

Continuous Refinement of the Plan: A View of MDMP from the OPFOR at JMRC

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Force-on-force training at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Germany, provides excellent opportunities for brigades to assess and improve their systems. One of the key processes that will make or break the rotational training unit (RTU) is the military decision-making process (MDMP). Executing the seven-step process is demanding for RTUs, particularly when they are simultaneously tackling other challenges. One of the most painful events of MDMP is found in an often overlooked sentence in Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization Operations*: “Commanders and staffs generally perform these steps sequentially; however, they may revisit several steps in an iterative fashion as they learn more about the situation.”

During Allied Spirit V (held 26 September through 15 October 2016), changes in the situation forced JMRC’s opposing force (OPFOR) — the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment — to revisit steps three through seven after completion of the full MDMP process. Continually revising the plan and adjusting to the situation on the ground is necessary for success. It requires recognizing that the current plan is no longer valid. This continual revision occurs at the staff level during planning and also at the command level during execution. This article outlines a battle period at JMRC, starting with relative combat power analysis and ending with change of mission instructions.

Combat Power Analysis

For Allied Spirit V, the RTU was a composite brigade under a multinational headquarters. The ground combat forces consisted of one U.S. Stryker battalion and one U.S. airborne battalion with a Canadian company attached. Fire support came from a U.S. field artillery battalion with one Italian battery attached. The aviation was a multinational task force with U.S. attack aviation, Belgian scout aviation, and both Czech and U.S. lift assets. Brigade and higher collection assets included a Lithuanian reconnaissance company, a U.S. Navy SEAL platoon, UK pathfinders, and two U.S. Shadow unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). There was no dedicated brigade sustainment battalion or brigade engineer battalion (BEB) in the RTU. Company and smaller elements within the task force covered these support functions. It was not clear exactly how this would happen, and it was a challenge for the brigade to address. The RTU’s task was to delay and then defend against advancing 1-4 IN armor to provide time for the RTU’s decisive operation (DO) to move into position in the north and prepare for a counterattack.

The 1-4 IN fought with a total of four companies. Two mechanized infantry companies had three tanks and six infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) per company. One engineer company had three sapper platoons and two D7 blade

