

Assessment: The Hardest Part of the Operations Process

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Author’s Note: *It is unlikely that commanders and staff officers will learn anything novel to existing doctrine from this article. Its purpose is not to introduce any new concepts or techniques. Instead, I intended to provide a relatable vignette to clearly illustrate the risks of not following well-established doctrine for conducting continuous assessments throughout the operations process. This article should illuminate the importance of tactical assessments better than merely reading doctrinal publications.*

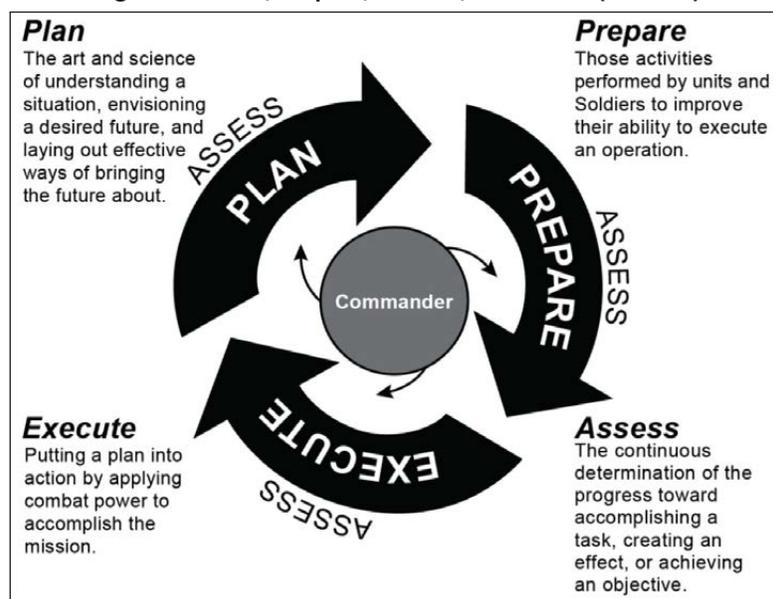
Sir, I’m dead.” That was the last radio transmission I heard from my A Company commander on the night we failed to seize Objective (OBJ) Sun — a medium-sized simulated urban area at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Johnson, LA, in November 2022. During the preceding 19 hours, our battalion conducted a movement to contact to clear the brigade’s main axis of advance west and seize key terrain to pass follow-on forces as the brigade transitioned to offense. I thought the first 12 hours of the attack went well, but by the time we culminated in defeat on the objective, I realized what we failed to do en route — we failed to continually, deliberately, and comprehensively assess the tactical situation between the end of planning and the beginning of the assault.

Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*, defines the operations process as “the major command and control (C2) activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation.”¹

Plan, Prepare, Execute, and Assess

Our battalion’s previous JRTC rotation in March 2021 was challenged by shortcomings in basic aspects of planning and execution — specifically, a lack of effective orders processes in austere, time-constrained environments and poor communications.

Figure 1 — Plan, Prepare, Execute, and Assess (ADP 5-0)



By our mid-rotation point in November 2022, I concluded that our unit had largely solved those old problems: We had an efficient, routine planning battle rhythm that consistently produced timely orders, and we could consistently communicate with subordinate units and the brigade headquarters.

Subconsciously, I believed the following equation to be true: “Good planning plus good communication equals good execution.” By the time we culminated on OBJs Sun and Europa, I realized that something was obviously wrong with that “math,” but I couldn’t figure out what. As time passed after the mission and I learned more about what happened on the OBJs, I came to the following two conclusions:

- We failed to mass on each of the OBJs, and
- We failed to effectively synchronize fires with maneuver.

