

Enhancing Shared Understanding within the Brigade's Operations Process

by MAJ Richard Z. Groen

All too often we have experienced the moment when a combined-arms rehearsal (CAR) transitions to a "combined-arms wargame." Amid a terrain model, battalion commanders and S-3s pause the CAR to discuss a friction point or introduce a new perspective not identified during the operations process. The brigade planner frantically takes notes, the plan morphs and a fragmentary order is published while units are crossing the line of departure (LD). Shared understanding is not present.

Some see this action as the "good-idea fairy," but it is not. The CAR transitioning to a combined-arms wargame is an indicator that subordinate commanders and units do not have shared understanding of their higher-headquarters commander's intent, nor an understanding of key events needed for synchronization.¹ Nor did they have the opportunity to provide input during the operations process.

Though battalion commanders and the brigade staff walked away from the CAR with a better understanding, the drastic change to the plan had a trickle-down effect in everyone's planning timeline. For example, companies and below suffered the consequences of losing their promised two-thirds² timeline, conducting troop-leading procedures (TLPs) hours before beginning operations. The result was a brigade frago published as units crossed the LD, unavailable to commanders and S-3s as they began movement toward accomplishing their tactical tasks.

The commander drives from the center of the operations process,³ but where can the battalion commander and staffs (subordinate unit commanders and staffs) fit within the process and realistically possess enhanced shared understanding using the current practices of doctrine?

The purpose of this article is twofold:

- First, to discuss the application of doctrine at brigade level and below;
- Then, to propose methods to possibly enhance shared understanding while preserving the planning timeline and conducting an effective CAR.

Doctrine vs. practices

Our operations process does a phenomenal job in allowing commanders and staffs to dissect a problem set and develop appropriate actions. Most importantly, it assists the organization as a whole in enhancing overall situational understanding. However, tailoring is needed at the brigade level and below. Within our organization, the brigade and battalions used the military decision-making process and companies/troops/batteries used TLPs. Just as doctrine lays out, commanders drove the operations process, and liaisons and liaison officers (LNOs) ensured subordinate units understood the situation. Shared understanding is lost if liaisons are not properly resourced or mentored, and battalions do not have the means to interject viewpoints throughout the operations process.

Within Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, a dedicated chapter focuses on the liaisons and their importance within the operations process. Our Army's doctrine discusses the roles and responsibilities of liaisons and LNOs⁴ and their expectations when incorporated into another organization.⁵ It also defines the rank requirements for liaisons.⁶ For example, battalions provide a lieutenant as a liaison to their brigade.

Though the use of a liaison is a great instrument to increase shared understanding throughout the organization, battalions may not receive the level of shared understanding that doctrine intends because their liaison may not possess the proper accreditations.

Liaisons must:

- Understand how their commander thinks and interpret verbal and written guidance;
- Convey their commander's intent, planning guidance, mission and concept of operations;
- Represent their commander's position;

- Know the unit's mission; tactics, techniques and procedures; organization; capabilities; and communications equipment;
- Observe the established channels of command and staff functions;
- Be trained in their functional responsibilities;
- Be tactful; and
- Possess the necessary language expertise.”⁷

The question is then raised for most battalions: does a lieutenant have the professional maturity, expertise and experience to represent his or her organization as an effective liaison? Limited experience with only a few years of military service may prove difficult for LNOs when it comes to knowing the intricacies of their organization. Therefore, it can be difficult for them to articulate the vision of their battalion commander. It may not be fair to charge a junior officer with the level of responsibility that we typically ask from a field-grade officer, especially when operating during decisive-action operations in austere conditions.

In a decisive-action environment, liaisons may have connectivity, but their battalions may also be on the move or maneuvering while using communication systems that stretch beyond their given email or Secure Voice Over Internet Protocol (SVOIP). Frequently, we see the line of liaisons in the rear of the brigade's main command post (CP) behind their computers, trying their best to answer the battle captain's questions. However, by no fault of their own, they cannot clearly convey an answer because they do not possess a shared understanding, or they do not have the appropriate information. For example, their unit quickly adjusted their plan using acetate, and the liaison does not have a copy.

Shared understanding can also be limited during the operations process if battalions are not incorporated early and often. Our doctrine defines the role of the commander and staff during the operations process, but it does not explain where subordinate commanders and S-3s fit.⁸ Despite undefined roles, subordinate units lean forward in parallel planning by attempting to use liaisons, interacting with their higher unit's staff and attending briefings during the operations process to add their input.

