# What Now?
Rapid Decision-Making Synchronization Process: the Planning Tool You Didn't Know You Were Missing

by COL Esli T. Pitts

It was approaching late morning, and the multinational brigade's attack into the northern objective (Objective Corvette) had ground to a halt. Task Force (TF) Lancer was set in covered positions to the rear, waiting for the brigade to commit them to the fight. Lancers' task-organization included the organic scout and mortar platoons, task-force reserve (a mechanized platoon), two tank companies and a heavily-attrited mechanized-infantry company. The battalion had detached the second mechanized-infantry company but was reinforced with a U.S. cavalry troop and two multinational motorized rifle companies.

The two motorized companies were in the lead and in close proximity to Objective Corvette, but not in significant contact. The cavalry troop was deployed in a screen line to the TF's south, oriented to the east. The brigade was picking up indications and warnings that an enemy force was displacing from Objective Corvette and moving to the south, apparently to occupy Objective Mustang (Figure 1).
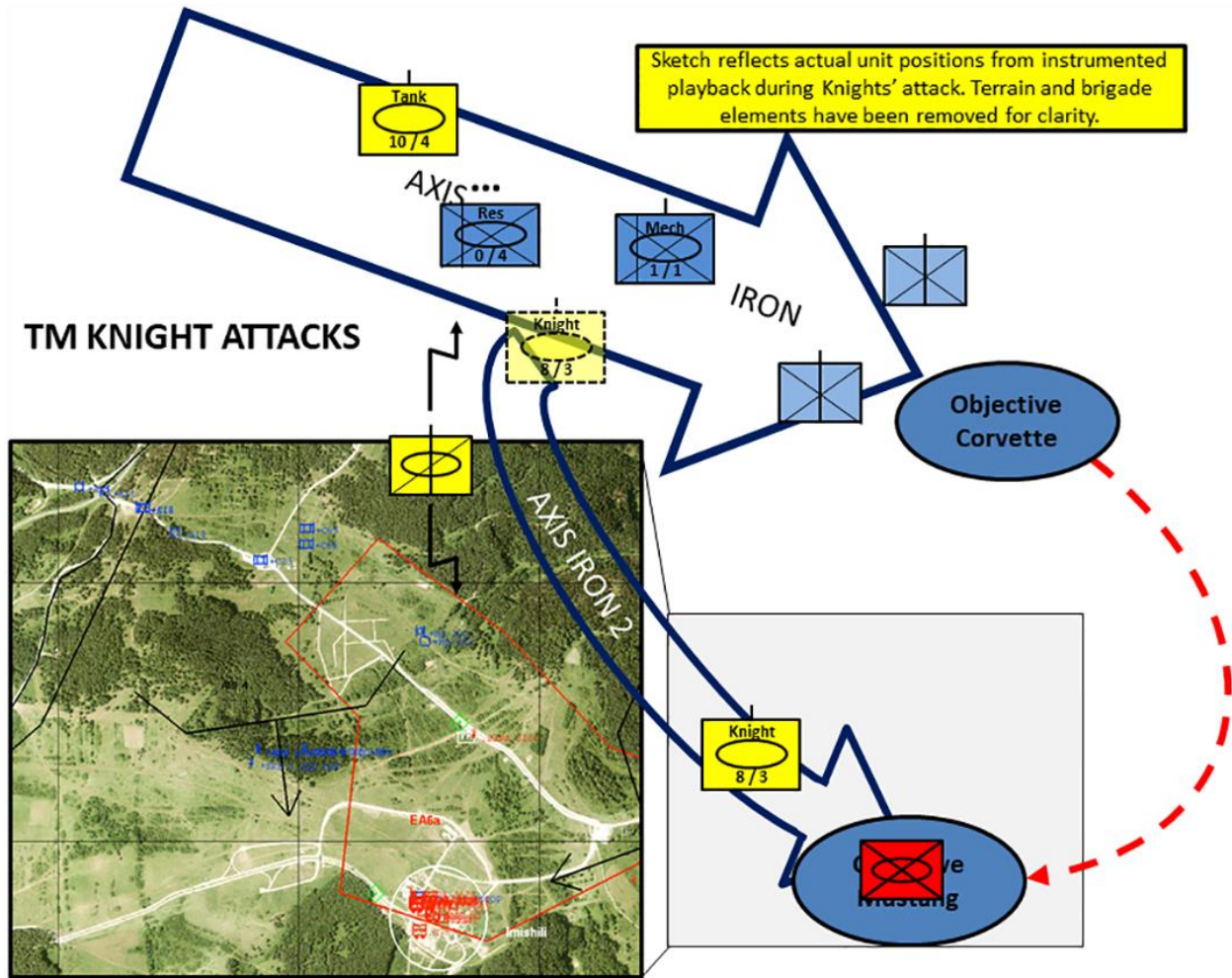
Instrumented playback shot of Knight attacking along Axis Iron 2 into enemy forces on Objective Mustang

