

# Objective Curly: One Leader’s Experience with the Operations Process

by CPT Lazaro Oliva Jr.

The U.S. Army has conducted continuous overseas contingency operations, including combat operations in Afghanistan from 2001-2014 and in Iraq from 2003-2010, for more than 13 years. This ongoing overseas commitment has forced a very high operational tempo (optempo). As a result, we as an organization developed “field expedient” methods that allowed us to maintain an appropriate level of readiness required to deploy and accomplish our mission in a time-constrained environment.

While it was important to make an effort to disseminate lessons-learned to deploying units so they could incorporate them into their training for upcoming deployments, the unintended consequence of this approach was that the operational force became strictly reliant on our tactics, techniques and procedures and consequently ignored doctrine. Therefore, we have forgotten how to employ the most basic doctrinal concepts. As the deployments slow and optempo comes back down to a sustainable pace, we must once again shift our focus back to our doctrinal concepts to re-establish our technical proficiency.

## Operations process

One key concept we have forgotten how to use is the operations process, which helps a leader understand, manage and account for the uncertainty inherent in the operational environment. Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0 defines the operations process as the Army’s framework for exercising mission command; in laymen’s terms, the operations process serves as a common language through which we can plan, prepare and execute our mission. This process applies at all levels of leadership – from the platoon level up to the highest levels of command, with different methodologies prescribed for each echelon.

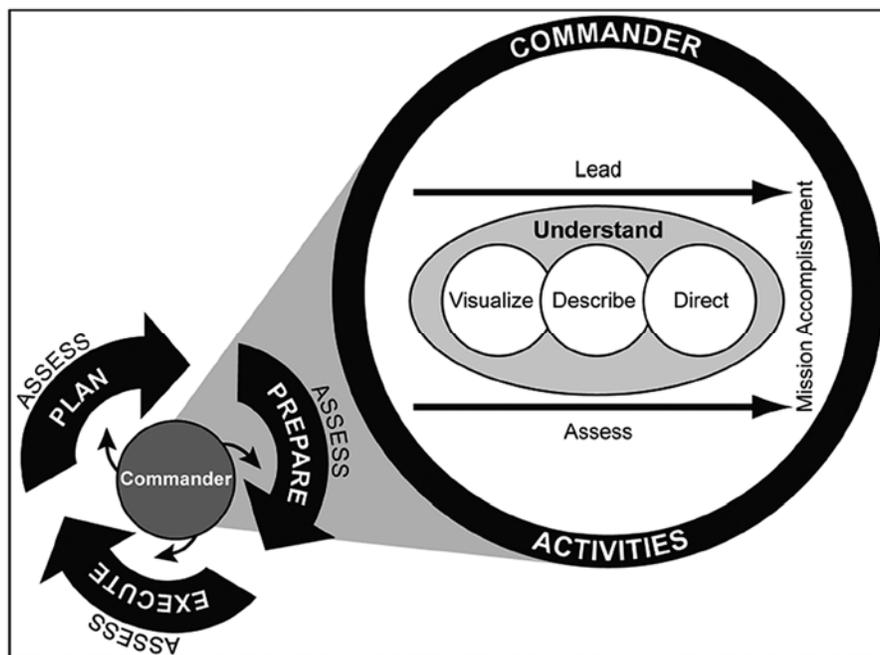


Figure 1. According to ADRP 5-0, the operations process serves as a common language through which we can plan, prepare and execute our mission.

The prescribed methods to apply the operations process are troop-leading procedures (TLPs), which are employed at the company and below, and the military decision-making process, typically employed by battalion and above.