As more time passed, I had the opportunity to further analyze the root causes of these failures. I kept asking myself: “How did this happen? We know better than that!” What I eventually realized was that we incorrectly thought we were doing all the above, but we were not. The missing ingredient was continuous assessment. ADP 5-0 dedicates an entire chapter to assessments as a critical activity within the operations process. During our battalion attack on OBJs Sun and Europa, we fell woefully short of this doctrinal emphasis on the importance of assessments. ADP 5-0 defines assessment as “the determination of the progress toward accomplishing a task, creating a condition, or achieving an objective.”² The idea of assessments being continuous is critical. Unfortunately, during this operation, our focus on assessments essentially ended during planning. Our reporting, upkeep of staff running estimates, and analysis of commander’s critical information requirements (CCIR) did not enable continuous assessment during execution, particularly in two warfighting functions: intelligence and fires.

Shortcomings in Intelligence Assessments

What We Thought — During planning, we made the following initial enemy assessments:

1. There was a company-sized enemy force within our battalion’s area of operation (AO);
2. The enemy would either fight a retrograde defense in depth, culminating with platoon-sized defenses on key terrain at OBJ Sun and OBJ Europa; or
3. The enemy would strongpoint key terrain at OBJ Sun and OBJ Europa.

What Actually Happened — Three key aspects of the enemy situation changed that we failed to identify through continuous assessment:

1. The enemy actually had a battalion-sized enemy force within our AO — the difference was manifested through some combination of inaccurate initial assessments and repositioning of enemy forces from the southern portion of the brigade’s AO.
2. The enemy did not fight a retrograde defense in depth, despite positioning obstacles along the routes and conducting harassing attacks with small elements.
3. The enemy established strongpoint defenses at the key terrain of OBJ Sun and OBJ Europa with company-sized elements on each objective.

What We Missed — As the battalion conducted the movement to contact west, most of the enemy activity we experienced was unobserved obstacle contact with unsynchronized harassing fire by small enemy elements. Laziness and not using critical thinking enabled us to interpret this activity as an enemy retrograde defense. The truth was our headquarters (tactical command post [CP] and main CP) had all the information needed to assess that this enemy activity did not amount to a retrograde defense. Intelligence reporting often contained the adequate size, activity, location, unit/uniform, time observed, equipment (SALUTE) report data to feed the tracking of enemy disposition, composition, and battle damage assessment. However, we did not assess or evaluate this information against indicators for our priority intelligence requirements (PIR) to drive the decision to change our plan to mass a battalion-sized attack on OBJ Sun rather than attack with only a company, with an additional company in a follow-and-assume role.

What is the Fix? — Throughout the entire operations process, the staff must prioritize the deliberate assessment of indicators for PIR that are tied to named areas of interest (NAIs) identified through the

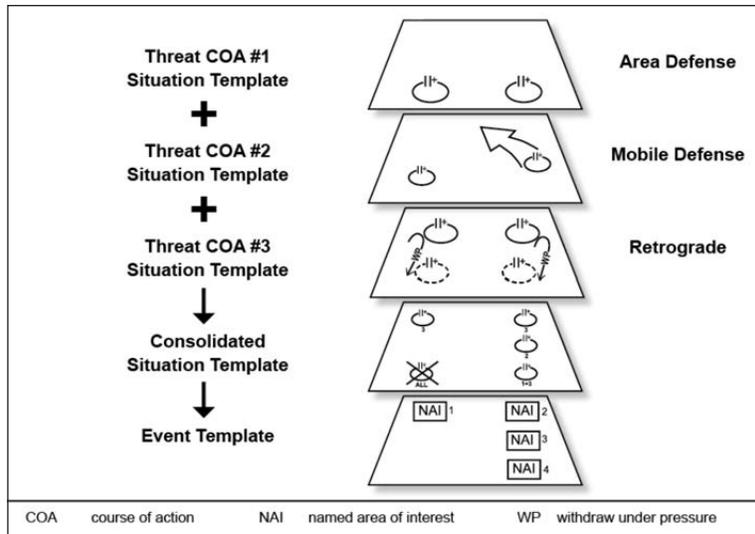


Figure 2 — Steps to Create an EVENTTEMP (ATP 2-01.3)

