

The Rehearsal Is the Thing!

by CPT Luke C. Bowers

The combined-arms rehearsal (CAR) had just completed. The battalion executive officer stood on the terrain model, satisfied with the thorough execution; the staff had, after all, rehearsed it many times before the rest of the battalion leaders arrived. The staff and commanders had briefed their parts well; all the actions occurred just as developed in the wargame and the rehearsal to the rehearsal.

In closing, the executive officer conducted one final survey of the team: “Anyone have any final questions?” All the attendees were quiet, their heads swaying left and right indicating they did not. The executive officer, again satisfied, concluded the rehearsal and dismissed the leaders.

Immediately, the audience began to move about seeking each other and discussing the operations. As the executive officer walked about, he heard key leaders requesting clarification of tactical triggers and possible decision points. Platoon leaders were asking about signals for shifting fires; a company fire-support officer (FSO) asked when his company would receive Army attack aviation; the reserve didn’t know where the passage lane and link-up point were in the decisive operation’s area of operation.

How could this be? The team just conducted a CAR with the leaders two levels down ... right?

The rehearsal is the thing. Just like Shakespeare’s character Hamlet used a play to reveal the king’s conscience, a good rehearsal reveals our conceptual and detailed understanding of an operation. However, a good rehearsal, unlike a play, requires active participation, not simple observation. Army leaders know that rehearsals are important. We even **want** to do rehearsals; we do them intuitively, especially if we are trying to save face. We do it with less obvious events: when we have a significant presentation to give, during training for a hands-on examination or when we deliver bad news. The phenomena of units rehearsing how they will conduct a rehearsal (rehearsal to the rehearsal) further exemplifies its value. Why, then, are our rehearsals for tactical operations often ineffective?

My purpose with this article is twofold: I’d like leaders to appreciate rehearsals and see their true utility, and I want to share a technique that engages all participants and promotes shared understanding.

Regarding the first purpose, Field Manual (FM) 6-0, **Commander and Staff Organizations and Operations**, plainly states that rehearsals allow leaders to practice key aspects of their operations and orient themselves to the environment and other units before executing the operation.¹ The same publication also refers to rehearsal as a tool to ensure staff and subordinates understand the commander’s intent and concept of the operation. The rehearsal is a powerful construct; it is not a terrible obligation to conduct before an operation. Rather, it is a practice to assess and improve our understanding of the operation. Creating shared understanding and clear intent are among the guiding principles of the mission-command philosophy, according to Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, **Mission Command**.²

As to the second purpose, the frequency modulation (FM) “speak” rehearsal, or speaking with radio etiquette, is an excellent technique for rehearsing an operation, especially a CAR. This article will demonstrate the technique’s application, but first, we need to examine rehearsals in a broad sense.

What happens, what shouldn’t happen

Rehearsals of any type – key leader, full dress, etc. – often fail to be effective in enabling shared understanding because leaders drive toward a friction-free presentation as the desired outcome. Rehearsal participants usually meet multiple times to ensure the lines and sequencing of critical, or “friction,” points are well understood before conducting the actual rehearsal.

This practice is in direct opposition to why we rehearse for combat operations. In fact, we should minimize our preparation for the role as “actors” but demonstrate our understanding and agility of the operation’s plan through good unscripted execution.

This invites the question of who are the right persons to participate in the rehearsal. Rehearsals are commonly dominated by staff and commanders, but that isn't the right group. Understanding the plan is implicit for the staff – they wrote it. The commanders equally understand the plan – they've studied it deeply to build their own. These participants, the commanders and staff, are not the group who needs to demonstrate their understanding or how to adapt to uncertainty within the commander's intent of that plan. Leaders two levels down, those achieving the assigned tactical task, are the members who need to rehearse.

I've witnessed many rehearsals, from company to brigade level, led and dominated by those who planned (and won't execute) the operation. I've seen the staff wax eloquent on the terrain board showing their complete comprehension of the operation. Simultaneously, I've recognized that platoon leaders and other leaders fail to understand the relationship between their task and how it enables and complements adjacent units.

Commanders need to get the staff and the planners out of the spotlight during the rehearsal. It's a danger that leaders will roleplay the product of the staff's course-of-action (CoA) analysis (wargame) and prove it correct instead of demonstrating understanding where initiative will occur. We should want to see how the platoon leader or squad leader will react – and hopefully operate within the commander's intent – when presented with an unexpected event. We should see the leader employ tactics based on knowledge of terrain and enemy – consistent with intent or leverage-enablers available – because he understands what needs to be accomplished despite the plan.

When we see that happen, we've seen shared understanding. Then the rehearsal has performed the task and has been the tool we wanted.

Best practices, general comments

Before discussing the "FM speak" technique, it's worthwhile to discuss a few best practices, tips and ideas for rehearsals in general.

Key-leader and the FM-technique rehearsals require large terrain models. How large? Large enough to allow all the rehearsal participants (again, two levels down) to occupy their positions on the represented terrain at the same time for the event or phase rehearsed. The terrain model needs to be this large because we want the participants to see where they are in relation to each other.