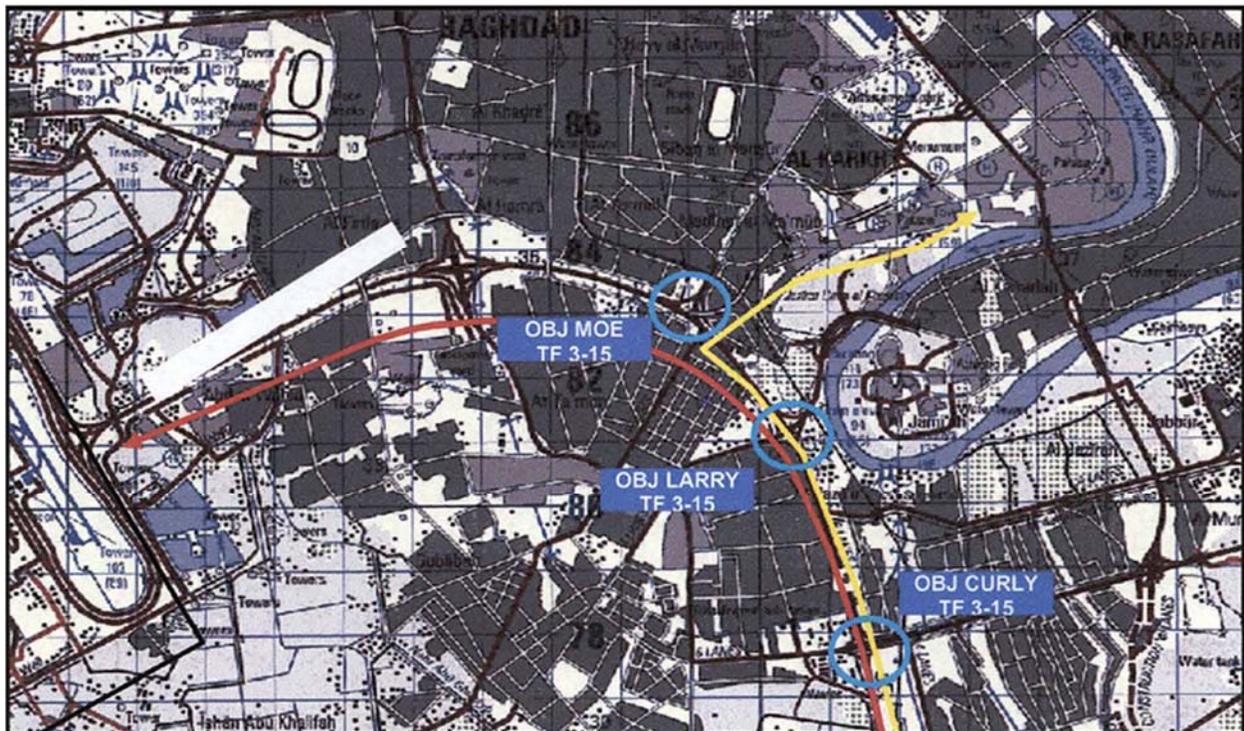
The operations process is driven by the commander, who – with the help of his staff – strives to understand, visualize, describe and direct his organization by providing leadership and continuous assessment.

One example of how to properly employ the operations process at the company level using TLPs was demonstrated by a young captain on Objective Curly the morning of April 7, 2003, prior to the biggest fight of his professional military career.

Late on the evening of April 6, 2003, the events unfolding on Objective Peach, a bridgehead over the Euphrates River, were part of a much larger military campaign known as Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), which was designed to topple Saddam Hussein's dictatorial government. At the tip of the American spear was 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (Mechanized), and its 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was the decisive operation. The following morning, on the heels of a successful raid (the first Thunder Run), brigade commander COL David Perkins devised his plan to conduct an audacious attack into the heart of Baghdad and attempt to seize the city, and this time he intended to stay there; this assault would come to be known as Thunder Run 2.

Leading this raid for 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was Task Force (TF) 4-64 Armored Regiment (AR) and TF 1-64 AR; they would attack to seize Objective Woody and Objective Diane, respectively, which were in the heart of Baghdad. If this assault were to succeed, the largest route leading in and out of Baghdad would have to be secured to ensure that TF 4-64 AR and TF 1-64 AR had access to the resupplies they would need. This was critical if Perkins intended to retain the city of Baghdad and attempt to exploit the opportunity to end the war much more quickly than anticipated.