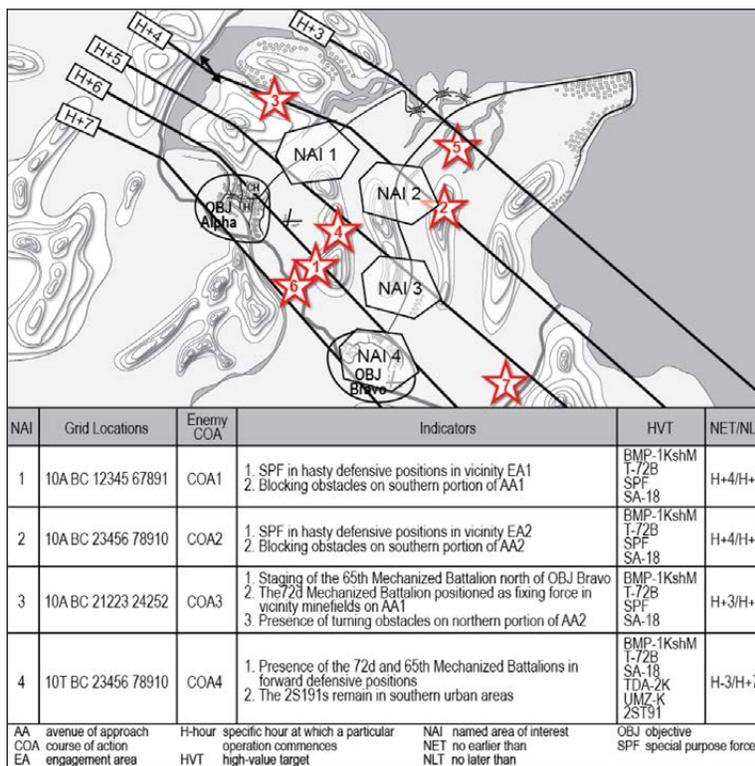


Figure 3 — EVENTTEMP (ATP 2-01.3)

development of an enemy event template (EVENTTEMP). Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB)*, describes the relationship between the EVENTTEMP, NAIs, PIRs as CCIR, and decision-making in excellent detail (see Figures 2 and 3).

According to ATP 2-01.3, an EVENTTEMP is a guide for collection planning that depicts the NAIs where activity, or lack of activity, will indicate which course of action (COA) the adversary has adopted.³ The EVENTTEMP is used during the execution activity of the operations process to assist in determining which COA the threat has adopted.

In our case (and to our credit), during planning we did develop an adequate EVENTTEMP with associated NAIs, PIRs, and indicators to distinguish between two possible enemy COAs; however, our current operations (CUOPS) staff subsequently failed to synthesize PIR indicators from intelligence reporting to determine which COA the enemy was executing. To say it differently: Our focus on deliberate assessments essentially ended during planning and did not carry over into CUOPS.

One way to accomplish this in the future would be to conduct routine two-minute drills within the main CP specifically focused on assessing the status of all CCIR, including PIR that drive decision-making. There are several contributing factors for why this did not happen inside our battalion main CP, but one that I own as a commander is not demanding these deliberate CCIR assessments from the staff. I instead gave them a pass by trying to intuitively make these assessments on my own.