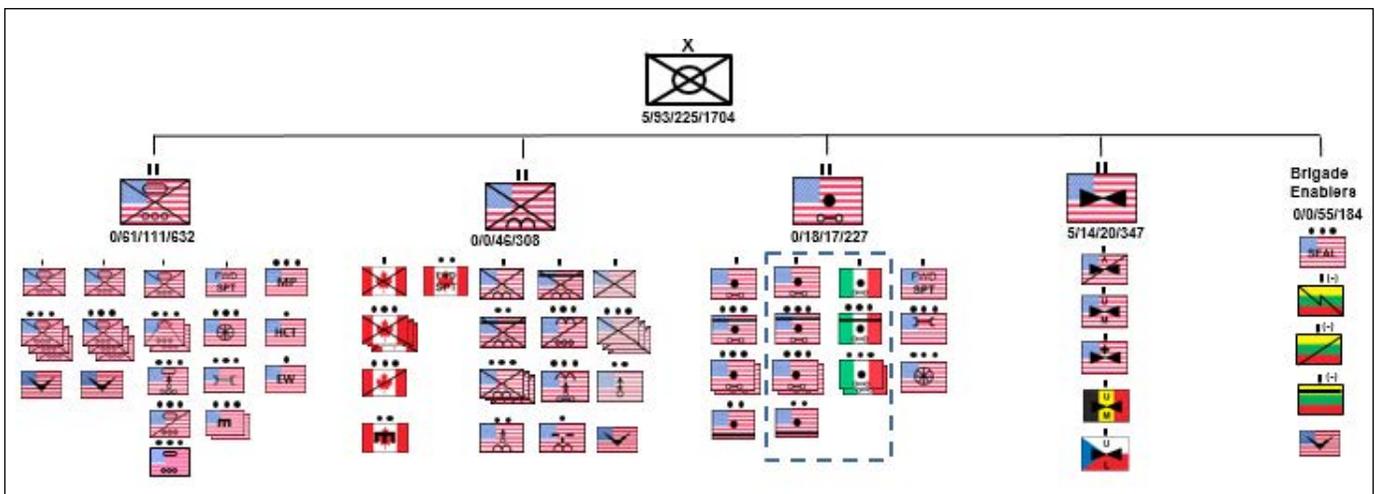


Figure 1 — Rotational Training Unit Task Organization for Allied Spirit V

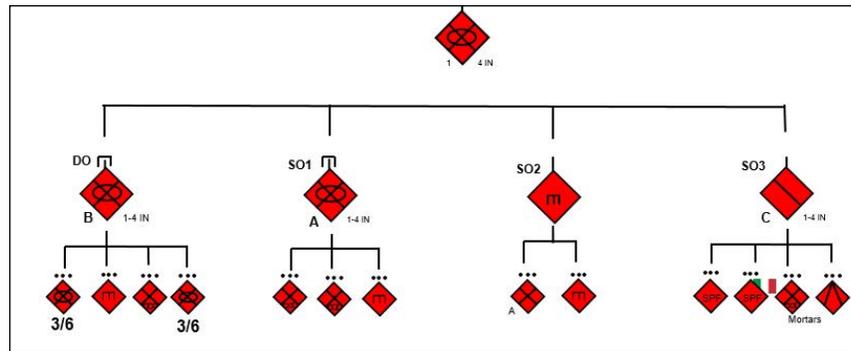


Figure 2 — OPFOR Task Organization

teams. One recon company consisted of one mortar platoon fighting as mounted infantry, one anti-tank platoon, and two platoons of special purpose forces (SPF — essentially OPFOR special operations forces). The 1-4 IN had significant artillery at its disposal including an artillery battalion (152mm howitzers), a 120mm mortar platoon, a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) battery capable of firing chemical munitions, scatterable mines, conventional high explosive (HE), and dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM). The 1-4 IN also had a Mi-35 Hind air weapons team (AWT) at its disposal and direct support from brigade-level UAS and counterfire radar. The 1-4 IN's mission was attack to neutralize the RTU to enable the seizure of Nurnberg by the division DO.

The relative combat power analysis revealed several advantages for 1-4 IN to exploit in the attack: maneuver, mission command, and protection. The staff also assessed that RTU logistics would be susceptible to disruption given they did not have a dedicated brigade support battalion (BSB).

Maneuver advantage for 1-4 IN was inherent given the formations. The majority of 1-4 IN fights in tracked vehicles, which have significantly better off-road capabilities compared to the Stryker vehicle and obvious speed advantages over the RTU's dismounted infantry. From a movement/maneuver perspective, the only assets the RTU could rapidly reallocate against attacking forces were aviation assets and the Stryker battalion. The 1-4 IN had the ability to focus the majority of its combat power on a narrow front, and the RTU did not have the ability to rapidly respond to this challenge.



An OPFOR soldier fires a simulated rocket-propelled grenade during Allied Spirit V at the 7th Army Training Command's Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, on 12 October 2016.
(Photo by SPC Emily Houdershielt)