The critical task of securing Highway 8 fell to TF China (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry). LTC Stephen Twitty, the TF commander, knew that to accomplish this task, TF China would have to seize three key intersections along Highway 8; these intersections would be named Objectives Moe, Larry and Curly, in order from north to south. Seizing these key intersections would prevent Iraqi soldiers and foreign fighters from gaining control of the largest avenue of approach in and out of the city and would secure the lines of communications necessary to maintain freedom of maneuver for friendly forces. Just before the TF was to execute this mission, brigade headquarters informed TF China's leadership that one of its three line companies would have to remain on Objective Saints to occupy a blocking position to the north of the objective. This effectively reduced TF China's combat power by one-third, leaving it with more objectives than it had companies to defend them.



**Figure 2. Seizing the objectives of Moe, Larry and Curly would prevent Iraqi soldiers and foreign fighters from gaining control of the largest avenue of approach in and out of the city and would secure lines of communications necessary to maintain freedom of maneuver for friendly forces.**

To mitigate the loss of one company, the TF commander compiled a makeshift team, now referred to as Team Zan, from various elements within the TF. The tall order of defending the southernmost objective, named Objective Curly, fell to an unsuspecting captain serving as an assistant operations officer in the TF; his name was CPT Harry “Zan” Hornbuckle III. Twitty informed Hornbuckle of his new mission one minute after midnight April 7, 2003, just six hours before the start of the mission.

Team Zan comprised one mechanized-infantry platoon, another Infantry Fighting Vehicle (Bradley), the battalion’s mortar platoon, a scout section, an engineer squad, one armored combat earthmover (ACE), the battalion’s main aid station (MAS) and the TF’s tactical-operations center (TOC) Alpha (two M577s and one M114). Hornbuckle, now the commander of “Team Zan,” along with his senior noncommissioned officer (NCO), SFC Vincent Phillips, began to devise a plan to seize Objective Curly and prevent it from falling into the enemy’s hands.



**Figure 3. CPT Harry “Zan” Hornbuckle, assistant operations officer, TF 3-15 Infantry, directs the battle. (Photo by Dennis Steele, ARMY Magazine. From Steele’s photo essay “Baghdad: The Crossroads” in ARMY Magazine’s June 2003 edition. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of ARMY Magazine.)**

## **The plan**

With the difficult task of securing Objective Curly and defeating whatever the enemy would throw at him and his team, Hornbuckle began to develop his plan by using the TLPs he had been taught how to employ time and again throughout his military career. He had just received his mission, and the first step in the commander’s activities was to understand the problem; he focused on the enemy and the time he had available. The next step was to issue a quick warning order (warno) that would facilitate parallel planning.

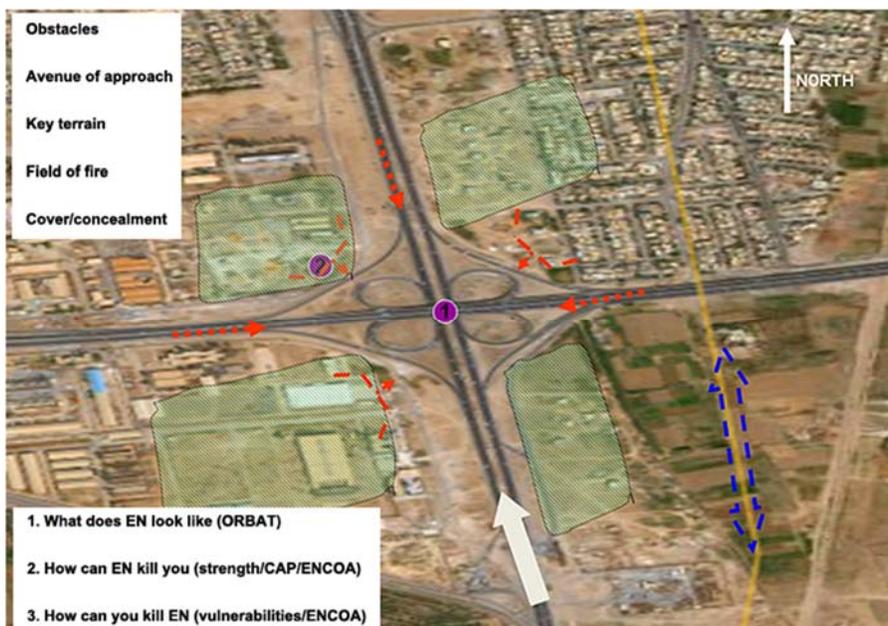
“I met with LT Matt McKenna, LT Rob Woodruff and CPT Trey Lawrence first to disseminate a quick [warno],” Hornbuckle recalled. “I focused on our timeline and what I knew of the enemy situation, while getting an updated status on where they stood in regard to men, weapons and equipment.”<sup>1</sup>