For example, during the planning of our first battle period at the National Training Center (NTC), battalion commanders and S-3s had the opportunity to attend the mission-analysis brief, course of action (CoA) development brief, operation-order brief and CAR. They also had the luxury of personally interacting with the brigade commander and staff. During the second battle period, battalions were spread throughout the area of operations (AO), fighting to maintain an AO while establishing connectivity. As a result, interaction between battalions and the brigade declined dramatically as the battlefield stretched. Battalion commanders and S-3s were now responsible for the local security of their AO, driving their own operations process while trying to interact with their liaisons to understand expectations as the brigade prepared for transitions. As a result, battalion commander and S-3 participation in the brigade's operations process declined during the opord brief and CAR.



Figure 1. U.S. Army Soldiers with 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, conduct a combined-arms rehearsal at NTC. (U.S. Army Combined Arms Center photo)

Overall, shared understanding decreases if liaisons, though energetic, are not properly resourced or mentored. Also, declining levels of shared understanding mirrored the downward ability of battalion commanders and S-3s to interact with the brigade staff during the operations process as the battalion and brigade headquarters staffs grew further apart in geographical distance.

Two possible solutions

Looking back at our NTC experience, two possible solutions come to mind to improve the overall shared understanding for battalions: 1) Develop a deliberate plan to empower liaisons with information and 2) develop systems to allow battalion commanders and S-3s to be part of the brigade's operations process. Doctrine defines the responsibilities, information requirements and necessary equipment for the liaisons to send and receive units.⁹ However, some of this is a bit overwhelming for an LNO who is a lieutenant representing his or her battalion. Units try to send the "right" officer to represent their unit, but due to the battalion's modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), the unit may not be able to afford to send someone higher in rank than a lieutenant, who lacks expertise.

Solution 1. Develop a liaison training program within the gated training strategy. Furthermore, in the case of a battalion LNO, the brigade executive officer, brigade chief of operations (CHoPs) or brigade battle captain is responsible for establishing and resourcing a primary, alternate, contingency and emergency (PACE) communications redundancy plan so all liaisons can communicate with their battalions.

As stated earlier, LNOs at the battalion level, with limited expertise, may not be well versed in all the warfighting functions or understand all aspects of their organization. Adding a liaison training program (or academy) into a unit's gated training strategy would facilitate a baseline in expectations and shared understanding. It could be an opportunity for liaisons to meet with members of the brigade staff and their peers to discuss concerns and friction points. Information learned from liaison training could allow liaisons to develop a clear vision of what is required and how the brigade operates before beginning any operations. Also, this is a venue for brigade and battalion commanders to voice their expectations and intents to liaisons before major operations.

One aspect of the liaison training should focus on a PACE plan: for example, primary (SVOIP, telephone), alternate (email), contingency (frequency modulation (FM) and high frequency (HF)¹⁰) and emergency (ground or air transport). Under the current MTOE, liaison connectivity is usually easy for SVOIP and email, but it proves to be tricky when it comes to FM/HF and transport. However, FM/HF and transport can be the most important means of communication when battalions don't have established Upper Tactical Internet (TI) or when they are moving CPs.

Every two liaisons should have at least one radio mount and two sets of radios, antennas and power amplifiers in the brigade CP's designated liaison area. This allows liaisons to monitor and communicate with their parent battalions without disrupting the brigade CP's current operations or activity during key moments. Since battalion CPs usually operate within FM/HF range from the brigade's main CP, liaisons would have the ability to send and receive information quickly.

In addition to providing communication systems, liaisons should have access to transportation so they can send and receive information. This is especially needed if battalions predominately produce orders using acetate and printouts. Furthermore, providing transportation allows liaisons to attend critical battalion-planning events and rehearsals. Though providing radios and transportation may seem costly in time and resources, the benefit is enhanced shared understanding and planning timeline preservation for both battalions and the brigade. Since unit MTOEs may not support additional ground transportation for liaisons, battalions and brigade staffs may need to be creative when requesting air support to transport liaisons.

Increasing liaison connectivity and mobility to aid shared understanding is useless if a liaison does not also have a mentor to provide advice or direction for mission success. Although the battalion provides the liaison, most of a liaison's interactions are with the brigade staff, particularly the brigade's CHoPs.¹¹ Doctrine mandates that all receiving units provide their liaisons information such as battle rhythms and standard-operating procedures (SOPs),¹² but it does not stipulate who assumes responsibility for the liaisons and essentially takes them under

their wing. Though this may not be necessary for the brigade and higher liaison, battalion liaisons, who are typically lieutenants, require mentorship to assist them in mission success.

Since battalion liaisons have more interaction with the brigade on a daily basis, the CHoPs should mentor battalion liaisons. Battalions maintain their liaisons, but the CHoPs should counsel them and provide oversight to ensure liaisons have a shared understanding of their unit's operations and how they fit within the brigade's overall operations. Furthermore, as a mentor, the CHoPs should monitor liaison activities to ensure they have connectivity with their battalions, have access to their unit's products and have the ability to attend critical planning activities and rehearsals.

