

# Checks Unbalanced: A Doctrinal and Practical Solution to the Army's Pre-Combat Checks and Pre-Combat Inspections Problem

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Of the tasks leaders conduct in the Army, pre-combat checks (PCCs) and pre-combat inspections (PCIs) are among the most vital. Doctrine goes so far as to state "PCCs and PCIs are critical to success."<sup>1</sup> Despite this universally accepted importance, most rotational units' performances at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), Fort Polk, LA, reveal troubling trends arising across the Army.

These trends include reduced command emphasis, the grouping of PCCs and PCIs into a single activity, a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of PCCs and often a complete absence of either PCCs or PCIs at echelons above the squad leader.

This problem can be solved and the trends reversed, however, through increased involvement by battalion-level leadership in defining and enforcing standards, and through a slight change in the troop-leading procedures (TLPs) execution cross-walk currently being taught across the Army.

## PCC and PCI standards

Before each JRTC rotation, leaders at brigade, battalion and company levels develop their lists of key tasks and training objectives. These objectives usually include PCCs and PCIs, typically worded, "Our unit will conduct PCCs and PCIs to standard."



Their recognition of the importance of PCCs and PCIs is clear, but less clear is what those standards are or how the two activities differ.

In the Army's Field Manual (FM) 3-20.98, **Reconnaissance and Scout Platoon** – the primary doctrinal resource for Cavalry platoons – the chapter on command and control broadly defines PCCs and PCIs. Of PCCs, the section opens, "Equipment operators, vehicle crewmen and individual Soldiers conduct PCCs before executing operations."<sup>2</sup> Of note, there is no specific mention of leader checks in the PCC process; rather, it states that PCCs are individual Soldier tasks. The same manual opens discussion on PCIs, however, by stating, "Leaders in reconnaissance and scout platoons conduct PCIs to ensure that subordinate leaders and Soldiers have executed the necessary PCCs," clearly delineating the differences and establishing the leader task of PCIs as a check on the individual task of PCCs.

At the start of each rotation, their observer/coach/trainers (O/C/Ts) typically ask rotational platoons' leadership if they understand the differences between PCCs and PCIs. The answer is nearly always yes, but their answers often betray a common misconception; as demonstrated above, PCCs are an individual task but frequently misunderstood to be a leader task at a smaller or more detailed level. Somehow, the notion has arisen that PCCs are a squad leader or team leader function, while PCIs are the purview of the platoon leader or platoon sergeant. Partly due to this misunderstanding, the two activities are usually combined, if conducted at all, and implemented in a way that greatly reduces their effectiveness.

Doctrine provides little help in attacking the specifics of the problem, as the standards for PCCs and PCIs therein are scant. FM 3-20.98 explains simply that, "PCCs are conducted in accordance with appropriate technical manuals, supply catalogs and unit [standard operating procedures (SOPs)],"<sup>3</sup> prescribing the responsibility for refinement and standardization to the individual units. Conversely, FM 3-21.8, **Infantry and Rifle Platoon and Squad**, goes a little farther by providing an example PCC checklist with 46 items to inspect, but does so essentially

in lieu of a discussion on PCCs' role in the TLP process.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the appendices, the FM offers a second list of 39 vehicle and equipment checks – clearly a PCC checklist – that it curiously calls a "pre-execution checklist,"<sup>5</sup> needlessly introducing a new term and complicating what is already a confusing issue for junior leaders.

These example checklists provide a solid starting point for leaders, but they fall far short of definitive and require much refinement at the unit level. However, without instruction on the theory behind the action, how can a young leader provide that refinement? When instructing leaders, a list of specifics without a general discussion is less useful than a general discussion without specifics. With PCCs, general discussion of theory is necessary given the complexity of the task and the number of variables that exist from unit to unit and mission to mission.

Complicating matters still, the doctrine seems unclear on what TLP step PCCs and PCIs should be conducted. The Cavalry and Infantry platoon FMs both state that PCCs and PCIs both belong in the final step, "Step 8: supervise and refine."<sup>6,7</sup> The TLP crosswalk taught at the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) confirms as much.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, FM 3-20.98 presents an "example" of a screening operation during which "the platoon conducts PCCs" while the platoon leader "briefs his plan to the S-2 and the combined-arms battalion commander at the tactical operations center."<sup>9</sup> If the platoon leader is in the middle of "Step 3: make a tentative plan," it would seem that he could not simultaneously be in Step 8. This example seems to indicate that PCCs should occur during "Step 4: initiate movement," which "can be executed at any time throughout the sequence of the TLP."<sup>10</sup>

## Harmful PCC and PCI trends

A number of JRTC O/C/Ts observe the following negative trends as being prevalent, though not universal, among rotational units over the last several years:

- Neither PCCs nor PCIs receive proper standards at the appropriate levels. Units do not develop an SOP that identifies PCC or PCI standards prior to arrival at JRTC. This trend does not seem to be

entirely a product of lack of planning time, as standards for other complex issues are often thought out and reflected in their orders process – e.g., information operations themes and messages.

- Leaders do not understand the difference between PCCs and PCIs, or how to properly conduct them.
- Leaders and Soldiers simply do not conduct PCCs or PCIs. Leaders asking their Soldiers, “Do you have your stuff?” are neither PCCs nor PCIs. When the tasks are infrequently performed, leaders are often observed merely going through the motions with the knowledge they are being observed.
- Leaders frequently claim they do not have time to conduct proper PCCs or PCIs.
- Leaders forget to conduct a PCI, typically as a result of failing to plan for it, not budgeting the time and not using a proper mission checklist or order template (e.g., SH 21-76, **The Ranger Handbook**), which would ensure that PCIs be properly considered as part of the mission process.
- When effort is made to plan for PCCs and PCIs, they are almost universally grouped together in the timeline.
- When PCIs are conducted, mission-essential equipment is not prioritized and often goes unchecked.