A forward-passage-of-lines, for example, can be executed according to a unit standard operating procedure (SOP); however, one can appreciate the value of allowing leaders who will actually meet on the ground and execute the task to meet each other and see relative positioning. The planners will only see unit icons conducting a tactical-enabling task during CoA development, but the executors will see each other and confirm the signals and procedural details – increasing understanding.

The terrain model should show relief. Building a large two-dimensional map with graphic control measures (GCM) is easy, but integrating terrain relief shows an understanding of the terrain's effects to maneuver. This will be valuable for creating spatial awareness when injecting uncertainty and task reorganizing.

The terrain model should be complete and populated with GCMs and enemy icons (size, composition or combat slant). As a rule of thumb, if someone will brief a threat, GCM, unit position and so on, then that briefer should be responsible for generating that representation on the terrain model.

For example, the FSO should create the markers signifying fire-support control measures like coordinated fires line, no-fire areas and targets instead of a tactical-operations center radio-telephone operator or driver. That FSO will need to brief, so he/she should build and place that piece on the model to ensure it's present in the correct position, and includes details relevant to the rehearsal such as target number/trigger/location/observer/delivery system/attack guidance/communication, or TTLDAC, an acronym for organization of indirect-fires planning considerations.

Similarly, the S-2 or assistant S-2 should build the enemy composition and array according to the disposition from the mission or CoA analysis.

Whenever possible, the battalion-and-above current operations (CUOPS) integrated cells should drive the rehearsal. The rationale is the same as having subordinates two levels down brief during the rehearsal instead of

the staff or planners. Once future operations (FUOPS) has created and published the order, it should transition to the CUOPS team for execution and assessment. The rehearsal is the ideal practice to demonstrate that the transition from FUOPS has occurred and a thorough knowledge of the operation's details are understood by the team that will "fight the plan."

Also, the CUOPS team should drive the rehearsal to better exercise battle-tracking and to recognize decision points and contingencies from the plan while rehearsing. Their participation will increase understanding and enable better recognition of opportunities for initiative or recommending to stay the course during the operation.

Good rehearsals will exercise the plan and uncertainty in the operation's execution. Rehearsals should include elements of uncertainty that are not scripted, on the execution check list or known by participants. Introducing uncertainty and ambiguity in the rehearsal process enables leaders to see how their subordinates actually react and adhere to the commander's intent with creativity and adaptability – applying mission command.

Leaders can create realistic uncertainty by presenting various elements different from the enemy CoA – for example, an element templated in the battlezone fighting far forward in the disruption zone. The rehearsal lead can significantly reduce the combat power available to a leader by changing the forces available to him during a phase. A leader could create a surprise meeting engagement or contact with indirect fires to force an assessment from the subordinate leader to choose between maintaining the CoA and recommending a task reorganization.

Another option is to manipulate the enablers and attachments available to a unit. For example, take a company/team breach force organized with engineers, then introduce a requirement to task-reorganize the engineer attachment, thus requiring the company/team to reduce an obstacle within its organic assets. This can be applied in a similar manner with enablers such as aviation and priority of support.

Train, certify, rehearse

We need to make our rehearsals an ingrained part of the organization. FM 6-0 states that effective and efficient units habitually rehearse during training. The rehearsal, because it is an important tool to exercise mission command, should be trained as well.

We should train to rehearse before we conduct collective-training exercises. We need to teach leaders how we want rehearsals conducted before we require and employ them as part of the operations process. Units should include the introduction and instruction of their rehearsal SOPs to new leaders as part of certifying those leaders for each level they lead.

We train other collective tasks by ensuring proficiency in supporting tasks at the lower echelon first. Training and certifying leaders becomes more important with a technique like "FM speak" or unscripted rehearsals because the technique is less familiar and requires more thinking in the moment.

'FM style' or 'FM speak'

The "FM speak" technique is not a type or method of rehearsal listed in FM 6-0; however, it would probably position between "terrain model" and "key leader" on the rehearsal-type continuum. The "FM speak" concept places participants on a terrain model where they exercise the unit's scheme of maneuver using only call signs and radio-protocol etiquette to communicate their actions to each other. This technique closely replicates the advantages of a full-dress rehearsal without the time and operational-security risks associated with it.

The constraint of using radio procedures only – assuming brief transmissions – prohibits the participants from misrepresenting their understanding of the actions required of them in time and space. In other words, if you don't know the plan, you can't fake it by just speaking your lines from a script.

The "FM speak" rehearsal concept is not new; many leaders and units employ the technique in various forms and methods. My former leaders taught me the technique, having learned it from other mentors during their careers.³

I've seen units attempt to employ the technique but struggle to get a satisfying repetition at different levels. I believe the main challenge is simply getting rehearsal started. Practitioners new to the technique find themselves awkwardly stalled in the beginning because they don't know how to start the rehearsal with a radio call. Time spent in staff briefings or training meetings have conditioned us to open with wordy introductions, agendas and

read charts and analysis; speak in numerical and alphabetical order; and wait for final comments. In a sense, we trained ourselves to conduct our rehearsals like we brief orders and command and staff.