The next step in the TLPs is to make a tentative plan; here, the commander analyzes the mission variables to visualize how he believes the enemy would fight; he also determines his decisive point, commander's intent and initial risk assessment. "The two defining challenges to effective planning are uncertainty and time," according to ADRP 5-0. Both of these added to Hornbuckle's sense of urgency. He spent the next few hours developing his plan for Objective Curly; he also met periodically with the subordinate leaders of his newly formed team to continue describing his vision and provide updates to the plan. "The smartest two moves I made that night were to develop a quick and easy plan and to designate the chain of command," Hornbuckle wrote.<sup>2</sup>

He then went on to do his terrain analysis on a satellite map; he knew that the decisive terrain was the high ground on the two-lane overpass running west to east over Highway 8. It would provide Team Zan with superior observations and fields of fire in all directions. By occupying this overpass, he could also deny the enemy use of the high ground and freedom of maneuver.

Once Hornbuckle understood his terrain, which then allowed him to visualize the enemy situation, the next step in his planning process was to develop a course of action (CoA) that would defeat the enemy and retain Objective Curly. He did his analysis of relative combat power, generated options and began arraying his forces, developing a broad concept and assigning responsibility; "my plan was to put the mech platoon Bradleys in the east and west on top of the overpass,"<sup>3</sup> he said, and secure the high ground. He would then place his scout section oriented north, along with the engineer squad and his Bradley. To the south, he put the mortar platoon, along with his ACE, so they could cover the southern avenue of approach and provide fire support to all three of the battalion's objectives, not just Objective Curly. Finally, he would "tuck the TOC and MAS under the overpass."<sup>4</sup>

The next step was to prepare a CoA statement and sketch. "The basic concept was to occupy battle positions (BPs) and orient our fires by sectors," Hornbuckle wrote.<sup>5</sup> He divided his sectors of fire by using a terrain-based quadrant that would help him to avoid target overkill while still effectively massing his fires on the enemy.



**Figure 4. Hornbuckle's next step was to prepare a CoA statement and sketch. He divided his sectors of fire by using a terrain-based quadrant that would help him to avoid target overkill while still effectively massing his fires on the enemy.**

"My decisive point for the operation was to set BPs 1a and 1b, with the Bradley-Fighting-Vehicle split sections oriented to Quadrants 1 and 2. ... The intent I issued to the team was [to] quickly seize the objective and set in hasty defense; control the high ground to prevent the enemy from shooting down on us; keep all communications short and concise (give distance, direction, description); and ensure interlocking fires with element on left and

right (cross-talk). Endstate: Objective Curly is secured, U.S. forces can pass north through the objective, enemy forces destroyed.”<sup>6</sup>

With his operations order complete, Hornbuckle gathered all the leaders from his subordinate elements and issued his plan. After Hornbuckle issued the plan, it was late; the movement was to begin at 4:30 a.m. with a line-of-departure time of 6 a.m. By this point, “I had planned, briefed and spot-checked the best I knew how. ... I played all the parts in my head, trying to visualize all the possible scenarios. ... Little did I know, even my worst-case scenarios would pale in comparison to the action we would face at Curly.”<sup>7</sup>

