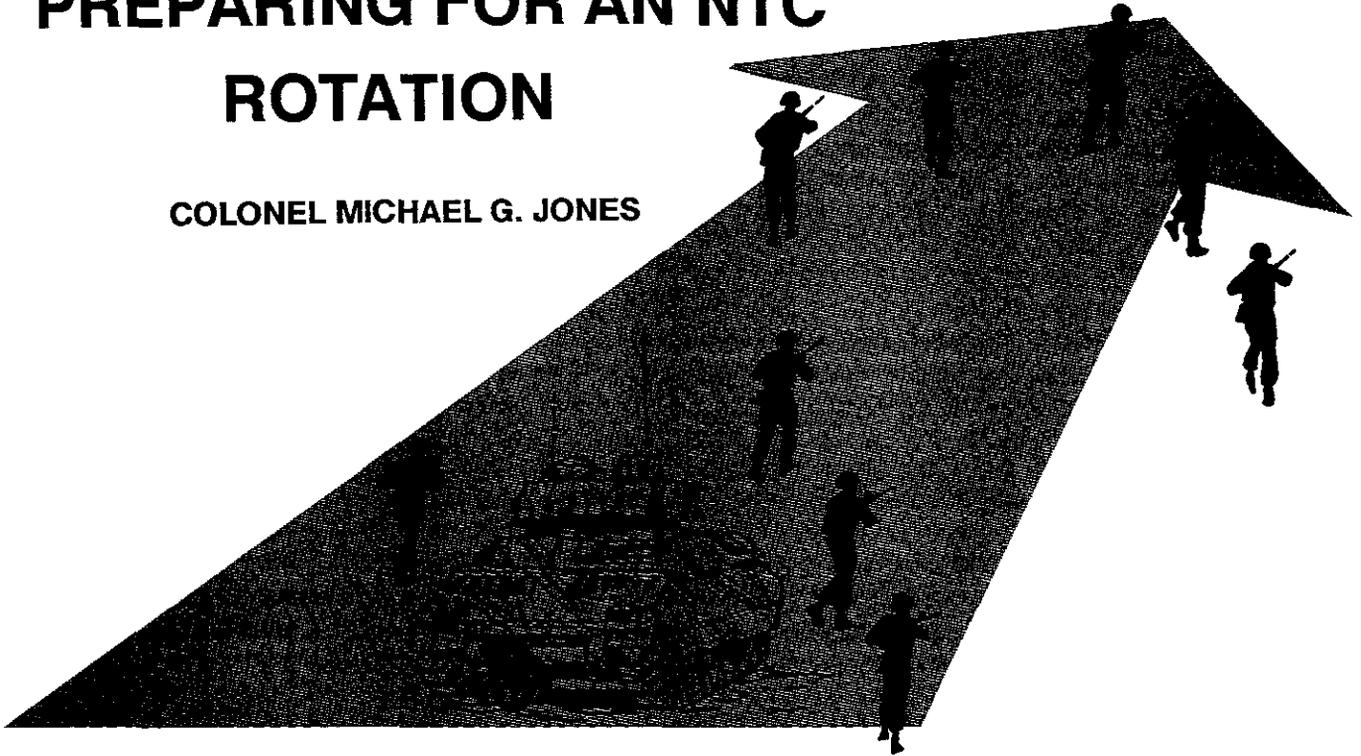


# PREPARING FOR AN NTC ROTATION

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A training rotation at the National Training Center (NTC) is one of the most exciting and challenging events a battalion commander and his unit can experience. How well you prepare yourself and the members of your task force (TF) will have a lot to do with your success during the rotation. Here are some ideas on how to get started:

*Begin with a brief two- or three-day assessment of where you stand.* Start with your mission essential task list (METL) and the enabling tasks, and analyze your shortcomings. Since most rotations revolve around the “big four”—movement to contact, hasty attack, deliberate attack, and defense in sector—you’ll want to focus on these.

As your analysis begins to take shape, ask the brigade commander and his staff to identify the tasks and skills you should emphasize.

Be sure to review the NTC take-home package and after-action report (AAR) videotapes of a recent battalion rotation. Most commanders wait until the last few weeks before a deployment; by then it’s already too late.