Figure 1. Attack along Axis Iron 2.

At 1145, after hearing some traffic on the brigade command net, Lancer 6 calls Black Knight 6: "Knight 6, be prepared to move south on Axis Iron 2 on order." (Knights' combat power consists of eight tanks and three Bradleys.)

At 1215, Lancer takes advantage of the lull in the brigade attack to refuel the companies. They direct the priority of fueling as Axe (mech) and then Dragon (tank). Knight had only drawn 1,600 gallons of fuel prior to the operation, which had not topped them off. Now, even though they have been running for more than five hours and had just received word to be prepared to conduct an attack, they are not part of the refueling plan.

At 1253, Lancer 5 and Lancer 6 discuss the situation, and their consensus is that Knight will move south on Axis Iron 2 and regain contact with enemy before they can reinforce Objective Mustang.

At 1309, Knight starts movement down Axis Iron 2 toward Objective Mustang, passing within 800 meters of Lancer's fuelers and 3,150 gallons of fuel. Knight is reinforced by Lancer 3 and Lancer 6, who leave the other five companies in the TF behind. Shortly after starting movement on Axis Iron 2, Knight makes contact with enemy vehicles and obstacles.

At 1314, Knight 6 backbriefs Lancer elements: "My task and purpose is to go all the way to seize Objective Mustang if my combat power allows it." He is corrected by Lancer 5: "Conduct a movement-to-contact to defeat that force; no need to enter Objective Mustang."

At 1420, Knight continues the attack and finds itself in heavy contact in the vicinity of Objective Mustang. Knight sustains significant combat losses while achieving minimal effects on the enemy force. Also, while it was irrelevant to the notionally dead vehicles, Lancer wound up with a significant real-world refueling issue for the scattered combat vehicles after the attack.

At 1725, TF Lancer initiated a second, mostly unplanned, company-level attack into Objective Mustang. This time they used Team Griffin, a multinational motorized company, and a platoon or so of U.S. mechanized forces. It was winter and darkness had fallen, but Griffin had minimal training, equipment or capability to operate at night. Lancer's failure to establish common direct-fire-control measures (DFCMs) on Objective Mustang meant that the United States and multinational forces could not coordinate direct fires, preventing the mechanized force from supporting Griffin, which was literally operating in the dark. Griffin's aggression enabled it to achieve a foothold on Objective Mustang; however, the results were again predictable. This time, instead of casualties and a fuel issue for the tanks, TF Lancer was presented with a dilemma in casualty evacuation, which was cut short as Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) initiated change of mission.

Though Lancer had about two hours and 20 minutes to prepare for this significant change of mission, they launched Knight without the benefit of updated graphics, direct-fires planning, a battalion fire-support plan or information-collection (IC) plan. When it arrived at Objective Mustang, Knight's tanks had been running for at least seven hours, but as the battalion's new main effort, they were not prioritized for refueling even though refueling operations were ongoing. Acknowledging that there was still a brigade attack, Lancer left behind four other companies (and the remnants of a fifth) and did not weight the new attack with mortars, scouts or the reserve. As a result, first Knight, and then Griffin, were unable to successfully execute the mission.

This attack really happened. I observed it at JMRC while serving as the task-force senior maneuver trainer. The names have been changed, but the essential facts played out as described even though the platoons, companies and battalion were filled with Soldiers who were trained, engaged, cared and wanted to win. Much like your own formation!

How did this happen? How could they have done better? More importantly, how can you keep this from happening to you during your next rotation, wherever or whenever that may be?