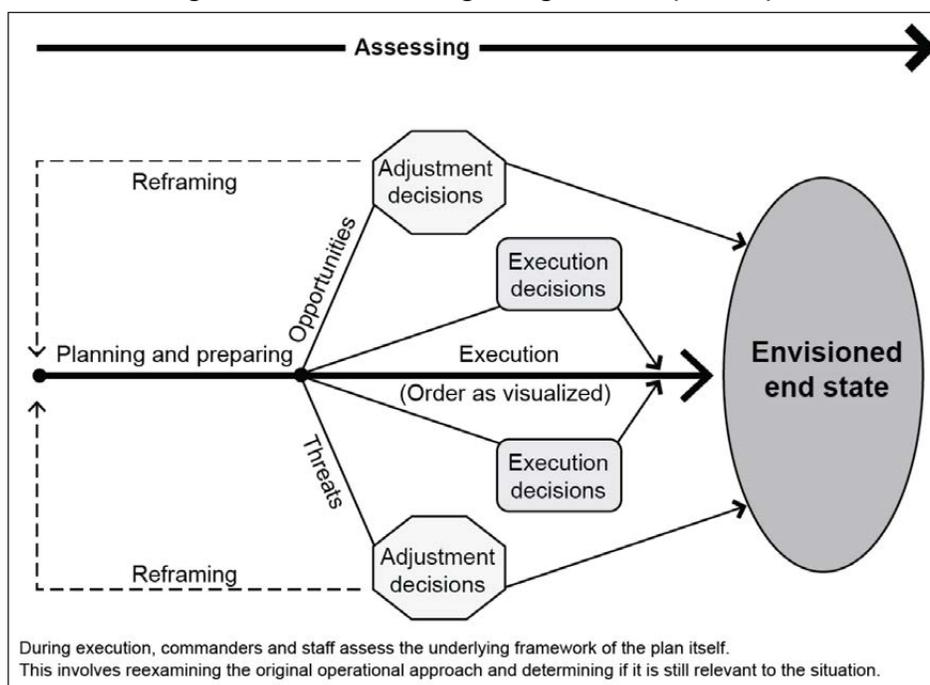
Shortcomings in Fires Assessments

What We Thought — The plan was to mass fires on OBJs Sun and Europa with a combination of artillery, mortars, and short-range rockets (courtesy of 2nd Company, 33rd Infantry Regiment, Japanese Ground Self-Defense Forces). It was a textbook echelonment of fires that we initially assessed would enable us to achieve mass and suppress the enemy during the isolation of the OBJs.

What Actually Happened — Although we shot a substantial amount of indirect fire on each objective, poor triggers, communications issues, and an ineffective observer plan led to the following outcomes:

1. The terrain en route to the OBJ was worse than we assessed during planning, causing the dismounted movement to be slower, effectively undermining our triggers for the fires plan.
2. As a result of failing to refine our triggers with updated terrain and time-distance factors, our indirect fires were not synchronized with our maneuver, causing the enemy to regroup between the termination of fires and the assault.
3. Because our forward observers were poorly positioned en route to the OBJ and we struggled to keep small unmanned aircraft systems (SUAS) in the air over the OBJ, we were unable to either adjust our fires or conduct effective battle damage assessments (BDA) to determine if our fires were achieving desired effects.

Figure 4 — Decision-Making During Execution (ADP 5-0)⁴





Paratroopers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment execute a live-fire exercise as part of Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 23-02 on 14 November 2022. (Photo by SGT Jacob Moir)

What We Missed — Our CUOPS processes were not effective in assessing whether our fires plan was having the desired effects — as if simply executing what we originally planned would magically result in success. It sounds obvious in hindsight, but the difficulties we experienced in running effective CUOPS (e.g., timely and accurate reporting; processing of friendly force information requirements [FFIR] such as “effective observation of TGT AD 1000”; and receiving BDA) are critical to making the assessments required to drive decision-making to be successful in execution.

What is the Fix? — ADP 5-0 describes decision-making during the execution phase of the operations process as a continuous assessment of “execution decisions” and “adjustment decisions” that either confirm the plan is on-track, drive minor changes to the plan, or drive major changes to the plan. In any case, the first step is making the assessment to determine the current state of conditions that either trigger execution or drive minor or major adjustments to the plan.

