

VALIDATING READINESS:

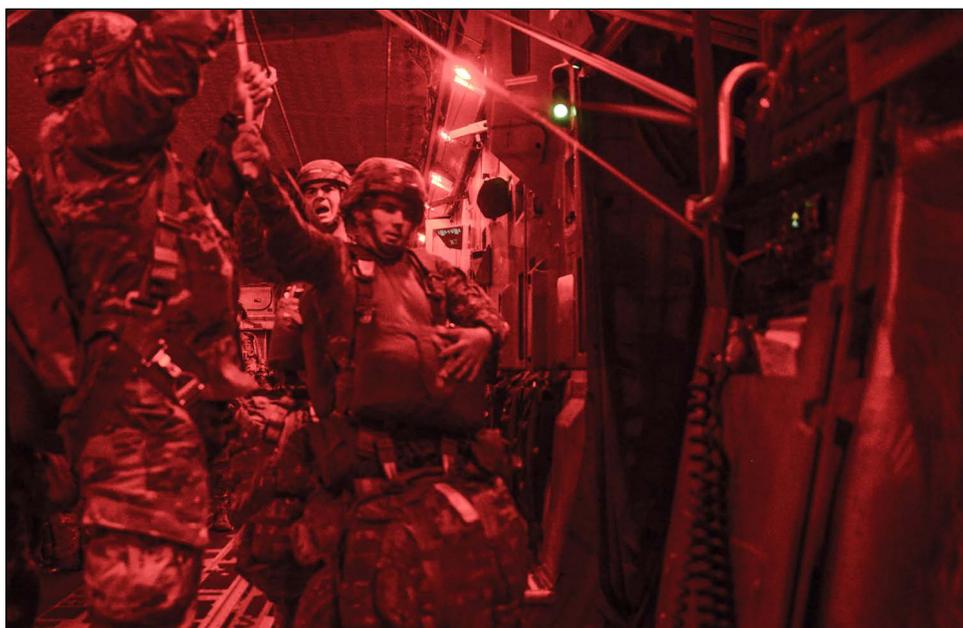
A BATTALION COMMANDER'S OBSERVATIONS FROM A NO-NOTICE EXERCISE

LTC MARK IVEZAJ

Unscheduled training opportunities test the readiness of a battalion and expose systemic vulnerabilities in a way that planned training cannot. In July 2016, U.S. Army Forces Command notified the 82nd Airborne Division's Global Response Force (GRF) of an emergency deployment readiness exercise (EDRE). The EDRE required the division to send more than 700 paratroopers from Fort Bragg, NC, to conduct an airborne insertion into Fort Polk, LA, within 100 hours and then immediately conduct a non-combat evacuation operation (NEO) alongside world-class role players at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). As the ready battalion — the Army's organization designated to rapidly deploy to crises anywhere in the world — the 2nd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment received the no-notice mission and then immediately launched our N-hour outload, planning, and deployment sequence. The EDRE allowed us to see ourselves and our readiness platforms, standard operating procedures (SOPs), and execution checklists in a realistic, condensed planning timeline. While the event revealed areas to improve, it highlighted the unique opportunities to develop readiness afforded by the 82nd Airborne Division's mission.

As in most Army organizations, those opportunities begin at 0630. Every day, we work towards enhancing readiness at the lowest level through the education and application of functional, combat-focused fitness. Our physical training program — Geronimo Athlete Warrior (GAW) — focuses on the development of maximal strength to ensure paratroopers' bodies are prepared for the physical demands of airborne operations. Additionally, GAW allows us to identify and address individual weaknesses that may contribute to injuries. During the EDRE, this daily focus paid dividends as our injury rate from the airborne entry was less than half of one percent, allowing us to keep our paratroopers in the fight after insertion.

Another initiative that profited our organization during the EDRE is our leadership professional development program, which is focused on exposing Geronimo officers and NCOs to civilian leaders and professionals. The GRF supports a broad range of missions across the spectrum of human strife, ranging from disaster relief to high-intensity conflict. Within the N-hour sequence we have a short window in which to plan against a specific problem set in a specific part of the world. Therefore, we instill a sense of intellectual agility in our junior leaders through exposure to best



Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division perform a nighttime static-line jump from a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft over Polk Field, LA, on 17 July 2016 as part of Devil Strike, a joint emergency deployment readiness exercise. (Photo by TSgt Sean Tobin, USAF)

practices in a variety of civilian fields. We have participated in panels and discussions focused on problem solving and talent management with executive leaders from successful organizations including Red Hat, Inc. in Raleigh and Roush Fenway Racing in Charlotte. These platforms allow us to develop leaders capable of critical thought who are aware of the importance of interdependency, interoperability, and integration. Meanwhile, the lessons acquired from these interactions provide us the tools to improve, encourage, and foster an atmosphere focused on teamwork and clear, constant communication.

Perhaps the most important opportunity available to all units within the division is our joint partnership platforms. For the 82nd Airborne Division, every day is a joint touch point; the Air Force is a 365-day-a-year mission partner. To sustain proficiency in airborne operations, we coordinate regularly with the Air Mobility Command and the 18th Air Force. This regular point-to-point coordination yielded success when we received the call to mobilize and deploy in 100 hours. During the EDRE, we quickly integrated our air mobility and unit movement teams with Air Force planners and inspectors, allowing us to promptly react to changes in manifest, timeline, and aircraft. Established relationships gave us the ability to anticipate requirements as they emerged in the outload process.

Fort Bragg provides proximity and access to our Special Operations Force partners, a relationship that allowed us to quickly plug into Special Forces planners and Operational Detachment Alpha commanders on the ground. These leaders shared their knowledge of the host nation and enemy situation once we inserted. We used this information to plan the rapid evacuation of embassy personnel on Fort Polk.

There are many lessons learned from this kind of no-notice deployment. We identified shortcomings with our outload process and employment of mission command systems. We realized that we do not have the right liaisons assigned to adjacent units on Fort Bragg to facilitate a rapid outload. We now know that we need to integrate our joint partners into our execution checklist scrub as conditions change, and we must develop a more coherent N-hour sequence SOP for mitigating information leaks from our formation. Through the EDRE we diagnosed vulnerabilities not normally visible within the organization.

Combined, the 82nd Airborne Division's multilayered readiness focus and joint access allowed us to conduct a no-notice deployment and follow-on mission that developed confidence, identified areas to improve, and built increased readiness. It is this focus that allows us to support the GRF mission and live at the knife's edge of readiness for our nation.

At the time this article was written, **LTC Mark Ivezaj** was serving as commander of the 2nd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, NC.



82nd Airborne Division paratroopers load a C-17 Globemaster at Pope Army Airfield, NC, during an emergency deployment readiness exercise on 16 July 2016. (Photo by SSgt DeAndre Curtiss, USAF)