander and S3 to provide oversight and control.

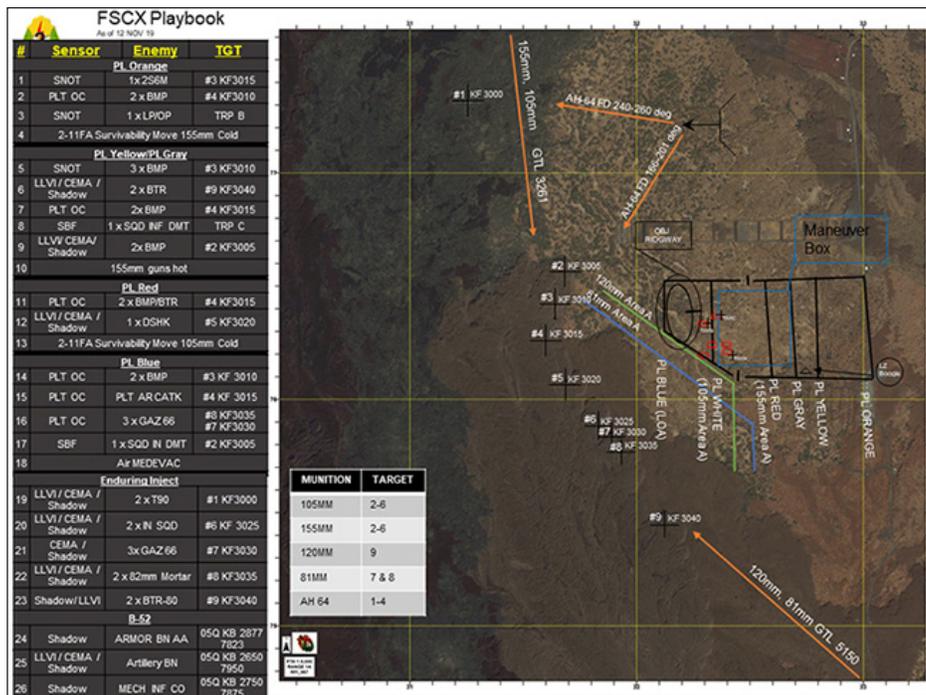


Figure 2 — 2/25 IBCT FSCX Playbook

Each iteration began in pick-up zone (PZ) posture at the designated PZ six kilometers from the range. Four UH-60s from the 25th Infantry Division Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) flew the C/Ts to the helicopter landing zone (HLZ) located at the start of the range. We used a “play book” with a number of injects assigned to a designated TGT on the ridgeline (see Figure 2). The play book had a total of 26 injects and was carried by all OC/Ts and the brigade TAC controlling the mission. To illustrate the process, the brigade commander would call an OC/T walking with a platoon and assign an inject number. For example, Inject 4 was a Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty (BMP) section at TGT Number 5. This prompted the OC/T to verbally tell the platoon leader/sergeant (PL/PSG) they were receiving effective fire from a BMP section and visually orient them to the target on the ridgeline. The PL/PSG and the forward observer (FO) would then plan the fire mission and call it up to the C/T commander and FSO. This process would continue from the beginning to the completion of the range at the LOA. The further a unit maneuvered down the range, the fewer assets were available to use due to SDZs. At the beginning of the range, the C/T commander had all mortars, artillery, and attack aviation available. At the LOA, the commander could only mass the effects of 60mm, 81mm, 120mm, and attack aviation. The most effective commanders managed their round allocation and were able to mass systems/assets simultaneously. The range had three groups of dismounted targets to stimulate direct fire and increase complexity for the commander. Every iteration ended with a 45-minute after actions review (AAR) to discuss sustains and improves.