Interview recent NTC graduates, and pay close attention to their counsel. Their experiences can help you identify your own weak areas.

Your command sergeant major (CSM) should talk with a returning CSM about activities at the Dustbowl (the initial tent city and the equipment draw and turn-in point), uniform, discipline, and the NCO observer-controllers at the NTC. Your battalion XO and staff should interview their counterparts as well. Then, formalize their research effort, and make sure they give you their notes. The interview

shouldn’t be one of those “How’d it go?” efforts; you and your staff need to develop specific questions in order to get the maximum benefit from the returning unit’s experience.

Begin developing an NTC library. The Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) series and the handouts from the FORSCOM Leaders Training Program are some of the best source documents with which to start a library.

Review other battalions’ NTC-tested tactical SOPs (TACSOPs), blank operations orders (OPORDs), Dustbowl game plans, letters and memorandums of instruction (LOIs/MOIs), and checklists. Publish your own LOIs or MOIs early, if only in draft, so you can use them, discuss them, and add or delete as necessary.

*Begin selling your personal NTC philosophy.* The NTC is World War III. It is the best training in the world. The OPFOR wants to win and knows how to do it. Morale and the desire to fight are everything. Commanders can get soldiers and weapons to the right place on the battlefield, but only tough, self-starting troops can make the plan succeed. Here are some ideas:

A successful rotation is measured in terms of three factors: Did we train safely? Did we learn? And did we maintain a positive attitude?

There are many ways to communicate your personal philosophy, but here is an approach that worked for me:

- Personally brief each company on the terrain, the enemy, and what you expect of them. Insist that they master the basics. Soldiers should know the difference between the opposing force’s (OPFOR’s) combat reconnaissance patrol

(CRP) and its forward security element (FSE), the maximum range of the T-72 tanks and BMP fighting vehicles, how to construct fighting positions, how to prepare range cards, and other fundamental skills.

- Put up OPFOR vehicle posters in the battalion area to keep everyone focused. The Brigade S-2 can get you what you need.

- Publish a monthly NTC newsletter that concentrates on the OPFOR, tactics, and training tips. Ensure that the newsletter gets down to platoon level.

- Develop a deployment handbook on safety, soldier-craft, and desert survival.

- Have your unit chaplain put together daily devotionals keyed to your rotation dates.

- Make sure each soldier gets a pocket-sized map of the NTC.

*Get your combat support and combat service support (CS/CSS) slice elements in tow.* If you concentrate all of your effort on getting your battalion up to speed, you're doomed. Sometimes, the performance of your slice elements will be decisive. The first step is to get the names of their key personnel and the vehicles and equipment they intend to deploy. Get your brigade commander's help if you have problems.

- Have your slice elements brief you on their capabilities, equipment, weapons, personnel status, and doctrinal employment.

- Ask that they attend all battalion command and staff meetings, OPDs, and NCOPDs. Don't take no for an answer!

- Insure that they help plan all training and participate in it.

- Invite them to all social events, both officer and NCO.

*Go to work on MILES gear.* The OPFOR has the best MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system) equipment in the world. It is permanently assigned and always set to kill at the maximum range of their weapons. You and your company commanders must know how to boresight all weapons. (We checked tanks almost daily at distances of 3.5, 3, 2.5, and 2 kilometers.) To master MILES, consider:

- Identifying a trained and certified MILES expert in each platoon.

- Spending some time each week on long-range MILES gunnery. (Can your M16s kill at 300 meters?)

- Running MILES jousts, with awards and special recognition for the winners.

- Establishing a MILES certification range in the Dustbowl. Frequently, one battalion runs the infantry weapons portion while another handles the tanks.

*Make the best use of NTC reconnaissances.* Most battalions participate in two reconnaissances of the NTC before their rotations begin. The four-day FORSCOM Leader Training Program is for commanders and staffs. It focuses on the orders development process, small unit tactics, and the OPFOR. You will have an opportunity to analyze both rotational units and OPFOR plans, and then watch force-on-

force battles. In addition to this program, the battalion will be able to send its XO, S-4, and perhaps others on a logistics reconnaissance to work out the details of the deployment, equipment draw, occupation of the Dustbowl, and other critical issues.

