

Transitions: From Deliberate to Dynamic in the Close Fight

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Success in modern large-scale combat operations (LSCO) requires the ability to make fluid adaptations to existing plans, the timely issuance of clear and concise orders, and shared understanding of the common operational picture (COP) with higher, adjacent, and subordinate commands. Staffs must be proficient at both deliberate and hasty planning to be successful. First, staffs must be expert at executing the deliberate procedures associated with the military decision-making process (MDMP) and the battle rhythm events through which the commander makes decisions, issues orders, and communicates with higher and adjacent commands. Second, staffs must define, establish, and practice the dynamic planning methodology through which they will rapidly adjust to changing situations. If MDMP is the cake, the rapid decision-making and synchronization process (RDSP) must be the icing.

When the Marne Division fought the World War I battle for which it is named (the Second Battle of the Marne), it played a pivotal role in defending against a German offensive that had been planned (deliberately and methodically) for months. The German Army's plans for this grand assault relied heavily upon the element of surprise. However, just as the 23 infantry divisions the Germans had assigned to the attack prepared to climb out of their trenches on 15 July 1918, Allied guns initiated an intense barrage on the German attack positions. The attacking troops were stunned — clearly, surprise had been lost — but they carried out their assault anyway. When German troops finally reached the Allied front lines, they found them mostly empty. The Allies, aware of the impending attack, had withdrawn their forward-most elements to subsequent positions, rendering German preparatory fires ineffectual. The Germans continued to fight their plan, as it had existed for months, without adjusting to the new battlefield situation. They remained rigidly dedicated to their scheme of maneuver and were ultimately beaten by the Allied force that included the recently formed American 3rd Division.

The Germans were not alone in their failure to adapt to changing or unexpected battlefield conditions. Throughout World War I, technology outpaced tactics, battlefield communication was scant, and plans were rigidly followed. Indeed, the very outset of the Great War is tied inseparably to the much-studied Schlieffen Plan, which was first



An American machine-gun crew engages enemy positions using a 37mm “pom-pom” gun during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in 1918. (National Archives photo)

outlined by German tacticians nearly a decade before the war began.¹ The Schlieffen Plan famously lacked flexibility and did not account for the possibility that things might not go exactly to plan. Among other flaws (which this article will not attempt to cover), the Schlieffen Plan required the enemy to behave as expected. The fact that this rarely occurs should serve as encouragement for canny strategists to leave elbow room for adaptability in their plans, establish the systems for rapidly exercising that adaptability, and practice until expert-level proficiency is gained.

The commander may rapidly change plans in execution due to unforeseen opportunities, unexpected enemy actions, short-suspense orders from higher, or other stimuli. When this occurs, the staff must be quick and effective in adapting plans; communicating with higher, adjacent, and subordinate commands; and publishing clear and concise orders. Just as the battle staff seeks to become expert at deliberate battlefield processes, it must also create opportunities to develop master-level proficiency in the dynamic processes. The latter will keep the commander inside of the enemy's decision cycle when the situation changes quickly and unexpectedly. Opportunities to hone these skills exist in the form of staff academics, command post exercises (CPXs), and warfighter exercises (WFXs).

The division is now the unit of action within the Army. As such, communications within division staffs must be fast, flat, and accurate to allow subordinate units time to plan and react to the ever-changing operational environment of multidomain operations. During the 3rd Infantry Division's WFX 23-2, the division planned to conduct uncoiling operations from unit tactical assembly areas, forward passage of lines (FPOL) with multinational counterparts, offensive operations in the enemy's disruption zone (DZ), and wet gap crossing (WGX) operations — all within the first three days of the exercise. Within an effective team, processes must be in place for the division staff to react rapidly and transition from deliberate to dynamic staff processes. The nucleus of this team, the future operations (FUOPS) and current operations (CUOPS) cells, must have an established, positive relationship that allows them to efficiently adjust and codify the plan and fighting products, transition to the current fight, and disseminate to subordinate units. Within an ever-changing operational environment, this flexibility at the division staff level will enable the unit of action to fight and win in LSCO.