RDSP

Most of us have been hearing some variation of the phrases "You were wedded to your plan" or "You fought the plan, not the enemy" for much of our careers. However, there is a doctrinal method by which we can avoid the tyranny of "fighting the plan." The secret is called the Rapid Decision-Making Synchronization Process (RDSP).

I first heard of RDSP as a student at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC). I'll admit I didn't grasp its importance until I later served as an instructor there, when I actually taught the class. During my own battalion command, I incorporated an iteration into several of the battalion-level training events we conducted and employed it with good effects during a brigade defense at the National Training Center. As a trainer at JMRC, I offered a class to rotational units prior to rolling into the box and also made it a point of emphasis during after-action reviews.

RDSP is still current doctrine, as found in Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, *The Operations Process,* and to the extent that it is emphasized by individual instructors, it is part of the Advanced Operations Course at CGSC.

So what is RDSP? And how does it work? This article will review the five steps to RDSP and talk about some ways to implement it in training.
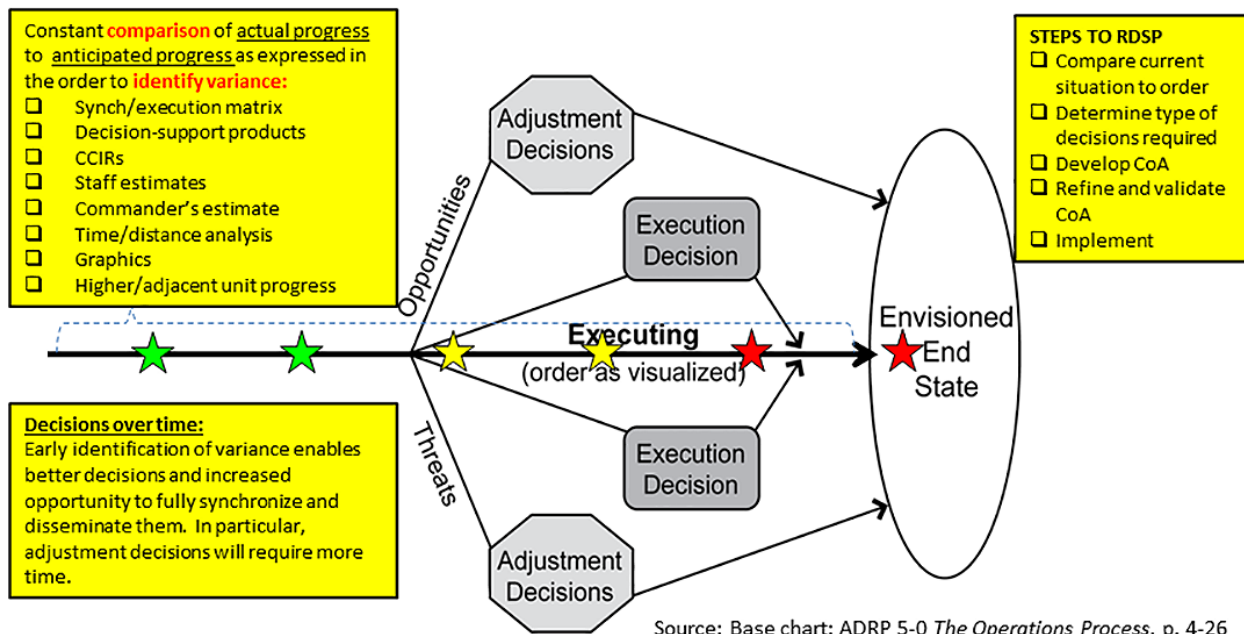

Figure 2. RDSP model.

Step 1: compare current situation to order

RDSP is a natural transition from the fourth step in the operations process: "assess." As we assess an ongoing operation, we are constantly comparing our actual current and likely future progress to what we anticipated in planning and preparation and looking for variance between them.

Information identified as variance often meets the definition of *exceptional information*, defined as "information that would have answered one of the commander's critical information requirements [CCIR] if the requirement for it had been foreseen and stated as one of the [CCIRs]."[1]

While this step says we are comparing the current situation to the order, we are actually comparing our current situation to a variety of inputs. Certainly the order is the source of some key products, including execution, synchronization and decision matrices. But we can (and should) consider our running estimates and our understanding of aspects of time/distance analysis, and compare our progress to reporting from adjacent and higher units.

Anybody might recognize variance. Consider the following situations:

- The flank-guard platoon leader just identified the regimental commander's tank and some command vehicles under nets on his left flank.