If you're lucky, you may be able to get some of your staff to the NTC as augmentees during another unit's deployment, or as students at the NTC's OPFOR Academy. If not, consider inviting some observer-controllers or members of the OPFOR to your home station.

*Get your paperwork squared away as soon as possible.*

- Formalize and standardize your vehicle load plans, and insist that all units comply with them.

- Ensure that everyone, including your slice elements, understands your uniform and appearance standards. Tell troops what to wear and what and how to pack. Discuss the uniforms for travel, the Dustbowl, and battle, if they are different. (In general, if it's not OD, I wouldn't take it.)

- Make sure your dependents' handbook for the rotation is prepared and issued well ahead of time. Schedule briefings for dependents, and make sure they are conducted by subject matter experts.

- Publish your NTC MOI quickly, leaving some annexes to be provided later if you don't yet have all the information. You don't want the staff churning out paper at the last moment. Don't hold up the MOI waiting for a single piece of information when you already have a lot that will be useful to the unit's soldiers and their dependents.

- Plan on completing all officer and NCO evaluation reports and a draft unit status report before leaving home station. During the rotation, there won't be time for anything but fighting.

- Get started early on such pre-deployment checks as records, powers of attorney, dental screenings, and the like to avoid last-minute problems.

*Develop a comprehensive plan for Officer and NCO Professional Development (OPD/NCOPD).* Don't waste a minute. Some good subjects, for starters, are counterreconnaissance, actions on the objective, development of engagement areas, and casualty evacuation.

- Study the NTC rules of engagement handbook. It will be an eye opener on how battles are fought, and it will give you insight into areas that will require work.

- Conduct orders drills until the staff has them down to a science, and get yourself straight as well. Make sure you can present a decent commander's intent. Have your brigade evaluate both your process and your product. You should be able to develop and reproduce a task force order within four or five hours. Fort Leavenworth's Reference Book 100-3 is an excellent guide, as is the NTC's Orders and Plans Handbook.

- Consider a one- or two-day logistics exercise (LOGEX) with the entire CSS team, including first sergeants, supply sergeants, and maintenance team chiefs.

- You may also find it useful to run an Army training battle simulation system (ARTBASS) simulation of the live-fire battle, and perhaps one battle in each corridor.

*Develop your training plan.* Regardless of your METL assessment, you'll probably want to conduct a battalion live-fire mortar exercise, a scout proficiency course, an obstacle breaching lane, and some sort of NBC certification. Some prerequisites to an NTC rotation are a combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX) and a gunnery within the six months before deployment.

If I were you, I would do the following:

- Focus on soldier basics and platoon and company operations.

- Do a lot of task force level work through command post exercises (CPXs), tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs), and simulations. Don't forget, however, that while these are good, nothing beats putting the task force together in a battalion level external evaluation.

- Practice at least one basic task force movement formation until you can run through it as a team at 15 miles per hour.

- Train to develop a fully integrated set of engagement areas, each of which synchronizes direct fires, indirect fires, and obstacles. This is key in the defense. Specialize your companies, and once they've developed some confidence, let them cross-train each other. To do this, you will need:

- A breaching expert (mech heavy) who knows how to conduct in-stride and deliberate breaches.

- A specialist in airmobile/dismounted operations (mech heavy). This requires practice, special communications, and guts.

- An advance guard company (tank heavy). The commander leads the task force and has to be a great map reader and an independent thinker. In the defense, this may be your flex (reserve) company. He prepares two positions and practices the fast dash.

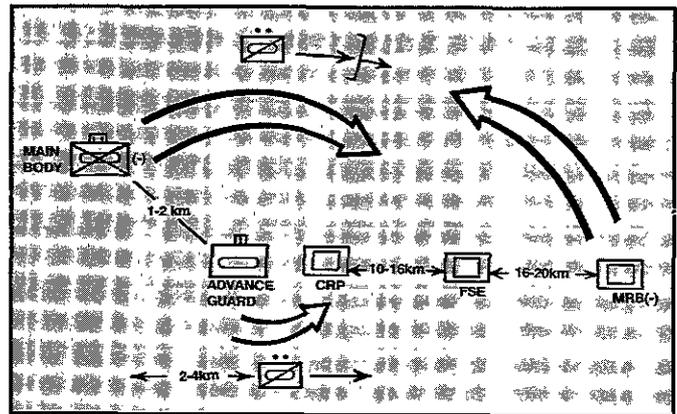
- A counterreconnaissance expert (tank heavy). He specializes in killing divisional and regimental reconnaissance elements. In the counterreconnaissance role, he has a mix of tanks and infantry, plus Stingers and a section of mortars. (I am convinced that an ad hoc organization or the antiarmor company won't cut it on counterreconnaissance.)