Deliberate Staff Processes

No unit is the same when it comes to the construct of the staff, specifically within the FUOPS or CUOPS cells.²⁻³ This variance may be due to manning or how the division operations officer (G3) sees each cell as "fit for purpose" for their fight. At the start of WFX 23-2, the 3rd Infantry Division had a published battle rhythm with five major events in which the commander, staff, and subordinate units participated. The battle rhythm events that fell into this section include the battle update brief, commander's visualization, operations synchronization, commander's update brief, and the staff transition brief. "The battle rhythm is a deliberate daily cycle of command, staff, and unit activities intended to synchronize current and future operations."⁴ Through these five battle rhythm events, the commander, staff, and subordinate units were able to communicate up, down, and within to ensure that the full operational picture was painted for the commander to make timely and accurate decisions.

This battle rhythm worked well during the first three days of the exercise as we conducted the FPOL, destroyed the enemy in the DZ, and completed the WGX. During these events, the FUOPS and CUOPS teams were able to execute deliberate and timely handovers of the division's key fighting products: the execution and synchronization matrix, operation schedule, conditions checklist, and execution checklist, when applicable. Our prescribed battle rhythm enabled effective communication and synchronization primarily because our planning cycle had prepared the team to fight out to the 96-hour planning horizon. In other words, the team was operating within a deliberate environment that allowed the staff to manage combat losses and efficiently adjust to minor (but not major) situational changes.

Dynamic Staff Processes

Once the exercise progressed past the WGX, the operational environment became more dynamic. Combat losses grew and ground lines of communication lengthened. At this point, the division staff no longer had the luxury of multiple days, or even hours, to receive information and provide options for the commander. In other words, the decision space was truncated by the tempo of the operation. As a result of these new variables and constraints, the evolving plan needed to be rapidly produced within the staff, approved by the commander, and disseminated to subordinate units. Time was critical and limited. The staff needed to act rapidly to avoid being outpaced and

outmaneuvered by the enemy — the form of this rapid action is RDSP. Summarized, RDSP is a decision-making and planning technique that commanders and staffs commonly use during execution when available planning time is limited. Leaders combine their experiences and intuition to understand the situation and develop a course of action (COA) quickly. The RDSP is based on an existing order and includes five steps:

- 1) Compare the current situation to the order,
- 2) Determine whether a decision, and what type, is required,
- 3) Develop a course of action,
- 4) Refine and validate that course of action, and
- 5) Issue and implement the order.⁵

In practice, what this meant for the 3rd ID battle staff across several WFXs was operating outside of the established battle rhythm to rapidly organize for-purpose working groups that could solve problems, make recommendations, adjust plans, and communicate quickly and effectively. In other words, when the situation changes suddenly, the staff cannot afford to wait until the next pre-planned event to adjust or disseminate the newly evolved plan. To imagine a quarterback calling an audible at the line of scrimmage would not be misplaced here. For the battle staff, this likely manifests through the chief of staff, G3, or chief of operations (joined by one or more G35 planners and other representatives from relevant warfighting functions) quickly organizing a current operations-focused team to conduct short-range planning.

The methodology may vary and should be discussed and iterated upon by each staff as they work through their developmental progression (academics, CPX, etc.). For the Marne staff, it most often looked like a small group (too many minds can muddle the process) containing current operations representation from each warfighting function, joined by at least one G35 planner and led by the chief of staff or deputy chief of staff. This team gathered around the analog COP on the current operations information center floor and ran through a quick two-minute drill to ensure a shared understanding of the evolving situation. It then transitioned into a short course-of-action development (COA DEV) session, quick wargaming, and subsequent composition and issuance of a flash fragmentary order (FRAGORD) to subordinate units. We learned that for this process to function properly, each representative (by warfighting function) must arrive at the short-term planning session equipped with accurate, up-to-date running estimates. Those products will inform the process and contribute toward the overall efficiency and efficacy of RDSP outcomes.