Overall, we found C/T commanders did a very good job planning and preparing for the operation. The C/T CARs were thorough, included all enablers and JTACs, and most used injects to simulate the perceived intensity of the operation. The commanders who chose to fight the enemy and not get fixated on the echelonment of their fires plan tended to perform much better. Overwhelming feedback during AARs was an underestimation of the difficulty managing the complexity of the operation. Frankly, the commander-first sergeant (1SG)-FSO teams were overwhelmed synchronizing the direct/indirect fight and the reception/processing of multiple simultaneous fire missions.

Justification

Developing Leaders: The FSCX was justified as the brigade’s primary leader development event for the fiscal year; it allowed the brigade commander to focus on all his priorities:

- 1) Leader development,
- 2) Lethal C/T/Bs and battalions,
- 3) Combat readiness, and
- 4) Team building.

The brigade envisioned the FSCX as a critical building block for leaders progressing to external evaluations, combined arms live-fire exercises (CALFEXs), and the brigade combat training exercise (CTE). This operation taught leaders how to mass effects at the decisive point, tactical capabilities of joint fires assets, command and control, and most importantly the ability to solve complex problems under intense live-fire conditions. The brigade commander continually talks to leaders about developing and becoming adaptive, flexible officers and NCOs who are prepared to lead our country's Soldiers to win in battle. This exercise was designed to test this very concept. The brigade leadership passionately believed combat should not be the first time junior leaders should control echeloned assets, feel and see the effects of large munitions at close range, and be placed under a tremendous amount of stress. As an example, the first time many of the senior leaders within the brigade experienced live ordnance drops from an aircraft was in combat as young officers and NCOs.

The FSCX set conditions to apply intense pressure on the formation through a multitude of real and notional injects. At times, C/T commanders were receiving fire missions from three different platoon leaders on three different targets, and they were able to effectively engage these TGTs with three different assets. Complexity and confusion are natural in combat, and it was our goal for every commander to experience similar conditions during the exercise. The brigade commander viewed the operation not only as an evaluation but, more importantly, as a learning experience for every leader in the brigade. If a commander was doing well, the brigade commander would increase the complexity while keeping the scenario to a manageable level. No leader should be comfortable during the execution of an FSCX or any other training mission. The playbook was a key tool to empower the brigade commander to control the pressure on a given C/T commander.

In addition to the primary training focus of fire support coordination at the C/T level, the brigade also planned an effects demonstration in the middle of the 10-day training event. Every C/T/B commander and 1SG, as well as all brigade and battalion staff officers, were required to attend the demonstration. The purpose of the effects demonstration was twofold:



A gun team with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment "Wolfhounds," 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, lays suppressing fire during an FSCX on 17 November 2019. The FSCX is one of the most realistic training events offered, allowing junior leaders to gain practical experience with calling coordinated fire missions and observing fires effects when paired with a maneuver element.



Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment observe incoming fires effects during an FSCX on 18 November 2019 at the Pohakuloa Training Area.

- Establish a baseline knowledge of the fundamentals of suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, and assault (SOSRA) at echelon; and
- Synchronize breaching, direct fire, indirect fire, and attack aviation at the decisive point.

The brigade S3 acted as the maneuver commander of a notional element which included a sapper platoon and heavy weapons section. Unlike the C/T-evaluated iterations, the effects demonstration included a mine-wire breach with bangalores and a live mine-clearing line charge (MCLIC) detonation. As we maneuvered through the lane, an S3 staff captain narrated the events unfolding on an FM radio net monitored by all leaders walking behind the demonstrators. With the aid of several staff officers who also provided OC/T support, we controlled the movement of the audience to the edge of Area A prior to initiating suppression missions. This occurred for every munition from 60mm mortars all the way through attack aviation 30mm and 2.75-inch rockets. The FSCX allowed the brigade commander and staff to deliberately coach, teach, mentor, and evaluate all C/T commanders within the organization. This was a tremendous learning experience for all leaders involved, whether evaluating, serving as an OC/T, or simply walking along as an observer.