Finally, remember that strength and the will to win at platoon and company level are more important than any of the above.

*Recognize that most classic NTC battles can be reduced to the elements of movement to contact, deliberate attack, and defense.* In a movement to contact (Figure 1), scouts precede the task force and locate the enemy. Your advance guard company kills the CRPs on the move and fixes the FSE with direct fire and mortars. The rest of the task force rapidly transitions to a hasty attack or defense and destroys the enemy's main body.

The scenario is much like the game of Musical Chairs: The chairs are terrain that affords you a significant advantage. When the music stops (contact is made), you get to the nearest chair.

In the deliberate attack (Figure 2), mass against the enemy's weakness. Dismounted infantry conducts a stealth breach and knocks out key enemy positions short of the LD.



**Figure 1. Movement to contact.**

The task force holds the enemy in the kill sack and attempts to turn his flank. The task force focuses all its combat power against a single platoon, while smoke and artillery suppress the rest of the force. FASCAM and CAS are targeted against the OPFOR's reserve.

*In the defense (Figure 3), the guiding principle should be, "He who defends all, defends nothing."* Therefore, take a risk on one enemy axis (your defense sector will always be too wide). A company team secures your risk axis. Give him most of your Class IV supplies. The balance of the task force defends the other axis. The task force reserve is one tank team (minus) in depth. Scatterable mines (FASCAM) are used to shape the battle. Ask brigade for 50 laborers to help with obstacle construction.

*Listen to what members of the OPFOR say.* Here's what the OPFOR people have told us:

- Our TOCs are too big, too undefended, and too easy for the enemy to locate. (Move mostly at night, and keep a Stinger and some Vipers with the headquarters.)

- Local security is a common weakness. (If we were good at it, we wouldn't be working so hard on counterreconnaissance.)

- Tanks become decisively engaged at 2,500 to 3,000 meters. M1A1 tank drivers think sweeping the objective and closing with the OPFOR's ATGMs is an effective technique, but it isn't. (Our tanks should kill at ranges between 2,500 and 3,000 meters; OPFOR T-72s kill at 2,000 meters. As the OPFOR gets more T-80 tanks, look out!)

- The OPFOR is vulnerable to dismounted infantry at night. Nothing is so disconcerting to the OPFOR regiment as "crunchies" in the darkness.

- Target acquisition, an old skill, is essential. All OPFOR track commanders and loaders use binoculars. Gun-tube orientation for two-thirds of the formation is to the flank and rear.

- When OPFOR vehicles stop, they get into a good hull-down defense. When rotational units stop, they just stop. Learn from their mistake.

Some final thoughts on training skills: Most of us discount the complexities of conducting NBC decontamination, casualty evacuation, vehicle recovery, and regeneration. Many units have more problems with these than with the standard actions of attack and defense.

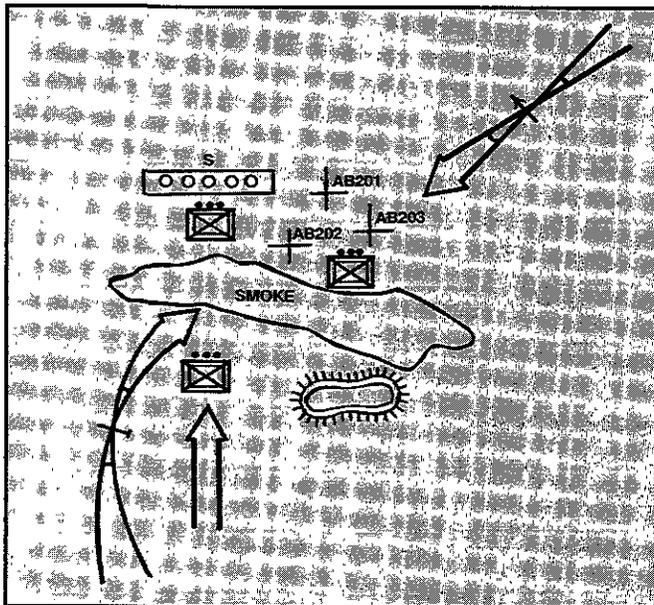


Figure 2. Deliberate attack.