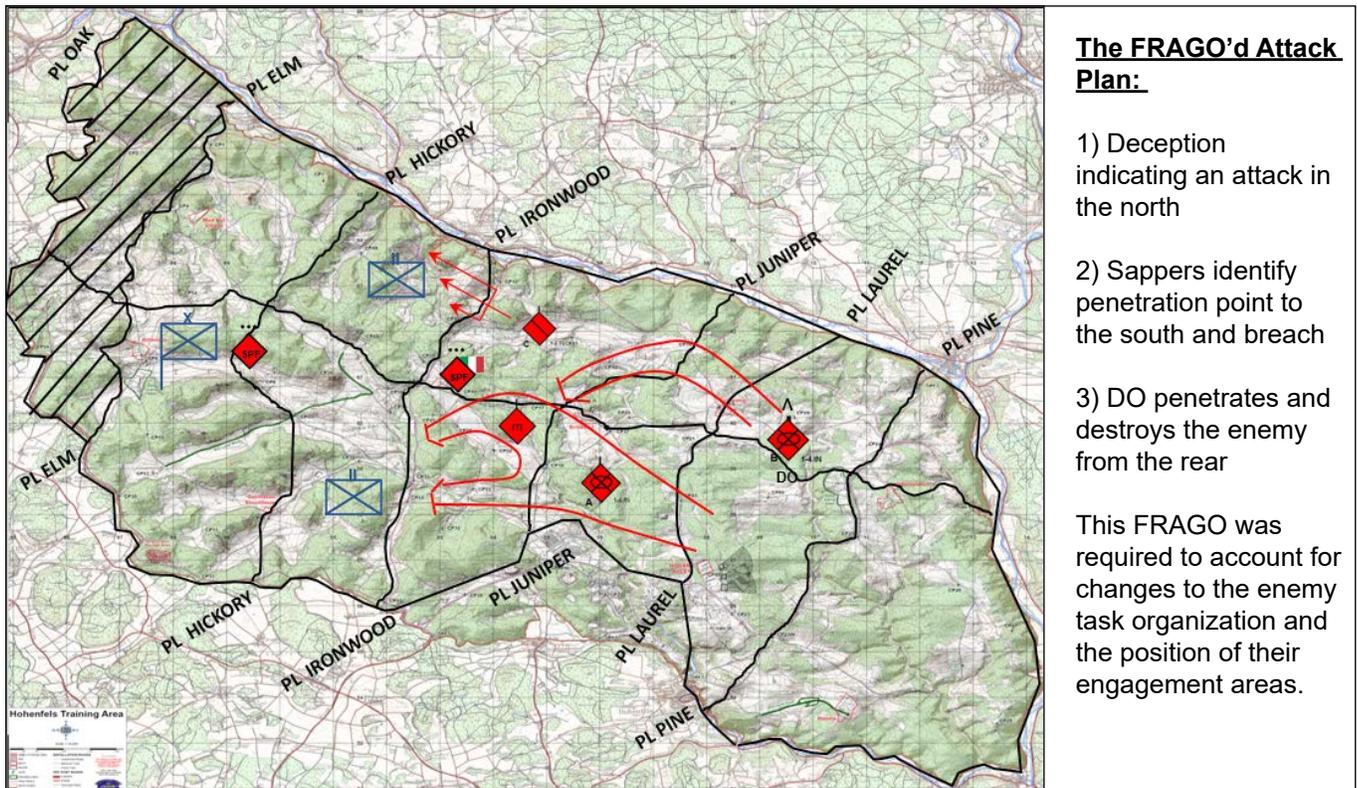


Figure 3 — OPFOR Scheme of Maneuver for the Attack

Mission command was a second advantage for 1-4 IN, particularly in the intelligence and fires warfighting functions. From an intelligence perspective, the RTU had a larger number of collection and analysis assets at its disposal. However, the force structure distributed the intelligence assets among multiple headquarters, and several did not even fall directly within the brigade (SEAL platoon and UK pathfinders reported to division through a separate chain of command). This created multiple steps between target acquisition, decision, and delivery which made the unit susceptible to deception. The 1-4 IN operates a much flatter collection plan with all assets reporting to one intel cell. The unit had a similar advantage in the fires warfighting function, with a single mission command post receiving, approving, and processing all fire missions. The RTU's larger size and multiple headquarters made clearing and approving fires a much more difficult and timely process.

The 1-4 IN's IFVs and tanks provided an additional advantage in protection. The RTU only had four weapons capable of defeating IFV and tank armor protection: attack aviation, Stryker Mobile Gun System (MGS), Stryker Anti-tank Guided Missile (ATGM), and Javelin. If 1-4 IN was capable of neutralizing these assets, it could destroy the remainder of the RTU brigade with impunity.

The Plan

The 1-4 IN staff built the initial course of action (COA) off of this analysis. The recon company would confirm the location of the RTU, identify seams, and disrupt its engagement area development. All three maneuver companies would advance on one avenue of approach and mass against the RTU's Stryker battalion. The companies would neutralize the Stryker battalion and then move on the light infantry battalion. A chemical strike from division MLRS and massed indirect fire from 2A36 howitzers supported the attack. By attacking on one axis, 1-4 IN would be able to achieve a 3:1 combat power advantage at the point of its attack, even though the overall ratio was in favor of the RTU.

Anti-tank (AT) assets were the largest threat to 1-4 IN's success. To control this risk, 1-4 IN tasked the recon company with targeting and destroying the easily identifiable ATGM and MGS Strykers. Unfortunately, Javelin missiles are harder to locate on the battlefield so a different method was required to neutralize them. The plan called for 1-4 IN SPF to disrupt the RTU support area, attacking logistics and mission command nodes. This would pull command



**An AH-64D Apache Longbow helicopter crew with the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade takes part in Exercise Allied Spirit on 4 October 2016.
(Photo by Gertrud Zach)**

focus to the rear (away from engagement area development) and reduce effective integration of AT systems into the RTU's defense.

Reality on the battlefield quickly showed itself to be different from expectations. When 1-4 IN conducted a reconnaissance in force one day prior to the main attack, it identified two major changes in the enemy array that required a rethinking of the plan. First, the enemy task organization had changed. The RTU cross-attached companies between the Stryker and light infantry battalions. This meant that our initial plan of massing against only the Stryker battalion was no longer feasible as the infantry battalion also had Strykers. The RTU would be able to move forces from one task force to support the other if needed. Second, the enemy placed his defenses much further west than initially templated. With updated enemy information, the staff went back and developed a new COA, wargamed it, approved it, and published a fragmentary order (FRAGO) with the new scheme of maneuver. From the reconnaissance-in-force backbrief to FRAGO issue, the process took roughly six hours.

