Taking Your Operational Performance 'To the Limit'

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In November 2023, the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 7th Infantry Division, achieved a high degree of success during our rotation through the leader training program (LTP) hosted at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. It is easy (and perhaps common) to think of LTP as just another repetition that the staff gets before deploying to the proverbial "box" at NTC. Our battalion, known as Sykes' Regulars, made a deliberate decision to maximize the opportunity, choosing two primary goals: refining our systems and learning the capabilities of our digital equipment.

Where We Started

In the weeks before the LTP, our staff identified seven essential fighting products that were required for successful mission execution: mission statement, commander's intent, synchronization matrix, enemy event template, decision support matrix, fire support products, and execution checklist (EXCHECK). We then worked to convert these products into an easily transferable data package through the Joint Battle Command - Platform (JBC-P) and Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE). Identifying the correct format and file size was essential in developing a product that could be quickly disseminated and shared in the field across JBC-Ps that are mounted in more than 75 percent of our Stryker and Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) fleet. We then conditioned ourselves through repetition by publishing garrison weekly tasking orders (WTOs) and holding battle-rhythm events across the JBC-P forum to streamline our garrison and field staff processes. We ultimately developed a Microsoft Excel order file that subordinates and staff became familiar with viewing and editing on JBC-P and CPCE to support daily battalion operations.

Setting Conditions at LTP

Before we settled into our tactical operations center (TOC) in the LTP building, we did our best to configure the room to match our actual TOC layout, which consists of two Strykers and two JLTVs with a small table in the center. Our communications shop (S-6) configured multiple JBC-Ps, a Tactical Server Infrastructure (TSI) Small, and several CPCE systems for us to use throughout the planning process. The use of these systems from receipt of the mission through planning, order production, and execution supported our ability to help the commander visualize, understand, and rapidly transition to describe and direct without putting a significant strain on our energy. This provided our entire staff more time to think through the primary, secondary, and tertiary effects of the decisions we were planning.

One of the key challenges in the military decision-making process (MDMP) is the amount of time it takes to complete mission analysis and publish the orders to subordinate elements. Based on recent trends at combat training centers (CTCs), the last step of MDMP is most often missed, which results in staffs spending a large amount of energy helping the commander visualize and understand. When it comes time to describe and direct, the staff is then often unable to operationalize the commander's intent, which means subordinate units receive too little information and guidance from the commander at a time that is too late for them to plan effectively at echelon, specifically at the company and platoon levels. We simultaneously flattened communication with subordinate elements while also speeding up the MDMP process by leveraging a CPCE along with a JBC-P to immediately publish all mission analysis products to companies. This enabled effective parallel planning, the sharing of graphics, and generally allowed for a common understanding of the situation.

LTC Tom Angstadt, commander of 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, briefs during the combined arms rehearsal.

Army Battle Command Systems Basics

Let's get down to the nuts and bolts of our technological approach. The core of our technique consisted of four key systems: CPCE, JBCP, ShareDrive, and SharePoint. CPCE emerged as the linchpin for creating a digital common operating picture (COP) that facilitated our tactical decision-making through MDMP, and it communicated directly to JBC-P systems which enabled real-time communication. JBC-P was used as the primary means of communication to the company commanders and our brigade TOC. ShareDrive and SharePoint provided tools to maximize collaboration and allow for parallel planning across the staff during windows of limited connectivity. We purposely only used legacy-fielded Army Battle Command Systems (ABCS) to prevent building systems and processes around commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) or experimental programs that may not be available across the Army.

More than Secure Messaging

The global war on terrorism era produced leaders familiar with JBC-P primarily as a secure form of messaging and unit location identification. At the LTP, we strove to integrate ABCS early and beyond the current operations (CUOPS) battle-tracking method. During mission analysis, the staff used the Digital Terrain Elevation Data (DTED) software feature for line-of-sight analysis to support intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). Integrating the JBC-P and CPCE DTED feature was a value-based addition as our staff progressed through course-of-action development and analysis, using the tool to continuously help the commander understand, visualize, describe, and direct the staff.

Historically, there has been a hard shift from garrison PowerPoint planning shells and orders to a tactically produced product. The battalion developed baseline MDMP staff products that directly fed into a "fighting product" or an order annex. After standardizing the products, the next step was ensuring compatibility with

ABCS and file size to support rapid dissemination. We began to use the tactical secure internet protocol router (TACSIPR) due to ergonomic considerations, and it freed the JBC-P and its operator to battle track and communicate more freely. The Secure Mission Data Loader (SMDL) allows staffs to transfer products that were made on a TACSIPR computer to the JBC-P for distribution. Using the SMDL this way is a great time saver compared to trying to create everything on a JBC-P. To share imagery and shorten the targeting cycle, we used the Long-Range Scout Surveillance System (LRAS3) to transfer photos and real-time scout reports to the JBC-P, where they are available for rapid sharing. The goal was to build efficiency within the staff to maximize any system, product, or action to contribute to the operation directly.

What digital systems do not replace is the need for occasional physical meetings between subordinate elements on the battlefield; the psychological impact of in-person contact on the battlefield is a net positive. According to a 2018 article, "Research shows face-to-face requests are 34 times more effective than those sent by email, and that a physical handshake promotes cooperation and influences negotiation outcomes for the better."[1] The importance of seeing your counterparts, peers, and superiors for a quick meeting or sync pays dividends for the psychological health of the force when stress and demands are high. In addition, technological vulnerabilities such as jamming, spoofing, phishing, and other electronic attack methods can hinder communication and operational planning.

After the Final After Action Review

Our battalion's decision to set two achievable goals during LTP proved pivotal in advancing our operational effectiveness. We achieved these goals by setting the ground rules and expectations up front, working as a team, and allowing for sufficient rest periods. By harnessing the full potential of cutting-edge tactical systems that were widely available to us, we refined our command-and-control processes and elevated our communication and operational planning.

Staff members in 5-20 IN plan around the analog COP.

Notes

[1] Hilton, "The Science of the Being There: Why Face-to-Face Meetings Are so Important," The Washington Post Creative Group (n.d.).

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