



LESSONS LEARNED FROM JRTC ROTATION 16-06

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In April 2016, the 1st Brigade Combat Team (-), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) “Bastogne” completed its first decisive action Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation in more than a decade — a significant departure from the numerous counterinsurgency (COIN)-focused mission readiness exercises to which we’ve become accustomed. JRTC presented a genuine hybrid threat that combined everything from enemy network compromise capabilities to threat aviation to chemical attacks. After years of training tailored to fight an insurgency in stability-focused scenarios in support of repeat deployments, our ability to fight such a threat had largely atrophied. In this article, we attempt to group our lessons learned into broad themes that cross over several, if not all, warfighting functions. While not a comprehensive list (separate articles could be written about each), these lessons were chosen because they drive the brigade’s training moving forward.

From COIN to Decisive Action: Shifting the Training Paradigm

The positive side of the repeat deployments over the last 13 years is the warfighting experience of our NCOs through field grade officers. This is a group accustomed to dealing with uncertainty, evolving threats, and partnered operations. The downside is that the experience is limited, to a great extent, to the capabilities and limitations of the threats in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of which come close to the hybrid threats we faced from the Arianan threat at JRTC. A perfect example of the early learning curve was this report from the leader of a combat patrol: “The enemy has helicopters that keep shooting at us. What do we do?” The guidance from the brigade tactical operations center (TOC): “You have .50 cal. machine guns, Javelins, and TOWs (tube-launched, optically tracked, wireless-guided missiles). Shoot back.” Seems simple enough, but those aren’t threats we’ve replicated in collective training in quite some time. We lack the general experiences of Soldiers from previous generations who trained AirLand Battle and understood the nuances of planning for and dealing with a wider spectrum of enemy capabilities.

The Arianan threat covered the full spectrum of capabilities, from conventional armor and infantry units to special purpose forces, criminal/insurgent threats, CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) capabilities, aviation

and unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and even “red” media. Where the brigade struggled was not in engagements with traditional capabilities — we are adept at combating any ground threat in an offensive engagement. Our tactical difficulties and pre-deployment training shortfalls were highlighted in the unexpected threats. For example, our experience fully prepared us to deal with an isolated improvised explosive device (IED) followed by a recovery mission, but it did not prepare us for an enemy obstacle belt with integrated fires and an assault force that regularly inflicted mass casualties.

In the end, changing two approaches allowed us to regain the initiative. First, shifting the mental model from COIN to decisive action started with reinforcing the basics and becoming comfortable with discomfort. Gone are the days of basing operations from a forward operating base (FOB) with showers, cots, and laundry facilities. Soldiers and leaders worked through very deliberate load plans and packing lists to ensure they were equipped for multi-day operations at extended ranges from their battalion or squadron headquarters. Going back to doctrine and employing battle drills produced more shared understanding of how to combat a near-peer threat.

Second, we identified and exploited the opposing force’s (OPFOR’s) operational patterns and preferences. Since weather denied us the use of aircraft for most of the rotation and roads quickly proved untenable, we walked. C Troop, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment — the light reconnaissance troop — logged 90 kilometers in 10 days. During the final assault, an infantry battalion walked 34 kilometers from the eastern boundary of the training area to the objective, bypassing mechanized threats en route to the objective. During our final after action review (AAR), the OPFOR commander conceded that our movement of large formations away from roads limited his ability to identify and disrupt our operations, ultimately allowing us to seize our final objective ahead of schedule.

Empowering the Commander to Make Decisions

If the purpose of the brigade staff is to resource subordinate operations, synchronize operations, and enable the brigade commander to make decisions, we fell short in developing a standard set of operational products that could achieve that goal. Early on, the brigade staff produced a myriad of products across the warfighting functions that made decision making and synchronization difficult. The increasing number of products resulted in greater likelihood of discrepancies in timing and prioritization. Towards the end of the rotation, we narrowed production to just a few products: standard map with common graphics, synchronization matrix, execution checklist, target execution list, and decision support matrix/template. With these five products, the brigade commander could manage the fight, and the reduction in outputs allowed the staff to more effectively focus. Getting to this point required shared understanding between our commander and the staff’s ability to produce products that enabled his understanding and visualization of the fight in front of us. Shared understanding and clear commander’s intent are essential to effective synchronization; omitting either will allow the brigade staff to lose focus.

Related to this was the overall staff planning process training that occurred simultaneous with collective training at the battalion level. As part of the brigade headquarters’ training progression, the brigade staff completed one full iteration of tactical military decision-making process (MDMP) focused on refining the plans standard operating procedure (PSOP), to include all associated briefs and products. From that initial training, the PSOP and TOCSOP were updated and redistributed across the staff. During the JRTC Leader Training Program in March 2016, the brigade staff once again validated the SOPs and further refined briefs, processes, and products. While we continued to adjust throughout the actual rotation, having invested time up front to determine how to present information to the brigade was vital to the early planning process.