## Preparations

As stated in ADRP 5-0, “The activities of the operations process are not discreet; they overlap and recur as circumstances demand. ... Preparing begins during planning and continues through execution.” Hornbuckle’s warno was all Phillips, his team first sergeant, needed to initiate movement. “He began the task of linking up units and conducting resupply in the dark,”<sup>8</sup> Hornbuckle recalled. These preparations also occurred at the platoon and crew level, with each senior NCO getting his unit ready for the mission that was now only a few hours away from execution.

This began with assigning priorities of work to each crew and squad. The highest priority is, without a doubt, security. Team Zan would have to maintain between 33 percent and 50 percent security at all times. The second-highest priority is cleaning and inspecting weapons; this includes everything from the individual Soldier’s M-16 to the 25mm Bushmaster chain gun on the Bradleys. Included in this was Class (CL) V ammunition to ensure that every weapon had a full unit basic load.

Next was ensuring that all maintenance on the vehicles was completed to ensure they were fully mission capable and ready for the next day’s operation – including any CL III petroleum, oils and lubricants. This was followed by the individual Soldier’s equipment, including night-vision goggles, PAQ4s and optics; Phillips needed to ensure that everyone had a fresh pair of batteries and that they, too, were fully mission capable. Last, but not least, came the Soldier’s chow, hygiene and rest.

While these priorities of work were being supervised, the leaders of each element were developing their own plans and conducting their own TLPs to ensure their plans were nested with their immediate higher headquarters. “Effective preparations ensure that the right forces are in the right place at the right time with the right equipment and other resources ready to execute the operation,” according to Paragraph 3-7, ADRP 5-0. However, no amount of preparation could have fully prepared these men for what they were about to experience.

## Execution

The attack began promptly at 6 a.m. April 7, 2003, in accordance with the plan. Team Zan was as ready as it could be; it was now time to execute. Execution is defined as “putting a plan into action by applying combat power to accomplish the mission ... to gain and maintain a position of relative advantage” (ADRP 5-0). TF China was third in the order of march for the brigade behind TF 1-64 and TF 4-64. The plan was that TF China would follow and support by securing lines of communications along Highway 8. The order of movement within TF China was Alpha Mech, Bravo Tank and Team Zan.

It wasn’t long before Hornbuckle began hearing contact reports over the radio; the lead tank battalion was reporting “heavy rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) fire at MB415777. As I [CPT Hornbuckle] plotted it on my map, I realized that was Objective Curly.” He did his best to assure himself and his men this was expected and they would accomplish their mission.<sup>9</sup>

As the rest of the battalion seized its objectives, Team Zan occupied Objective Curly, and the mechanized-infantry platoon wasted no time establishing BP over Highway 8, oriented on their Quadrants 1 and 2 to the north. Simultaneously, the mortar platoon established BP and oriented south along Highway 8. “All the leaders and Soldiers rapidly occupied their points of domination and established what would become a perimeter defense. The thing I remember was how glad I was that they all knew the plan,” Hornbuckle recalled.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 5. As the rest of the battalion seized its objectives, Team Zan occupied Objective Curly. The mechanized-infantry platoon wasted no time establishing a BP over Highway 8, oriented on Quadrants 1 and 2 to the north. (Photo by Dennis Steele, ARMY Magazine. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of ARMY Magazine.)**

The objective was surrounded by multi-story buildings on three sides and a single-story home on the southeast. The terrain under the overpass consisted of rubble and bunkers. The enemy used the very elaborate trench system under the overpass to conceal his movements.