Build Combat Lethality: The FSCX significantly increased the combat lethality of the brigade staff and maneuver leaders. Most combat veterans experience the employment of fires from direct, indirect, and aviation assets in urban or mountainous terrain. One goal of the FSCX was to build the combat readiness and “experience” within the organization. Undoubtedly, 2/25 IBCT is more prepared to fight and win in war upon completion of this operation. C/T commanders controlled and delivered munitions from all mortar systems, 105mm and 155mm artillery cannons, AH-64s, and live bomb drops from B-52s. These leaders better understand the employment, capability, and effects of these weapon systems.

Today’s operational environment forces leaders to solve problems through a joint lens. The FSCX involved the inclusion of the 25th Air Space Operations Squadron and B-52s from the 96th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron out of Guam. Every C/T commander was assigned a JTAC team with early inclusion during the planning process and CAR. For most of the leaders, this was the first time they had worked with the USAF and certainly the first time controlling live bomb drops. All echelons, from brigade staff to the platoon leaders on the line, are better trained from the integration of our USAF brothers and sisters in the exercise. The partnership will only increase lethality

heading into the brigade's Joint Readiness Training Center rotation and any future worldwide deployments.

Through the innovative work of the brigade S2 shop and the brigade engineer battalion (BEB), we worked manned-unmanned teaming (MUM-T) with the B-52s and our organic Shadows. Delta Company, 65th BEB successfully executed the first MUM-T between the RQ-7B and B-52. The UAS platoon coordinated and planned with the USAF JTACs assigned to 2/25ID to assist in the delivery of munitions. The UAS platoon successfully performed a TGT laser spot with the B-52s to provide the 25th Infantry Division and Pacific Air Force's (PACAF) first off-board laser spot track between the Army's RQ-7B and B-52s. This allowed 2/25 IBCT and PACAF to increase understanding of joint capabilities and integration in a multi-domain operational environment. After two sorties and 14,000 nautical miles of transit, the JTACs and Shadow UAS were able to deliver 15,000 pounds of live munitions, both dumb and laser-guided, onto target. This was a significant feat, captured by the USAF and included in Air Force Academy and *Business Insider* publications.

Commanders were forced to simultaneously control direct and indirect systems. As described in the introduction, the ability to mass effects is a critical task involving both the science and art of leadership. To be musicians of Mars, as stated by Patton, our commanders must understand and employ all weapons at the right time, on the correct target, and with the proper asset. This typically required commanders and FSOs to prioritize which targets, based on the high pay-off target list (HPTL), were serviced first. Often, our commanders processed fire missions in the order received, not on servicing the most lethal enemy threat first. For example, some commanders would fixate on completing the fire mission on an enemy mortar section while waiting or not acknowledging the enemy BMP platoon initiating fires on them. This also involved understanding the effects of a given munition. Utilizing 105mm or 120mm on enemy tanks or BMPs is probably not the right choice if one has attack aviation or 155mm dual-purpose improved conventional munition (DPICM) available. Through the design of the range, commanders were able to simultaneously mass effects from 120mm, 81mm, and attack aviation with 2.75-inch rockets and 30mm from the LOA. This taught leaders the true capabilities of weapon systems, both organic to the brigade and those found in echelons above. Too often the science behind a combat operation is overlooked or taken for granted. C/T commanders along with their FSOs constructed plans to utilize and echelon all weapons systems accounting for capabilities and minimum safe distances.

Lastly, inclusion of the CAB was critical to the quality of the operation. C/T commanders controlled AH-64s for the entirety of the operation. Due to the gun target line, they were forced to decide when to commit attack aviation and when to hold them back while employing indirect fire systems. Air assault operations were a secondary training objective for the FSCX, but we found significant development and learning in this area. As an IBCT, all leaders must be comfortable conducting air assault planning and execution. All C/T CARs included lift and attack aviation pilots, which increased shared understanding and added tremendous training value.