- The support force just reported there are no obstacles in the enemy's main defensive area – at least not where templated.
- The breach force just lost its third mine plow and the roller was already gone.
- The scouts report that the enemy is 2,500 meters farther east than the graphics show.
- The battle captain realizes your lead company is 30 minutes behind the timeline.
- The S-2 plots a unique high-value enemy asset in an unexpected but accessible location.
- You are executing a decision, branch or contingency plan that was not already planned in detail.
- The battle noncommissioned officer recognizes that the main-effort company doesn't have enough combat power to achieve the decisive operation.
- The executive officer realizes that the adjacent battalion is moving fast and there is now a 45-minute gap.
- Your higher headquarters has just directed you to attack to a new objective in response to a shifting enemy force (see the opening vignette).

These examples all sound overly obvious. My experience, however, is that in the noise and confusion of maneuver, the subtleties of key reporting are often missed or misunderstood. The information was sent, but nobody recognized the significance of it.

For instance, when I served as battle captain during a brigade attack at Hohenfels, my new radio-telephone operator (RTO) received a timely report of an "AT8" (anti-tank system) but recorded it as a report of an "88" (recovery vehicle) at a particular grid. Not recognizing the significance of a reported "88," the spot report died at his station. The AT8 crew quickly went on to destroy most of a company.

Identifying variance is meaningless if somebody doesn't take action on it. Essential to this step is that somebody then says something, whether that's a net call or announcing "Attention in the TOC [tactical-operations center]!"

Inexperienced units rarely see the variance until it comes out in the after-action review (AAR). Good units recognize variance as it emerges through constant comparison of the situation to multiple sources: the synch matrix, the commander's estimate, battle-tracking, situation reports and gut feelings. Great units recognize variance and conduct RDSP to quickly identify and analyze the problem, and then create a fragmentary order (FRAGO) to disseminate the solution.

The key to success with RDSP lies in the recognition of variance early enough to make a decision with enough time to execute it against a live enemy force.

Step 2: determine the type of decision required

There are two essential decisions to make. The first decision is whether to act at all. Variance can present itself in the form of *threats* or *opportunities*. In most if not all cases, the unit must respond to threats to mission accomplishment or threats to the force, while lesser threats might be ignored. At minimum, the commander must balance the risk of not taking action. The unit also may or may not choose to take advantage of opportunities. For instance, a battalion conducting an attack on a force-oriented objective might choose to instead take advantage of a significant terrain-based opportunity. Whether or not it does so, the unit should recognize the opportunity and make a deliberate decision.

The second decision is one of a matter of degree of change. Variance may only require a small change to the plan, called an *execution decision*. Execution decisions are generally within the existing concept of operations, and those decisions may have been delegated to the staff, the TOC, etc. Execution decisions can also involve conducting branch plans or contingency plans that were already developed to support anticipated commander's decisions per the decision-support matrix. Changes that are more complex, involving major changes to the course of action (CoA), are called *adjustment changes*. Adjustment decisions are generally the result of unanticipated events. They will, at minimum, require approval from the unit commander and may require approval of the next-higher commander as well.

The line between execution decisions and adjustment decisions is pretty blurred. Decisions should be evaluated in terms of a graduated scale of complexity. Maybe the necessary decision was for the battle captain to approve a temporary boundary change, with associated unit crosstalk and updated graphics in the TOC, at which time the process was done. At some point, factoring in experience, willingness to delegate and staff proficiency, decisions

rapidly become the commander's responsibility. Eventually, they become complex enough that they require conducting the next step.

Step 3: develop a CoA

Though this is starting to sound like the military decision-making process (MDMP), it is not MDMP. ADRP 5-0 says the following: "While [MDMP] seeks the optimal solution, RDSP seeks a timely and effective solution."[2] One key difference is that the start point of RDSP is the actual situation the unit finds itself in when variance was first observed and the need for a decision was identified. You are subject to the very real constraints presented by your available combat power, logistical status and disposition on the battlefield.

By its very nature, it starts as a reactive event. From that point, the CoA could be one directed by the commander, a hasty product developed in the TOC after a quick "two-minute drill" with the executive officer and then cross-talked between the tactical command post (TAC) and TOC, or a detailed and entirely new plan.