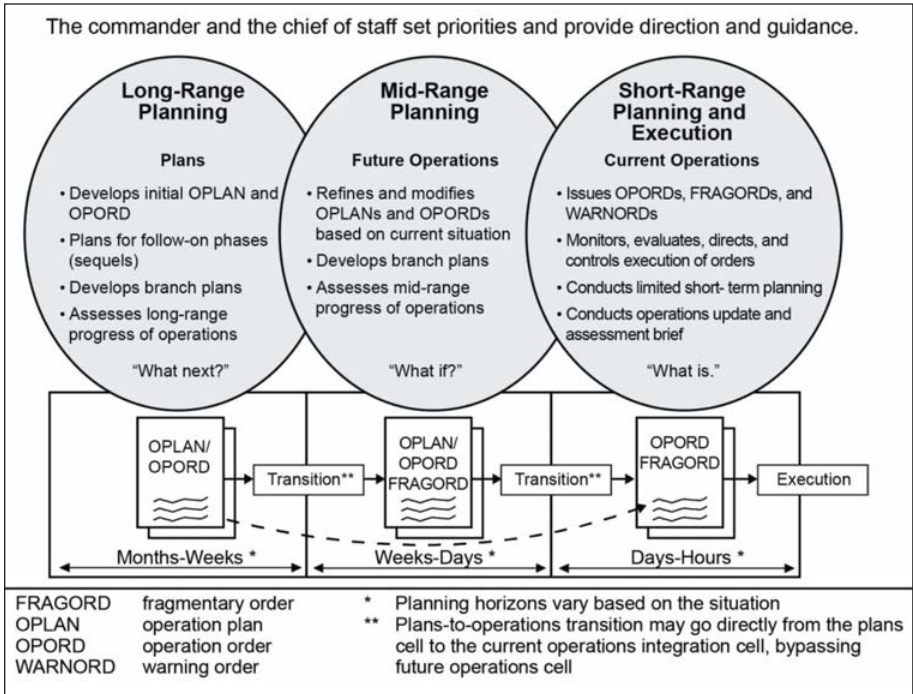


Figure 1 — Integrating Cells (FM 6-0)

Integrating cells are organized by planning horizons, which allow commanders to focus the organization’s planning efforts to shape future events.

As an outcome of RDSP, the importance of properly communicating changes to the mission/task and purpose cannot be overstated. Our experience showed that to ensure effective dissemination and shared understanding, the staff must go beyond simply typing the flash FRAGORD into an email or chat service. While that should be done, it must be supplemented by an immediate virtual gathering so that division leaders can verbally convey the changes to the plan/mission and intent to subordinate commanders. Finally, any changes to the plan must be quickly communicated to higher and adjacent headquarters. Though unexpected opportunities may present themselves to the division staff, it remains essential to stay nested with the higher headquarters' intent and to continue maneuvering in a fashion that supports your adjacent units' scheme. Seizing an initiative at the division level that threatens to destabilize the entire corps scheme of maneuver and simultaneously provides new and interesting opportunities to the enemy commander is a step in the wrong direction. In other words, the staff must ensure that their RDSP is disciplined and remains nested with higher and that they do not get swept away by their imaginative momentum.

Closing Thoughts

Success in modern war requires battle staffs to think quickly, fluidly adapt their existing plans to unexpected changes in battlefield conditions, and issue clear and concise orders in a timely fashion. To stay inside of the enemy's decision space, the staff must be expert at both deliberate (MDMP) and dynamic (RDSP) processes. In contact, the commander will need to use both to make decisions and direct battlefield operations. An overreliance on deliberate processes (time-protected MDMP, battle-rhythm events, etc.) and a lack of practice at RDSP (ad-hoc working groups, rapid COA DEV, swift orders development and publication, etc.) equate to sailing a large ship with a small rudder. When required, you simply will not be able to turn as quickly as needed to keep the enemy reacting to you in LSCO. Through each iteration of staff academics, CPX, WFX, and other training opportunities, battle staffs must seek to gain expert-level proficiency in their dynamic processes.

Notes

¹ For a concise review of the Schlieffen Plan, see LTG (Retired) Daniel Bulger's article at <https://www.ausa.org/articles/schlieffens-perfect-plan> or Geoffrey Parker's *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 273-274.

² Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, May 2022, 8-5.

³ Ibid, 8-6.

⁴ Ibid, 4-1.

⁵ FM 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, May 2022, 1-10.

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