Multi-Echelon Training: In a given fiscal year, limited opportunities exist for brigade and battalion staffs to operate together in a simulated combat environment such as the FSCX. It is critical to maximize every collective training event to achieve the most training objectives possible. In addition to the typical shoot, move, and communication tasks, 2/25 IBCT continually encourages inclusion of multi-echelon mission command training. We used the FSCX to exercise multi-echelon training from the company to brigade level. This included a full workout for battalion/squadron current operations staffs and the brigade tactical operation center (TOC). The brigade TAC controlled the fight on the lane and included the brigade commander/CSM, S3, S2, FSO, and BAO. The brigade executive officer (XO) controlled the current operations (CUOPS) floor and handed off the fight to the TAC once the live fire and air assault conditions check were complete.

The warfighting functions at all echelons were fully employed at every opportunity. All fire missions were called through the fires cell in the battalion and brigade TOCs. The brigade controlled and de-conflicted the airspace (UAS/rotary wing/fixed wing), ground assets, medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) operations, and the air assaults. Each iteration included real-world signal intelligence through the LLVI teams, electromagnetic warfare emitter, and PUMA/Shadow flights.

The focus of the FSCX was the evaluation and development of the maneuver commanders, but the ancillary training across all mission command echelons was invaluable. This was a building block event for the staffs in preparation for the upcoming CTE and Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation.

Counter-Argument

The organizational energy to plan, resource, and execute an FSCX is significant. This will consume the planning efforts with the brigade staff for months on end. The decision to commit to such an operation is further hindered by risk aversion, complexity of range construction, and the fact that class V ammunition is not allocated within standards in training commission (STRAC) per Army guidelines.

Risk and Range Construction

The process of designing the range and SDZs for danger close munitions was as valuable as the operation itself. The artillery battalion and brigade staff learned a tremendous amount developing the framework of the range including the locations of TGTs, PAAs, MFPs, dismounted TGTs, and the edge of Area A. One goal of the effects demonstration was to move the observers as close to every munition as possible within Army regulations. The science behind the design of the range is what allowed the brigade to execute this mission within an acceptable mitigated risk level. Assessing this event as critical to combat preparedness, the brigade commander was willing to accept calculated risk to put our Soldiers through a realistic, demanding, and stressful training environment. Only through such rigor and complexity will we get the most out of our leaders and build trust and confidence in our equipment, Soldiers, and abilities.

Range construction is an important step in the planning and execution of the FSCX. Working with range control and division leadership, the brigade emplaced five metal vehicle hulks that were visible from the start of the range. Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) cleared the impact area, and 25th CAB emplaced the hulks as sling loads. Next, brigade planners and range control added steel and pop-up targets to stimulate the direct-fire and sniper engagements. This range is now set up to support future organizations conducting FSCXs, CALFEXs, anti-armor training, or a multitude of additional uses.

Ammunition Considerations

A brigade-run FSCX is not built into the ammunition STRAC for the fiscal year, and the amount of ammunition needed to adequately execute this operation is immense. To accomplish the FSCX, we laid out our ammo allocation



Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment "Wolfhounds," prepare to hit the lane during an FSCX on 17 November 2019 at Pohakuloa Training Area in Hawaii.

for the year and prioritized Department of Defense Identification Codes (DODICs) that were needed for the operation. Next, the brigade staff met with all battalions to lay out the impact on their training events, specifically platoon LFXs and motor certifications. The FSCX prioritized high-explosive rounds, meaning the battalions were forced to execute LFXs utilizing mostly full range training rounds (FRTRs). Through bottom-up refinement and careful analysis, we concluded that we had enough ammunition to accomplish all brigade and battalion collective training events. The cost was the amount and type of indirect ammunition the battalions would get allocated for the fiscal year.

Conclusion

In summary, the FSCX is a critical event in the training progression of a brigade combat team. It is a baseline operation that supports all collective training events leading the formation to a CTC rotation and combat deployment. The FSCX is a critical training event that will develop leaders, train staffs, build combat lethality, and encourage multi-echelon training.

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