“It seems to me now that the enemy was waiting for us to stop before they began their serious counterattack,” Hornbuckle said. “The enemy consisted of 150 to 200 dismounts with small arms and RPGs ... believed to consist of Iraqi Special Republican Guard and Syrian jihad fighters.”<sup>11</sup>

Just north of the objective along Highway 8 lay a grim reminder to Hornbuckle of the reality of war: “a burning enemy MTLB to my front and destroyed M1 tank to my northwest.”<sup>12</sup> It was now that all hell broke loose on the objective. Hornbuckle was directing the fight over the radio from his Bradley, trying to maintain situational understanding and constantly repositioning his forces to respond to wave after wave of enemy soldiers who would assault the objective from the urban areas with reckless abandon. On more than one occasion, Hornbuckle found himself engaging dismounted enemy RPG teams with his personal rifle before his Bradley gunner would identify and destroy them.

During execution, the success of any plan hinges on timely decision-making and disciplined initiative by agile and adaptive leaders who can recognize opportunities. These variances present themselves in one of two ways: the first is an opportunity to accomplish the mission effectively, and the second is a threat to mission accomplishment or survival of the force. Without mutual trust and leader development, subordinates will not exercise the initiative required to gain a position of relative advantage.

One example of this was when Phillips recognized a threat to the survival of the force in the form of enemy soldiers using the trench system underneath the overpass to be able to move unobserved. He immediately approached Hornbuckle to request permission to take a three-man fire team to clear the trenches. Hornbuckle replied, “Roger, you really need to go do that.”<sup>13</sup> He watched as Phillips quickly assembled an ad hoc squad and began to clear the trenches. “By the time he had the squad set in place, they had destroyed 15-18 of the enemy,” Hornbuckle wrote.<sup>14</sup>

Back in his Bradley, Hornbuckle and his gunner were engaging vehicles trying to penetrate the perimeter. At some point in the fight, the Bradley began to experience problems with its 25mm cannon. The crew then began to work diligently to try to repair it. Little did the Soldiers know that the motor had broken, and it would be down until the

next day when they could get a replacement from the unit-maintenance collection point. At this point, with the fight raging all around him, Hornbuckle realized that “if [the enemy] managed to coordinate and attack all at once ... they might be able to overwhelm his undermanned combat team just by force of sheer numbers.”<sup>15</sup>

Another critical factor of the operations process is the commander’s ability to understand, visualize, describe and direct. To do this, the commander must have the energy to be at the point of friction and lead his team to mission accomplishment; this requires a leader to be in excellent physical condition. Hornbuckle, at one point, dismounted the Bradley and began running between friendly fighting positions under enemy fire to increase his situational understanding and bolster his men’s confidence through his presence and leadership.

“At one point, as he hustled between positions, an enemy gunman rose up from a trench and aimed his rifle at Hornbuckle. The captain raised his own rifle and fired. The man went down,” wrote David Zucchino in his book, ***Thunder Run***.<sup>16</sup>

Shortly after a conversation between Twitty and Hornbuckle about the location and status of each fighting position of Hornbuckle’s team, Twitty ordered Bravo Mech to reinforce Hornbuckle. Once they arrived, Bravo Mech conducted a hasty transfer of authority. By this time, Team Zan had been engaged in a close and intense fight for eight hours, and the fighting would continue for a while before eventually dying down prior to 2-7 Infantry’s arrival.



**Figure 6.** Hornbuckle, kneeling on the right, and other Soldiers rush to stop an enemy attack. (Photo by Dennis Steele, *ARMY Magazine*. From Steele’s photo essay “Baghdad: The Crossroads” in *ARMY Magazine*’s June 2003 edition. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of *ARMY Magazine*.)