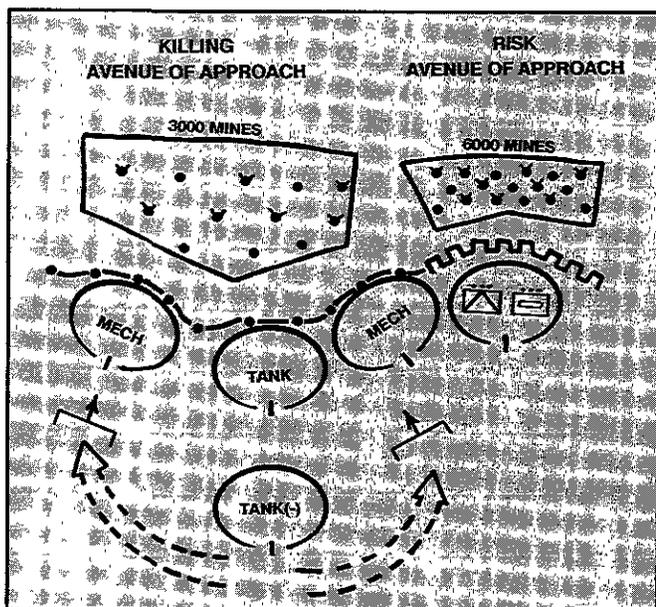


Figure 3. Defense.

Recognize that the NTC campaign consists of a set of smaller battles. Here are the ten key ones:

**Deployment.** Planning the move is your first real headache. This effort will require meticulous planning and an experienced eye, and it includes:

- Predeployment checks.
- Dependent briefings.
- Rear detachment planning.
- Red Cross message procedures.
- Courier flight scheduling.
- Equipment loan.
- Vehicle and equipment rail planning.
- Bus and aircraft flow.
- Preparation of manifests.

**The Dustbowl.** The term "Dustbowl" refers both to a place (the initial tent city) and to an activity (equipment

draw and turn-in). It is normally run by the XO and the CSM. The initial emphasis is usually on getting set up, housekeeping, uniforms, and discipline. It then shifts to offloading trains at Yermo, California (some 40 miles away) and moving by convoy to Fort Irwin. You then concentrate on drawing equipment, a frustratingly complex task that the battalion must rock drill. Then your focus turns to MILES verification and the specifics of the first operation. The initial Dustbowl lasts five days (Monday through Friday). On Day 1, your unit will draw light equipment; on Days 2 through 5, the battalion draws vehicles and weapons. On Day 3, the brigade receives the first OPOD. Finally, on Days 4 and 5, key personnel will attend a whole host of observer-controller meetings.

**The Moveout (frequently called the "Death March").** The convoy movement to your initial assembly area takes plenty of forethought and cannot be overplanned. The basic sequence works like this:

- Task forces move to initial staging areas, upload training ammunition, refuel, and conduct final pre-combat checks.
- At midday, scout platoons with chemical reconnaissance teams and aerial scouts move out along assigned routes.
- During the afternoon, quartering parties, TCPs, and some command and control facilities leave.
- At nightfall the task force's main body moves. (One task force moves to the live-fire training area and the other to the force-on-force area.)
- Trail parties normally close during the early morning hours of Training Day 1.

**Live Fire (LF).** The live-fire sequence normally lasts four to five days. The first day is Safety Day: You upload ammunition, receive your first OPOD, and test-fire all your weapons. During LF you'll do a daylight attack, a daylight defense, and a night defense. Planning time is short, and soldier skills are carefully examined. When you get out, you'll feel like you've been through the wringer.