Some initial considerations include whether the mission, commander's intent, CCIRs, decisive operation, shaping operations and potential decisions need to be changed. Do graphics require changing? Do we need to change the task-organization, allocate a reserve, reconstitute a reserve or shift the main effort?

More advanced: what are the ramifications of your changes on your higher headquarters? As an example: what if you change your scheme of fires and update your high-payoff target list (HPTL)? Be aware that your changes, and requested support, might significantly impact your higher headquarters' deep fight, either through inadvertently duplicating their efforts, or more likely by creating a gap in their plans through diverted assets.

The CoA might be as simple as a change to the scheme of maneuver. Consider the earlier example of variance in which our scout platoon identified that the objective is actually 2,500 meters farther to the east. Is it enough to identify a center-mass grid to the new objective, new point of breach, point of penetration and associated support- and attack-by-fire positions, build them in Joint Capabilities Release (JCR) and blast it out to the force? Maybe. Or maybe not -- let's look at the next step.

Step 4: refine and validate CoA

While ADRP 5-0 breaks this process into Steps 3 and 4, my opinion and experience at the battalion are that they are largely one continuous flow. A first consideration in this step is an assessment that your initial maneuver CoA is feasible, acceptable and suitable. It is not yet complete, and may never be. However, synchronization of all the warfighting functions (WfF) is inherent within the name of the process.

Continuing the example of the newly found objective, we already designed a new ground scheme of maneuver, but simply extending the battalion's graphics for 2,500 meters was insufficient in this case.

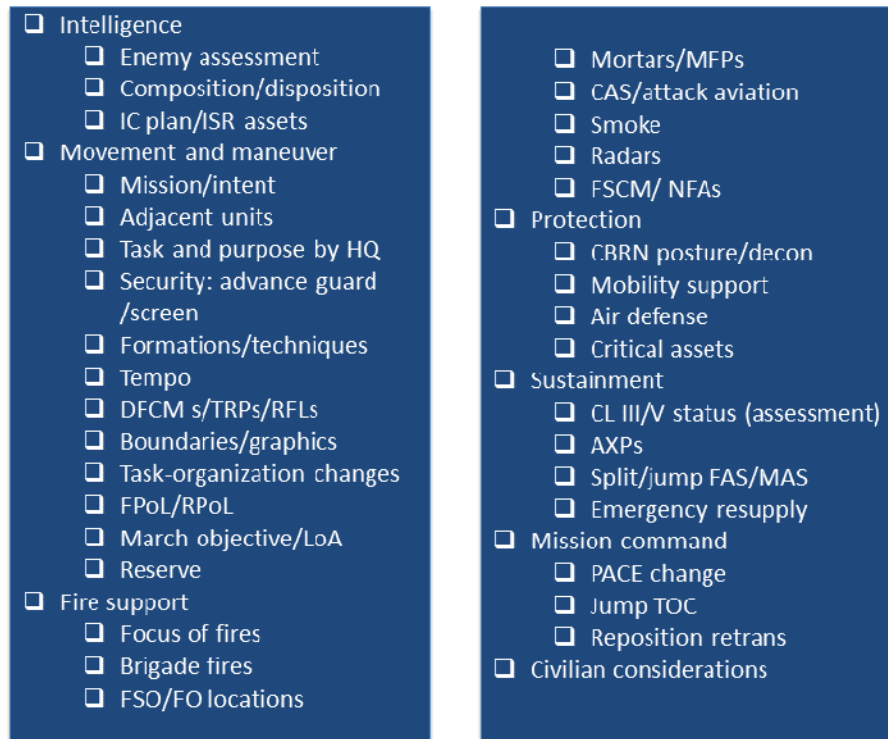Let's refine the CoA by adding just some of many possible additional considerations per WfF:

- **Movement and maneuver:** We'll add a new phase line at which to transition to bounding overwatch as well as designate and assign target-reference points (TRPs) on the new objective to control direct fires.
- **Intelligence:** Let's establish named areas of interest (NAIs) to help us confirm obstacles associated with the new objective and identify the enemy's reserve force. We'll also refine the HPTL.
- **Fires:** A CoA might be simple enough to simply refine existing targets. However, our example includes significant changes, so we'll develop a new plan with new grids for the same targets we already planned. We'll be sure to update our tactical and technical triggers, too. We'll also establish a new mortar firing point (MFP) and adjust supporting radar coverage through brigade.
- **Protection:** Based on our deeper penetration into the enemy's defensive positions, we'll change our air-defense threat warning and weapons-control status. We'll also review the location and employment of our critical assets and adjust (or request) our air defense, engineer and military police to better protect them.
- **Sustainment:** We'll establish an additional logistics release point and reposition our emergency Class (CL) III and CL V emergency resupply, and also jump the main aid station (MAS) forward one more terrain feature.