Enabling interaction with battalion liaisons is just as important as facilitating shared understanding between the brigade staff and battalion leadership. As cited earlier, a co-located battalion and brigade headquarters facilitated the interaction of commanders and S-3s with the brigade staff during the operations process and allowed for interjections before the CAR. With this in mind, access to information should not decrease as the geographic distance grows between the brigade and its battalions.

Solution 2. To create a better shared understanding of the entire operations process, I recommend incorporating battalions within the systems early and often by facilitating multiple means of communication, staff coordination and parallel planning. Although battalions only need to send representatives to attend the opord, their presence at other planning events could prove to be essential to the staff's productivity. Ultimately, having a battalion commander or S-3 attend a mission analysis or CoA brief is optimal, but often it is not feasible. Battalions must juggle maintaining an AO and preparing for their next operation while regenerating forces. The only acceptable solution is conducting these briefings via other means.

I recommend that brigades develop a PACE plan to deliver operations-process briefs thusly: primary (Command Post of the Future), alternative (SVOIP), contingency (FM/HF) and emergency (physically present). Units need to become creative in distributing products if digital systems are down when conducting these briefings. Brigades need an element to distribute products or use established systems such as an aerial ring route or logistics package. Despite the extra effort, input from the battalions during these critical planning events/briefs will increase overall shared understanding while preventing the "good idea fairy" at the CAR and possibly derailing a plan.

Conclusion

Increasing shared understanding within an organization is no easy task. Providing the means to enable liaisons and facilitate battalion participation of the brigade's operations process, while mentoring liaisons, can prove to be taxing for a brigade. However, these changes could eventually lead to effective planning timelines and preserving the preparation time of subordinate units. These practices would require a brigade to relook its planning/CP SOPs and allocate equipment toward the liaison PACE plan. Also, repetitions during a brigade's gated training strategy would make these taxing tasks nothing more than a step within the unit's planning SOP.

In resourcing these two possible solutions, the brigade and battalions need to remain flexible. While prepared to action each of these solutions, time, resources and external circumstances can sometimes prevent their implementation. Of these two recommended solutions, units may only be able to accomplish one or a hybrid of both, depending on the situation. For example, providing transportation for all battalion LNOs to attend their individual unit's CAR would come at a high expense, so a battalion could rely more on its commander being able to provide input during a critical planning event. In the end, creative solutions to enhance what doctrine prescribes will ensure enforced planning timelines so CARs do not transform into wargaming.

Remember, the indicator a unit needs to improve shared understanding is the emergence of the "combined-arms wargame" instead of the much-needed CAR. Hopefully, the preceding recommendations provide insight for increasing and enhancing overall organizational shared understanding.

MAJ Rich Groen serves as mission-command observer/coach/trainer, Mission Command Training Program, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Other assignments include brigade S-3, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX; battalion executive officer, 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, 3rd ABCT, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss; commander, Crazy Horse Troop, 1st Battalion, 40th Cavalry Regiment (Airborne), Fort Richardson, AK; troop executive officer and scout-platoon leader, Troop D, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood,

TX; and company executive officer and tank-platoon leader, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood. MAJ Groen's military schools include the British Advanced Command and Staff College at Shrivenham, United Kingdom, Infantry Captain's Career Course and Armor Officer Basic Course. He holds a bachelor's of science degree in civil engineering from Virginia Military Institute, a master's of science degree in occupational and adult education from Kansas State University and a master's of arts degree in defense and strategic studies from King's College London.

Notes

¹ FM 6-0: **Commander and Staff Organization and Operations**, Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, **The Operations Process**, Fort Leavenworth, KS: TRADOC, 2014.

⁴ FM 6-0.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ FM is a frequency for Single-Channel Ground and Airborne Radio Systems. HF is typically seen in Harris radio systems.

¹¹ Usually a major on the brigade staff who manages current operations.

¹² FM 6-0.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AO – area of operation

CAR – combined-arms rehearsal

CHoPs – brigade chief of operations

CoA – course of action

CP – command post

FM – frequency modulation

HF – high frequency

LD – line of departure

LNO – liaison officer

MTOE – modified table of organization and equipment

NTC – National Training Center

PACE – primary, alternate, contingency and emergency (communications redundancy)

SOP – standard-operating procedure

SVOIP – Secure Voice Over Internet Protocol

TI – Tactical Internet.

TLP – troop-leading procedure

TRADOC – (U.S. Army) Training and Doctrine Command