**Force on Force (FOF).** Task force FOF normally runs five days. You will conduct either a movement to contact or an attack the morning you arrive in the zone. Although the schedule usually alternates fight days with preparation days, you may have to fight on consecutive days, depending upon the scenario. AARs are conducted at company level and below immediately after the mission. Task force AARs are televised, high-tech operations conducted near the battle site about five hours after you receive a change of mission. Expect something bad to happen every preparation day (an air strike, a chemical attack, or a probe). Since some of your planning time will be interrupted by enemy action and AARs, make sure you've really wargamed your troop-leading procedures.

**The Transition.** After the first week, task forces can expect to trade between LF and FOF. Sometimes the trade will include an intermediate phase in which both task forces engage in brigade level operations. In other scenarios, the exchange simply involves a passage of lines between the two task forces. In either case, both task forces must download ammunition, recover all Class IV supplies, and fill in vehicle

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
RAILS ARR YERMO						(OFF-LOAD)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(CONVOY)	DRAW EQUIP/MILES CERT					(MOVE OUT)
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
TF 1: LF/TF 2: FOF					BDE OPS	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
TF 1: FOF/TF 2: LF					BDE OPS (MOVE IN)	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
(CLEAN)	TURN-IN/REDEPLOY					
29	30	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 4. Schedule for a typical rotation.

holes before leaving for the new site.

**Brigade Operations.** In most rotations, the brigade headquarters remains in FOF throughout the training period. The brigade commander's focus is on the FOF task force. During the transition, or at the end of the second task force's FOF, you can expect to participate in a two task force brigade operation. These operations are relatively complex, require close cooperation between the task forces, and frequently involve a task force reorganization.

**Actions in the Dustbowl and Redeployment.** The close-out Dustbowl represents the most dangerous phase of your rotation in terms of safety. Here, packs and other major components are being replaced day and night, the troops are tired, and most of your battalion will be scurrying around trying to get all the equipment turned in at the same time.

If you've stayed on top of maintenance, ordered parts during training, and conducted your oil analysis tests, your turn-in will only be painful. If your haven't done these things, the turn-in will be pure hell! The drawdown takes at least a week, and runs something like this:

**Day 1 (Saturday):** Completion of your last tactical mission. You will move to a staging area, download ammunition and equipment, return to the Dustbowl, and begin to wash vehicles.

**Day 2 (Sunday):** The task force receives its final observer-controller AARs and continues to wash vehicles, perform preventive maintenance checks and services, and take care of job order maintenance requirements.

**Day 3 (Monday):** Contractor technical inspections begin and run through Day 5. Battalions begin range police; the brigade tasking for this will run 400 to 600 soldiers a day.

**Day 4 (Tuesday):** Units begin turning in light equipment, communications, weapons, PLL, Class IV. The battalion can expect to get about 10 percent of its vehicles turned in.

**Day 5 (Wednesday):** You should have almost half of

your vehicle fleet turned in. Tanks and ITVs will take the most time.

**Day 6 (Thursday):** The goal is to have 80 to 90 percent of your vehicles turned in at this point. This should be your last day of range police.

**Days 7 and 8:** By the end of the week, you should be working to get your worst vehicles up to speed. Of course, if you are slow or simply disorganized, the turn-in will take still longer. (Commanders depart when the contractor has accepted 90 percent of their units' vehicles.)

To further complicate matters, you will be managing your battalion's drawdown and redeployment at the same time. A good rule is "first to clear, first to leave."

**Return and Post Operations Maintenance.** Vehicles usually come off the train as they were readied for loading; that is, with limited unit integrity. Therefore, you need a good plan for offloading on relatively short notice. After a short day off, most battalions begin a cycle of internal AARs and recovery maintenance. The schedule for a typical rotation is shown in the accompanying table (Figure 4).

Some final thoughts: Training at the NTC is the greatest training experience in the world. You'll walk away from it proud of your troops, the battalion, and yourself. If you're lucky enough to get a rotation early in your command, you'll gain enough good, solid experience to improve the battalion steadily during the rest of your tour. You should recognize, however, that preparation is everything. If you've just been alerted for a rotation, you're already behind. Get excited, worried, and motivated as soon as possible, but don't get discouraged. Many have gone before you, and they understand what it takes to succeed at the National Training Center.

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