*Pre*mortem Gets Desired Wargame Outputs with Economy of Effort

by MAJ Scott Dawe and MAJ Anthony Molica

There is possibly nothing more terrifying for a young field grade officer than being informed, while you are leading your new staff members through the military decision-making process (MDMP) during the leader training program (LTP), that the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) commander is on ground and coming by to observe your wargame. There is also likely nothing more horrifying than having that FORSCOM commander tell the entire room full of senior leaders as well as your staff that he is "disappointed."

Fortunately for the author, and the reason I am still in the Army writing this today, is that what retired GEN Michael X. Garrett was referring to when he expressed his "disappointment" was that we were executing the wargame in the same fashion he did when he was a junior staff officer. This comment was informative and raised the question, why is it there has been so little development in the execution of the staff wargame? Further reflection on battalion-level war gaming through multiple LTPs and combat training center (CTC) rotations (as an observer/coach/trainer, and member of a rotational training unit) suggests the status quo is indeed insufficient. But while my understanding from the rest of GEN Garrett's comments is he would have liked to see more technology incorporated to the existing process to make it more 21st Century, I would like to suggest a simpler alternative to the current battalion-level MDMP wargaming methodology.

Figure 1. GEN Michael X. Garrett, commanding general of U.S. Army Forces Command from 2019 – 2022 (seated center of photo), observes an LTP wargame in 2019. *(U.S. Army photo by the Fort Drum Public Affairs Office)*

A rule of thumb about doctrinal development is there are two conditions under which doctrine should change: when something is NOT in doctrine, but it works, or when something IS in doctrine, and it stops working. I suggest today's Army has arrived at the second condition state when it comes to war-gaming operations at the brigade/battalion and below level.

Controversial hot-take time: In 17 years, I do not believe I have executed a "to standard" battalion-level MDMP war game. We are, of course, taught the doctrine at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). Everyone can recall terms like "box method," "belt method," "avenue in depth," and "action/reaction/counterreaction," but I would challenge the reader to seriously consider if, given the time constraints of an LTP or CTC rotation, you've ever truly done, or seen it done, as explained in the CGSC classroom. I recall the block of instruction where we watched an out-of-date video of what looked like staff officers dissecting every aspect of a very complex plan in excruciating detail. While it was excellent and informative, and likely completely appropriate for an Operation OVERLORD or Operation DESERT STORM type operation, I just couldn't envision it happening in a swamp at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). Nor was the demonstration executed in a seemingly time constrained environment. No one in the video even looked tired. It was not like any JRTC, National Training Center (NTC), Joint Multinational Readiness Center, or Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center planning session I have ever seen. But if the schoolhouse answer might not work at the speed of the current fight, what other options are there to execute something approaching a wargame?

Enter the world of academia and the concept of the *pre*mortem or (to modify the term to sound more Army like) the before action review (BAR). In his 2007 **Harvard Business Review** article, "Performing a Project *Pre*mortem,"[1] the psychologist Gary Klein outlined the *pre*mortem as an incredibly simple mental model for changing the way a project team can identify and assess potential failures in a project. Simply put, the model discards the framing question of "what *could* go wrong?" with a project or plan and instead asks the participant to time warp into a future where failure has already been realized and ask, "what *did* go wrong?" I suggest this simple re-framing could be the perfect solution to the abbreviated battalion-level tactical wargame.

Imagine if instead of a potentially cumbersome and confusing action/reaction/counterreaction dynamic where the operations officer fights the plan against your own battalion S-2, you simply completed the plan then proffered the following thought exercise: "Now that the plan is complete, mentally transport yourself into the future. We have *lost* the battle or *failed* to accomplish our objectives. In two minutes, think through the details of what hypothetically happened and identify *why* we have lost." Then, solicit exact and specific failures from the entire team present. This would allow a holistic look at the entire operation from each warfighting function member of the staff which has the potential to tease out individual shortcomings which could be missed (i.e., missed the forest through all the trees) during the more doctrinally prescribed wargame methodology.

This is also a mental tool to have the staff conduct as a form of war-gaming when conducting the Rapid Decision Making and Synchronization Process, or when they are gathering the tools to conduct war-gaming during deliberate planning. One of the tools is every participant's *pre*mortem/BAR list. The identified planning lead is then able to execute the *pre*mortem/BAR adjudication as part of step zero of the wargame to establish the start set. Essentially, this forces every member of the planning team to execute an individual wargame to submit their *pre*mortem. Then, the team can execute the wargame as a group to minimize risk and friction thereby ensuring as efficient of an operation as possible. To some readers, this may seem like the Red Team conceptual tools employed to eliminate bias and decision-making pitfalls. This could be the foundation for implementing a "10th Man" rule during planning. Junior field grade officers and senior staff NCOs are consistently asked "how do we ensure we are producing a good product?" The *pre*mortem/BAR is one way to at least show how we are NOT producing a bad one.

Best of all, this process is already being used unofficially in places. Another anecdote from this article's co-author (who did not realize they were performing a *pre*mortem/BAR at the time), occurred during a rotation at NTC which illustrates the positive impact of the *pre*mortem/BAR on mission accomplishment. Tasked to seize the fictional training city of Razish, the combined arms battalion was to anchor the left flank of the brigade as it wagon wheeled into, and then cleared, the central corridor from east to west. The battalion commander decided to infiltrate two companies of dismounted infantry through the John Wayne Foothills, with their Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFV) following in support through John Wayne Pass. The one tank company would conduct a support by fire from Hill 876 and Hill 780. Following the battalion operations order brief, the battalion commander asked where we would fail. I responded that the enemy would conduct a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) attack into John Wayne Pass and the surrounding foothills to block the attack. This resulted in all BFVs being task organized to the tank company and all dismounts conducting the attack in mission oriented protective posture 2. Upon first contact the enemy chemically gassed John Wayne Pass. Fortunately, the dismounts were prepared and took no

casualties from the CBRN attack. Ultimately the battalion seized its objective as we were able to mass our combat power without suffering CBRN attrition. In this one instance, the saving grace came not from the deliberate war-gaming taking many hours, but from one simple question to one company commander.

To compound the problem, reflect on the following question: How often has a brigade or battalion combined arms rehearsal (CAR) devolved into a second wargame because the outputs of the first wargame proved insufficient? In the *pre*mortem/BAR, the identified failure points could then dictate the scope of the CAR so key leaders spend time reviewing identified critical failure points to resolve instead of redeveloping the plan, which often happens.

This abbreviated technique of the *pre*mortem or BAR is not meant to replace the detailed and rigorous war-gaming necessary for larger and more complex operations like an Overlord or a Desert Storm. Given that current war-gaming methodology is not satisfactory for the lower echelon tactical level or in a time constrained environment, the *pre*mortem or BAR is a way to get at the desired conceptual outputs of a wargame in an economy of effort manner.

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Notes

[1] Gary Klein, "Performing a project premortem," **Harvard Business Review**; 2007.

Acronym Quick-Scan

BAR – before action review
BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle
CAR – combined arms rehearsal
CBRN – chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear
CGSC – Command and General Staff College
CTC – combat training center
FORSCOM – U.S. Army Forces Command
JRTC – Joint Readiness Training Center
LTP – leader training program
MDMP – military decision-making process
NTC – National Training Center