- **Mission command:** We'll need to move the retransmission team forward quickly. We also need to develop additional triggers to control if and when we jump the TOC or TAC forward one more bound.

The combinations are endless. The point is that changes to the scheme of maneuver will almost always generate changes in the other WfFs. The essential point is that the CoA is synchronized, and this can actually be done relatively quickly in the TOC.

See Figure 3 for a partial list of considerations for a counterattack.

Lastly, before going final, the unit must ensure that its new CoA still nests with and supports its higher headquarters' plan and, if necessary, it has approval to execute it.

❏ Intelligence
   ❏ Enemy assessment
   ❏ Composition/disposition
   ❏ IC plan/ISR assets
❏ Movement and maneuver
   ❏ Mission/intent
   ❏ Adjacent units
   ❏ Task and purpose by HQ
   ❏ Security: advance guard /screen
   ❏ Formations/techniques
   ❏ Tempo
   ❏ DFCM s/TRPs/RFLs
   ❏ Boundaries/graphics
   ❏ Task-organization changes
   ❏ FPoL/RPoL
   ❏ March objective/LoA
   ❏ Reserve
❏ Fire support
   ❏ Focus of fires
   ❏ Brigade fires
   ❏ FSO/FO locations

   ❏ Mortars/MFPs
   ❏ CAS/attack aviation
   ❏ Smoke
   ❏ Radars
   ❏ FSCM/ NFAs
❏ Protection
   ❏ CBRN posture/decon
   ❏ Mobility support
   ❏ Air defense
   ❏ Critical assets
❏ Sustainment
   ❏ CL III/V status (assessment)
   ❏ AXPs
   ❏ Split/jump FAS/MAS
   ❏ Emergency resupply
❏ Mission command
   ❏ PACE change
   ❏ Jump TOC
   ❏ Reposition retrans
❏ Civilian considerations

Figure 3. RDSP considerations for hasty or counterattack.

Step 5: implement

Implementing the new CoA could be as simple as a verbal directive from the TOC or the commander. Ideally, it begins to take advantage of mission-command tools such as JCR or Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below to develop and disseminate updated graphics and a written or verbal FRAGO.

If enough time is available, the unit should continue to refine and disseminate associated products: graphics, decision-support products, fire-support plans, synch matrix, execution checklist, etc. But not at the expense of time or clarity – the keys to RDSP are rapidity and synchronization. RDSP done too late will only cause confusion. LTG George S. Patton Jr.'s famous maxim that "a good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week" is still relevant.

What now?

RDSP is the staff answer to the age-old question: "What now, lieutenant (captain, major, lieutenant colonel, colonel)?" My own experience is that it is a useful process that helps units leverage flexibility and resist the tendency to "fight the plan" even when that plan is no longer relevant. Unfortunately, my informal survey of recent graduates of CGSC, intermediate-level education, sister-service schools and combat-training center leader-training programs reveals that it is not taught – or, if it is, it is not emphasized.

I opened this article with an overview of RDSP that was conspicuous by its absence. You might have already said to yourself that you already do RDSP, but you don't call it RDSP. My observations of RDSP (by any name) being employed at JMRC were that those rare instances produced highly maneuver-centric CoAs (and sometimes that is enough). But we can do better. And we can do so pretty easily if we recognize and take control of the emerging situation.

More than once, while conducting TF AARs at JMRC, we would discuss a particular tactical situation for which RDSP would have been appropriate. I would then offer the battalion's leadership about 10 minutes to gather onto a screen an image of the situation and to develop the FRAGO they wish they'd developed while in execution. The FRAGO was invariably a better option than what they chose to execute during the mission, which was often choosing to "fight the plan."

It's easy to recognize after the fact that variance has occurred and that we missed an opportunity or failed to respond to a threat. It's harder to do so while we are in the fight. Therefore, it's important to train ourselves so that we recognize variance during operations and are able to respond appropriately.