Throughout the entire operations process, the staff must prioritize the deliberate assessment of FFIR that may drive either execution decisions (minor changes to the plan) or adjustment decisions (major changes to the plan). In my experience, a major obstacle for inexperienced battalion staffs to achieve successful execution and adjustment decisions is the development of meaningful FFIR that provide truly critical information amongst all the other information and data flowing through the main CP. One technique for staffs to determine what is truly critical as FFIR is to identify critical capabilities or conditions that must occur to either achieve the decisive point or maintain a favorable correlation of forces and means (COFMs) to accomplish the mission. If the friendly mission information does not directly affect achieving the decisive point or maintaining favorable COFMs throughout the mission, then it probably should not be FFIR. Giving this clear guidance to staffs enables them to focus their assessments on the conditions and associated triggers that matter to drive decisions. It is also recommended that pre-mission rehearsals place an emphasis on who owns these conditions and triggers — both sub-units and staff — to inform FFIR that drive decisions.

The Decision Support Matrix and Why it Matters

ADP 5-0 states: “During execution, assessment involves deliberately comparing forecast outcomes to actual events while using indicators to judge operational progress towards success. Assessment during execution helps commanders determine whether changes in the operation are necessary to take advantage of

opportunities or to counter unexpected threats.”⁵ ADP 5-0 describes two tools that drive assessments and inform decisions: running estimates and the decision support matrix (DSM). In my experience, most staffs at the battalion level struggle to manage both of these tools during operations, and our JRTC rotation in November was no exception. But updated running estimates and a good DSM are essential to conducting continuous assessments, maintaining situational understanding, and informing decision-making. I used to believe the DSM was primarily for the commander. Thus, my logic map of not putting emphasis on developing a DSM was as follows:

- If the DSM is mainly for the commander;
- And battalion staffs struggle to develop an effective DSM without significant help from the commander;
- And the DSM is an output of wargaming, which is hard enough without producing a DSM;
- Then I might as well just do the DSM myself, maybe with the S3 or executive officer’s (XO’s) help;
- So, I’m basically making my own DSM;
- Therefore, I won’t make one, I’ll just intuit the process.

The biggest problem with this logic starts with the first proposition: It’s false. The DSM is primarily to drive the staff’s assessments. Identifying CCIR that inform decisions focuses the staff’s information requirements within their running estimates to maintain situational understanding. Without a DSM to focus the staff’s assessment activities, they run the risk of not happening at all.

Another problem with this logic is that it presumes the DSM is merely tangential to the COA analysis step of the military decision-making process (MDMP). On the contrary, the DSM is arguably the entire point of wargaming and COA analysis, much like development of the operation synchronization matrix (OPSYNCHMAT). Thus, staffs cannot be given a pass on developing the DSM as a key output of COA analysis — it must be prioritized as critical to effective assessments within the operations process.

The Danger of Commanders “Winging It” on Assessments and Decisions

This JRTC rotation was my second in command. I was comfortable in my understanding of how to maneuver the battalion and drive the operations process. Regarding my thoughts on the DSM and tactical decision-making, I assumed I could just “wing it” and still be more effective than following a mediocre output from an inexperienced staff. I had been relatively successful (read: lucky) in doing exactly that up until our attack on OBJs Sun and Europa in November 2022. What I soon realized is that there are more ways that the mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available-time available and civil considerations (METT-TC) variables can change during execution to derail the plan than any commander could ever personally track, and it is only a matter of time before the CCIR that you are not thinking of (and forcing subunits to report) will derail the plan without you knowing it. The bottom line is: Without putting significant thought into the friendly and enemy indicators that show the mission is either on track or not on track, this CCIR will not be monitored, reported, and analyzed to inform decisions. You are going to miss something.

Editor’s Note: *This article first appeared on the Center for Army Lessons Learned website at https://www.army.mil/article/265914/assessment_the_hardest_part_of_the_operations_process.*

Notes

¹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*, July 2019.

² Ibid.

³ Army Techniques Publication 2-01.3, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, March 2019, 6-20, para 6-65.

⁴ ADP 5-0, 4-6.

⁵ Ibid, 5-1, para 5-3.

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