In the four months prior to the rotation, the brigade and battalion staffs developed and adopted a more comprehensive battle rhythm that was nested with the division headquarters. The revamped version reduced the overall number of meetings but provided greater clarity on expected inputs and outcomes from the remaining meetings. As we developed the tactical battle rhythm for JRTC, we adopted a similar approach. First, the battle rhythm had to include a complete daily targeting and planning process that culminated in a nightly fragmentary order (FRAGORD). The second, like our home-station battle rhythm, is that it had to be nested with and support the higher headquarters battle rhythm. While we achieved the format and deployed to JRTC with it, we struggled with enforcement, which ultimately reduced the positive impact that such predictability could have provided.

Synchronizing the Warfighting Functions and Leveraging all Capabilities

During reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI), the brigade staff employed a number of detailed



Soldiers with the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division conduct a live-fire rehearsal during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 16-06 at Fort Polk, LA, on 13 April 2016. (U.S. Army photo)

tracking systems to ensure we accounted for the location of all personnel and equipment, where the brigade was in terms of completing RSOI requirements, and the operational status of every possible system as we built combat power. While we had a number of detailed “bubble charts” that captured combat power and readiness snapshots in time, we never transitioned to communicating what that progress meant in terms of capabilities and combat power. For instance, within three days of consolidating all TOCs, our charts indicated the full suite of communications systems were fully linked and communicating. What the charts didn’t communicate was that operators at the battalion and squadron level didn’t necessarily understand how to employ the system.

Where this shortcoming perhaps hurt the worst was upon immediate deployment into “the box” during the initial attack as we failed to communicate employable combat power. We could account for all combat losses, but the battle captains struggled to translate raw numbers into remaining platoons or companies the brigade commander had available. Not until after the mid-rotation AAR did we develop a functional system that leveraged liaison officers (LNOs) from the subordinate units to track capabilities in real time and then brief them to the brigade commander at each evening battle update brief (BUB). This venue ensured widest dissemination and shared understanding across the board; it also enabled the brigade commander to make task organization changes as needed.

Our difficulties in synchronizing and sustaining the fight go back to the importance of the battle rhythm. During RSOI, when all units were consolidated at the intermediate staging base (ISB), face-to-face meetings were easily conducted and effective. Once the brigade deployed from the ISB and began dispersed operations across the battlefield, operations synch (OPSYNCH) and logistics synch (LOGSYNCH) meetings became infrequent, poorly attended, and marginally effective. Combined with incomplete reports and poor enforcement of reporting requirements, the resulting effect was most of the resupply operations were done with minimal notice when units were “black” on a certain class of supply.

Perhaps the most important battle rhythm event, the OPSYNCH suffered the same difficulties as the LOGSYNCH, often resulting in disjointed operations, poor prioritization of enabling assets, and missed opportunities to gain access to division-level assets. Two changes helped us correct course, albeit towards the end of the rotation. First, we enforced the battle rhythm reporting scheduled and distributed standard report formats to ensure we received the right information, at the right time, in the right format. Second, we shifted away from exclusively relying on subordinate TOCs to submit reports and leveraged the LNOs present on the current operations floor 24 hours per day. This not only freed up the battle captain but also ensured LNOs better understood their units’ needs.



The Way Ahead

Master the basics — shoot, move, and communicate. As a light infantry brigade, we shoot and maneuver on the battlefield effectively — this is well within our comfort zone. Where we struggle is leveraging all communication platforms from the Capabilities Set 14 (now CS16) to coordinate and synchronize operations. Moving forward, our TOCSOP and tactical SOP (TACSOP) will more clearly delineate what platforms are used for what transmissions and under what circumstances. While we adhere well to standard radio protocol, we have not yet effectively captured standards. In addition, we have built new systems to maintain and track digital skill proficiency. The nuances of our mission command systems require continual sustainment training in order to maintain individual proficiency. The collective tasks required to establish and maintain effective mission command are just as important. To this point, the brigade has developed a multi-echelon approach to layering command post exercises (CPXs) into home-station training.

The benefits of more realistic and rigorous training depend largely on the threat force against which our formations fight. While we can't fully replicate the OPFOR from JRTC, we can replicate some of the more challenging capabilities. Rather than having specifically identified OPFOR, pitting formations against one another in force-on-force provides a thinking enemy, with identical capabilities, and allows leaders at all levels to exercise subordinate leader development from squad through company level.

As more time passes since our JRTC decisive action training environment (DATE) rotation, it remains imperative to effectively integrate our lessons learned through the refinement of our SOPs. We have developed a deliberate plan to codify the most challenging lessons learned into the newly formed brigade TACSOP. Time management is often our own worst enemy, and nowhere is this more readily apparent than at JRTC. One benefit from a sound SOP is that it will save time as units are permitted the ability to execute an operation freely and stay within the commander's intent by following an agreed upon standard for the operation. The condensed timelines at JRTC stress a unit's ability to develop succinct plans that are synchronized across warfighting functions. As we move forward, codifying particular operations (such as a combined arms breach) and distinct DATE battle drills (such as react to enemy air) will allow us to gain efficiency as an organization and better prepare us to face a hybrid threat.

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Soldiers with 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, conduct a live-fire rehearsal at Pearson Ridge Training Area during JRTC Rotation 16-06 at Fort Polk on 13 April 2016. (U.S. Army photo)