The FRAGO'd plan was a penetration targeting the southern task force. Supported by indirect fire and smoke, the recon company would fix the RTU in the north. The main body would initially move on a northern avenue of approach as deception. The intent was for the RTU to see recon forces and obscurity in the northern engagement area with tanks advancing in support. However, the sappers would advance to the southern engagement area with a chemical strike supporting. The main body would turn south, penetrate the engagement area, and destroy the enemy from behind. With the FRAGO issued, it was time for execution and more refinement.

The Battle

As 1-4 IN initiated the attack, they identified their first issue. The lead element was the attached reserve component sapper company. While it had a guide from the recon company and an attached platoon familiar with the terrain, the element had difficulty maintaining the rate of march necessary to stay synchronized with its enablers. The chemical strike from division MLRS required an hour of lead time. The MLRS fired according to the triggers planned, but with the lead company moving slower, the chemical agent dissipated on the target before the attack hit, which forced the tactical command post (TAC) to make a decision:

COA 1 — Conserve Combat Power: Halt the main body until the sappers reach the RTU engagement area. This would ensure awareness of the engagement area before the DO was committed. However, the MLRS would no longer support the DO's attack, and the main body would be vulnerable to indirect fire (IDF) and attack aviation.

COA 2 — Risk Combat Power: Allow the main body to close with or bypass the lead element. This would ensure the DO's attack was supported by all planned enablers but would also mean the main body would make initial contact with the enemy.

In considering the options, the TAC had to decide which risk was prudent. They decided halting the main body was a lesser risk because it preserved combat power. The RTU's defensive belts were unknown and bypasses were not yet identified. The halted DO would be vulnerable, but in order for the RTU to exploit and gain the initiative, they would have to identify the halted 1-4 IN main body, report it, decide on an action, and execute — all before the main body continued movement.

This decision to halt the main body was critical for the fight. Allowing the main body to bypass the engineers or decrease separation could have allowed the attack to hit in time with the chemical agent as originally planned; however, the main body would be making the initial contact with the RTU, reducing flexibility. While halting movement provided an opportunity for the RTU, 1-4 IN was safe halting for a short time, based on an understanding of the RTU's ability to react. The flexibility provided by keeping the main body uncommitted showed its value when the sappers hit the RTU defense and identified the second issue — obstacles.

The RTU obstacle development was much more substantial than 1-4 IN expected. The terrain at Hohenfels is not conducive to developing a brigade-sized engagement area. The ridges and valleys split up the brigade area of operations (AO) into a series of company-size engagement areas. Normally 1-4 IN is able to find one of the company engagement areas that the engineers did not reach and penetrate. In this case, the RTU engineers had been working directly at the battalion level and below and had built up most of the engagement areas very well. This further slowed the sappers, and they were heavily attrited by RTU attack aviation.

The RTU used the attack aviation as a maneuver element and tasked them to screen. The advantage the RTU gained by this was that the aviation was not pulled to the north in reaction to 1-4 IN deception. The attack aviation stayed in a screen to the south, exactly where the sappers were entering engagement areas. The AH-64s did significant damage to the two lead 1-4 IN companies while they were attempting to penetrate obstacles. The aviation screen, however, also prevented the RTU from massing indirect fires because they were unable to clear air.

The fight at the breach lasted more than three hours but only consumed 1-4 IN's shaping efforts. If the TAC had maintained the initial plan, the DO would have been the element attrited by the aviation, not the sappers. In this case, the change of the plan ultimately resulted in a successful penetration by the DO with nearly all of its combat power.

Conclusion

Neither the RTU nor 1-4 IN had a perfect picture of what the fight would look like. The fight on the ground turned out very different from what was anticipated on either side. The RTU was successful in overcoming many the weaknesses of its task organization, particularly the lack of a BEB. The 1-4 IN was successful in exploiting other weaknesses such as the sensor-shooter disconnect and the lack of RTU mobility. Some decisions, such as the employment of attack aviation, are difficult to judge as many of the advantages were offset by other problems they caused. This shows the necessity of continual refinement of the plan both during the MDMP process and during execution. During Allied Spirit V, as with most CTC rotations, the continually changing situation required the staff to constantly analyze and adjust. During execution, continuous supervision and refinement were necessary to ensure the units stayed synchronized when the pace did not match the planned tempo. Continual refinement is key to success.

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