**Figure 7. Hornbuckle and his gunner engage vehicles trying to penetrate the perimeter while their Bradley experienced problems with its 25mm cannon. (Photo by Dennis Steele, ARMY Magazine. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of ARMY Magazine.)**



**Figure 8. Hornbuckle dismounts his Bradley and begins running between friendly fighting positions under enemy fire to increase his situational understanding and bolster his men's confidence through his presence and leadership. (Photo by Dennis Steele, ARMY Magazine. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of ARMY Magazine.)**



**Figure 9. Hornbuckle and SFC Vincent Phillips discuss adjusting their perimeter during a lull in the fighting. (Photo by Dennis Steele, ARMY Magazine. Copyright 2015 by the Association of the U.S. Army and republished by permission of ARMY Magazine.)**

## **Mission accomplishment**

When the fight was over and the dust settled on Objective Curly, Team Zan had accomplished its mission. The conditions for this victory were set long before Team Zan, along with the rest of TF China, began its movement north. It started when Hornbuckle started the first critical step in the operations process: the plan. He did this by using the TLPs and then disseminating information to his team to facilitate parallel planning. Concurrently, his team was taking all the necessary steps to prepare for the operation. His simple plan allowed his team to exercise disciplined initiative and seize opportunities that presented themselves throughout the day.

Hornbuckle also played an active part in the execution through his ability to identify and be at the point of friction. Hornbuckle's understanding of doctrine and employment of the operations process allowed him to visualize, describe and direct through his leadership and continuous assessment. His use of the operations process is just one example that illustrates how our doctrine can serve as a combat multiplier.

## **Way ahead**

As Paragraph 1-1, ADRP 5-0 states, "Military operations are human endeavors, contests of wills characterized by continuous and mutual adaptation among all participants. ... Uncertainty pervades operations in the form of unknowns about the enemy, the people and the surroundings." To ensure our victory while minimizing our casualties, we understand our enemy, exploit his weaknesses and protect against his strengths. We must make the enemy fight us on our terms.

Also, we must be well-versed in our doctrine. It serves as both a foundation and a common language, "through understanding you can apply judgment in its use. ... This lends itself to understanding how to think."<sup>17</sup>

Finally, as leaders, we must prepare ourselves for command; we must understand what our nation expects of us. We are entrusted with our nation's sons and daughters, and as a result, we have a moral obligation to do everything in our power to prepare, so when that moment presents itself, we will be ready to lead.

## **Lessons-learned**

Courtesy of now-LTC Hornbuckle:

- Be a student of your profession; know your doctrine and tactics. If you understand the process, you can put it all together in combat.
- Continue to assess the situation. Understand what your strengths and weaknesses are. Be willing to accept risk to exploit an enemy vulnerability.
- To lead effectively, you must stay calm on the radio, and you must have the endurance to be at the point of decision.
- See yourself, see the terrain, see the enemy and make bold decisions while considering risk.
- Don't train your subordinates on what to think; teach them how to think.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From the student paper "Objective Curly Task Force 3-15" by MAJ Harry "Zan" Hornbuckle, Army Writing Program, Dec. 12, 2006. To access Hornbuckle's paper, from <http://www.benning.army.mil/library/>, click on "Digital Collections" on the left, then in the center, under "MCoE Army Writing Program Student Papers," click on "Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)-(CAC access required)." OIF student papers are alphabetized by the author's last name.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> David Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, New York: Grove Press, 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Hornbuckle, "Objective Curly Task Force 3-15" student paper.

<sup>15</sup> Zucchini.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Hornbuckle, "Objective Curly Task Force 3-15" student paper; confirmed in an interview with the author March 13, 2015.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**ACE** – armored combat earthmover

**ADRP** – Army doctrinal reference publication

**AR** – armored regiment

**BP** – battle position

**CAP** – capabilities

**CL** – class

**CoA** – course of action

**EN** – enemy

**ENCOA** – evaluating enemy course of action

**MAS** – main aid station

**MCCC** – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

**MCoE** – Maneuver Center of Excellence

**NCO** – noncommissioned officer

**OBJ** – objective

**OIF** – Operation Iraqi Freedom

**Optempo** – operational tempo

**ORBAT** – order of battle

**RPG** – rocket-propelled grenade

**TF** – task force

**TLP** – troop-leading procedure

**TOC** – tactical-operations center

**Warno** – warning order