First, recall that the first step is to compare the current situation to the order. We must habitually complete the order, including developing a detailed synch matrix and detailed decision-support products. If we never fully develop the plan, how do we recognize variance from it? If we did not do the time/distance analysis to know that the time between planned Events A and B should be 60 minutes, how do we know we should be alarmed when we are currently 90 minutes into that time with no sign of Event B yet? If we did not develop the understanding that Events C, D and E must happen before Decisive Event F, how do we respond when we eventually realize that Event E cannot, and will not, happen and F will now fail?

Second, the battle captain that will be on duty during the mission should be in attendance at the combined-arms rehearsal. This is a free chance to see and hear the mission and begin to gain an understanding of it.

Third, the mission must be battle-tracked to completion. The battle staff should be sitting in the TOC, closely watching the synch matrix and decision-support products and crossing events off as they happen. As the staff does so, they are looking for variance and asking questions. The S-2 ops rep is sitting right next to the battle captain and is closely tracking enemy forces to compare what has been seen and/or killed, vs. what they anticipated having killed. Unseen enemy forces always represent threats or opportunities. Other staff officers are doing similar analysis within their functions. Going back to our original example, picture Lancer 4 keying the net and insisting that Knight be first in the line to refuel.

Fourth, the whole team in the TOC – everybody regardless of rank or position – must be trained on recognizing variance in its many forms and taking action. In the example of the AT8 vs. the 88, the lesson for me was not to grab the hand mic from the RTO but to train us better.

Fifth, train the process of RDSP. Run through it in the classroom. Read the doctrine (or this article), take some prep time to build a vignette, and then have a brown-bag lunch with the team.

Sixth, during battalion or brigade training events, use the AAR to identify times when RDSP would have been appropriate. Stop the AAR and actually do the process for 10 to 15 minutes.

Seventh, train the process of RDSP again. Run through it in the field. Here is my technique, both during battalion command and refined during my time as a trainer at JMRC. The idea was to execute the actual mission you've been assigned and then conduct RDSP. At the same time I ended the exercise for the companies, I would inject a new situation on the battalion by way of additional reporting. This would stimulate RDSP with sufficient complexity to require an adjustment decision. While the companies then paused to consolidate, account for weapons, etc., the staff worked the process until they could transmit a FRAGO. There was no actual tactical movement required by the companies. Generally, the companies would be finished and prepared for any administrative movements about the same time the battalion staff was finished with the FRAGO and prepared to resume control of the companies' next movements. Battalion and brigade executive officers should specifically find time to rehearse the RDSP with their TOC crews and build the necessary products.

Eighth, do it again.

RDSP is an essential but overlooked tool. If you inventoried the tank and found your impact wrench missing, you'd be a little bit concerned. You'd be even more concerned if you were about to break track. If you inventoried your staff's tool bag, would you find RDSP, or would it be missing?

So the question for you is, What now?

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Notes
[1] ADRP 5-0, **The Operations Process**, May 17, 2012.
[2] Ibid.

Acronym Quick-Scan
AAR – after-action review
ADRP – Army doctrinal reference publication
ADV Grd – advance guard
ATK AVN – attack aviation
AXP – ambulance exchange point
CAS – close air support
CBRN – chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear
CCIR – commander's critical-information requirement
CGSC – Command and General Staff College
CL – class
CoA – course of action
DFCM – direct fire-control measure
FAS – forward aid station
FO – forward observer
FPoL – forward passage of lines
FRAGO – fragmentary order
FSCM – fire-support coordination measure
FSO – fire-support officer
HPTL – high-payoff target list
HQ -- headquarters
IC – information collection
ISR – intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance
JCR – Joint Capabilities Release
JMRC – Joint Multinational Readiness Center
LoA – limit of advance
MAS – main aid station
MDMP – military decision-making process
MFP – mortar firing point
NAI – named area of interest
NFA – no-fire area
PACE – primary, alternate, contingency, emergency
RDSP – Rapid Decision-making Synchronization Process
RFL – restricted firing line
RPoL – rearward passage of lines
RTO – radio-telephone operator
TAC – tactical command post
TF – task force
TOC – tactical-operations center
TRP – target-reference point

TM – team
WfF – warfighting function