## Policy recommendations

The tasks are simple but clearly not automatic. To ensure their proper execution, the following steps must be taken to enhance unit SOPs and develop junior leaders for mission success:

- Creation of uniformity is vital across all doctrinal sources for the handling of both PCCs and PCIs. Regardless of branch, company and platoon-level field manuals must include both a basic checklist specific to their unit type and a general discussion on the nature of the tasks, what they mean to accomplish and how they ought to be conducted. This provides grounding in the specific and promotes independence in the general.
- PCCs and PCIs must be discussed separately in doctrine. The two are too often confused in practice; there must be special emphasis in doctrine to clarify their

differences. Of particular note, it should be clear that PCCs occur at all levels as an individual task, and that PCIs occur at all leader levels, to include team leaders and squad leaders. PCIs must cease to be seen as a platoon leader/platoon sergeant or commander function only.

- PCIs should remain in Step 8 of the TLP, but PCCs must be moved to Step 4. The practical example in FM 3-20.98 already describes it as such, but this concept is not formalized anywhere else. Since PCCs are an individual task, and they may be conducted at any time – in fact constantly throughout the mission-preparation process – they must fall earlier in the TLP. Step 4 is the most logical place. This must be codified and formalized in doctrine, in **The Ranger Handbook** and, at minimum, in the TLP crosswalk taught at MCCC and the Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course (ABOLC).
- Battalion-level units must ensure that basic PCC checklists are developed and validated at company level. Each echelon of leadership moving down should add to, and seldom take from, the checklist provided from their higher command, but it is that higher command’s responsibility to both validate its subordinates’ checklists and enforce their use. This refinement applies to leadership at all echelons, starting with team leaders.
- PCC checklists must be treated as living documents that are constantly re-addressed and modified for different mission sets. An observed best practice involved a rotational commander who, to validate them, gave PCC checklists to his platoons with instructions that anything needing to be added or removed must be backbriefed in real time. This set a clear tone for his command emphasis on PCCs, ensured that his intent was met and increased his platoons’ combat effectiveness by enforcing PCC performance.
- Soldiers must be made to understand the significance of self-responsibility in ensuring they are mission-capable. They must be mentored on the importance of self- and battle-buddy PCCs. When Soldiers understand how their role affects the greater mission, they are more likely to PCC themselves and their battle buddies. Leaders may empower Soldiers

with their tasks by having them develop their own PCC checklist for their own equipment – i.e., a radio/telephone operator performing his own communications checks.

- PCI SOPs should establish the minimum standards for different mission types, with special emphasis on mission-essential equipment. Further, leaders should be coached to make their PCI intentions clear during the warning order or operational order, enabling subordinate leaders to ensure their PCIs address key issues first.
- When building PCIs into the timeline, they must be planned with enough time to fix any deficiencies should they be found. Too often, when units do manage to conduct PCIs, they force themselves to delay their mission to fix issues that are discovered. It is better to find these issues than not find them, but if fixing them requires desynchronizing a larger operation, the solution may be worse than the problem. The answer is to plan accordingly. Planning a PCI mere minutes before execution indicates a desire to go through the motions but reveals little thought put into the activity's actual purpose or utility.
- Leaders must remember that during PCIs, they are not limited to only checking physical items; they should also consider checking Soldiers' knowledge of the mission, their task and purpose and their priority intelligence requirements. Clarified doctrine, checklists and command emphasis will ensure these are checked as well.
- The final, key ingredient, as with most Army tasks, is discipline. "Discipline ... makes the Soldiers of a free country reliable in battle," GEN John Schofield famously said. Complacency is a major enemy to the execution of PCCs and PCIs, but if leaders stress their importance and Soldiers are disciplined, no obstacle to PCC or PCI execution is insurmountable.
- PCCs and PCIs are not only for combat operations. They should be conducted for every task any unit is charged with. If PCCs and PCIs are performed at all times in garrison to published and vali-

dated standards, when the time comes to execute in combat, the process will be second nature.

## Conclusion

PCCs and PCIs ensure a unit is in the best possible condition for the operation it is about to conduct. It stops a unit from making itself a victim through preventable errors. Regardless of a unit's experience or skill, of its cleanliness or care of equipment, or of its discipline and attentiveness, mistakes will still be made. Equipment will still be broken. Things will still be forgotten. PCCs, especially when codified, written and followed to the letter, catch these mistakes before they cost lives and before they fail missions. PCIs ensure standards through command emphasis and that PCCs happen as they should. A breakdown at any level in the process creates a hole whereby failure can slip through. The preceding recommendations aim to keep the net as tightly woven as possible. If we are defeated in battle, let it be through the enemy's cunning and not through our carelessness.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Department of the Army, FM 3-20.98, **Reconnaissance and Scout Platoon**. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (GPO), August 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Department of the Army, FM 3-21.8, **The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad**, Washington, DC: GPO, March 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>FM 3-20.98.

<sup>7</sup>FM 3-21.8.

<sup>8</sup>"Troop-leading procedures outline Version 2 (July 09).ppt," MCCC, 2009.

<sup>9</sup>FM 3-20.98.

<sup>10</sup>FM 3-21.10.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**ABOLC** – Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course

**FM** – field manual

**GPO** – Government Printing Office

**JRTC** – Joint Readiness Training Center

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

**O/C/T** – observer/coach/trainer

**OIF** – Operation Iraqi Freedom

**PCC** – pre-combat check

**PCI** – pre-combat inspection

**SOP** – standard operating procedures

**TLP** – troop-leading procedures