Units can overcome this with a very brief introduction from the S-2 to present the enemy disposition. To begin, have leaders "join the net" with call signs as roll call and report their combat slant. The CUOPS can initiate a net call with leaders reporting combat power and front-line traces. For example: *"Dealer X-Ray, this is Demon 6. Set at Attack Position Dog, slant 10/4/0/3. Over."*

The S-2 can set the stage with an operations and intelligence update. During this update, the S-2 speaks in radio etiquette to describe enemy forces' disposition and actions they're conducting, per his estimate. The scout-platoon leader can also help develop the rehearsal's setting by providing reports. For example:

"Dealer X-Ray, this Recon 16. Over."

"Recon 16, this is Dealer X-Ray. Over."

"Dealer X-Ray, this is Recon 16. Observing four BRDMs in NAI 2002 moving east to west. Observation answers PIR 3. I recommend ... Over."

With this single transmission, the unit can establish an action that allows the operation to develop. The S-2 can provide an assessment in "FM speak," and the line companies can respond to this stimulation with an action on the terrain model according to the scheme of maneuver. Once a unit begins the simulated FM traffic, leaders quickly become comfortable responding to their cues or triggers, and the rehearsal becomes interactive. This is when the rehearsal becomes engaging and revealing, thus building shared understanding.

To appreciate the FM technique's value in creating shared understanding, consider a complicated event such as a combined-arms breach. Imagine the support force (Red Platoon) set in a support-by-fire (SBF) position, suppressing an enemy to enable the breach force (White Platoon) to reduce an obstacle and pass the assault force (Blue Platoon) to an objective. Participants would sound something like this:

"Demon 6, this Red 1. Slant 4 with 2/4/0 enemy BDA. Recommend initiation of the breach. Over."

"Red 1, this is Demon 6. Breach criteria is met with that BDA. Break. White 1, attack along DoA Sword and execute the reduction. Over."

"Demon 6, this is White 1. Roger. Over."

"Red 1, this is White 1. Executing PL California. Over."

"White 1, this is Red 1. Acknowledge PL California. Shifting from TRPs 1-4 to 3-4. Over."

"Demon 6, this is White 1. Identified the lead edge of the obstacle. Local SBF suppressing between TRPs 2-4. Over."

"Dealer 95, this is Demon 95. Cease fire on Target AB1005. Fire Target AB10101, smoke. Over."

"Demon 95, this is Dealer 95. Acknowledge ceasefire on Target AB1005 and initiate obscuration with Target AB10101."

"Demon 6, this is Blue 1. Initiating movement from assault position to execute the passage lane. Over."

Here the commander, Demon 6, recognizes that the platoon leader, Blue 1, has reacted to an incorrect tactical trigger per his operations order. The commander does not disrupt the rehearsal to correct the platoon leader out of turn; rather, he uses FM procedures:

"Blue 1, this is Demon 6. Limit your advance on DoA Sword to PL Oregon. Maintain weapon control status-hold and do not resume movement until White 1 reports PL New Mexico. Over."

The "FM speak" rehearsal demonstrated that Blue 1 didn't fully understand the conditions that triggered his maneuver from the assault position to the passage lane through the obstacle.

The technique is applicable at nearly all echelons and type of tactical operations. Once a team understands how to conduct FM speak, the rehearsals become fluid and effective for all participants. Commanders see how their leaders understand the plan, react to uncertainty and adapt to meet their intent.

The “FM speak” rehearsal is an excellent tool for leaders and possibly one of the best for creating shared understanding by bring mission orders and commander’s intent together during the prepare phase of the operations process. Rehearsing with this technique will challenge warfighters, staffs and commanders to think critically and creatively vs. reading lines on a script. Rehearsing with uncertainty replicates the truest condition of combat operations and prepares leaders to fight the enemy and not the plan.

The FM technique, or simply rehearsing with an outline only, requires leaders to think and decide – that is more valuable to rehearse than a simple script. Ultimately, the rehearsal is the thing – the thing we must do well to prepare us to apply mission command.

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Endnotes

¹ FM 6-0, **Commander and Staff Organizations and Operations**, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (GPO), May 2014.

² ADRP 6-0, **Mission Command**, Washington, DC: GPO, May 17, 2012.

³ BG Omar Jones, my former brigade combat team commander, learned the “FM speak” technique from former commanders during his career. Email correspondence dated April 10, 2017.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ADRP – Army doctrinal reference publication

BDA – battle-damage assessment

BRDM -- *Boyevaya Razvedyvatelnaya Dozornaya Mashina*, a Russian amphibious armored patrol car

CAR – combined-arms rehearsal

CoA – course of action

CUOPS – current operations

DoA – direction of attack

FM – field manual

FM – frequency modulation

FUOPS – future operations

GCM – graphic control measure

GPO – Government Printing Office

FSO – fire-support officer

MCCC – Maneuver Captain’s Career Course

NAI – named area of interest

PIR – priority intelligence requirement

PL – phase line

SBF – support-by-fire

SOP – standard operating procedures

TRP – target-reference point