



Planning Challenging, Realistic Training at the Battalion Level

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“Success in battle does not happen by accident; it is a direct result of tough, realistic, and challenging training.”

— FM 7-0, Training the Force
October 2002

Many junior officers and NCOs of my generation have served multiple tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. With today’s increased operational tempo (OPTEMPO), multi-echeloned training has never been more critical. Ironically, the same OPTEMPO that demands increased levels of training has led to a loss of competence in garrison-based skills such as training management among junior officers and NCOs. On numerous occasions, I have heard senior Army officers tell groups of young officers that one of the biggest shortcomings among junior officers is a lack of knowledge on training management. Contrary to these perceived deficiencies, I was a part of the planning and execution of an excellent battalion-planned training event; planned in large part by the same junior officers lacking training management experience. With clear guidance and a good working relationship between key staff, battalions can conduct challenging, realistic, and multi-echeloned training.

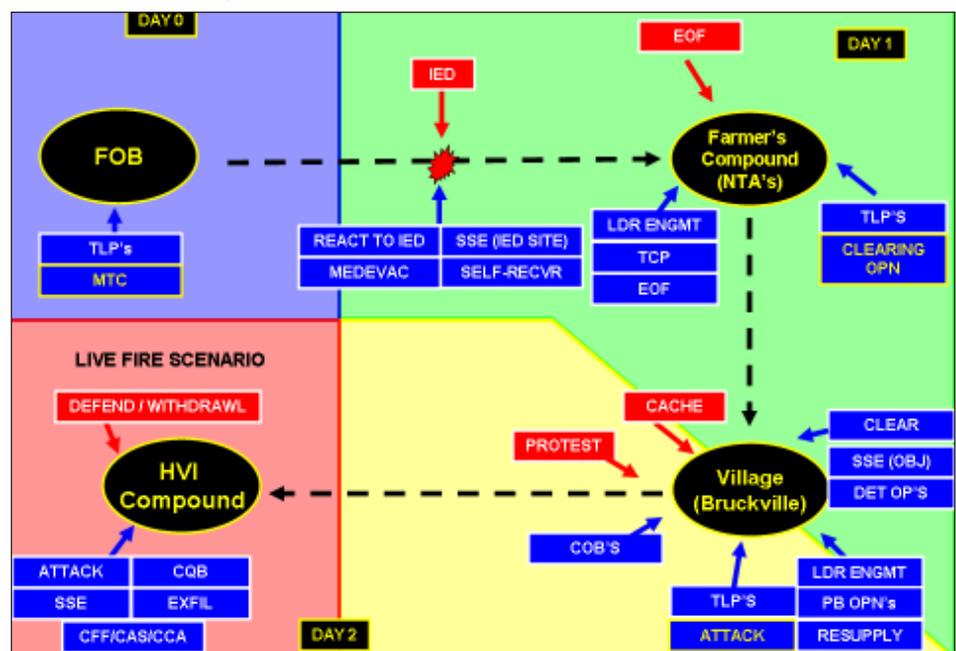
The 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment returned from a 15-month deployment in March of 2007. Our battalion suffered the same fate as many returning units, namely a large reduction in personnel strength due to separations and permanent changes of station (PCS). Due to the large turnover of experienced personnel, the battalion began a training cycle at the individual Soldier level. The next seven months saw the unit conducting basic individual skills training, working up to squad-level live-fire exercises in November. The plan was to complete squad-level training in order to have the battalion prepared to conduct platoon-level training by December.

The most important element in planning training, and a must before the process can begin, is to receive the commander’s intent. As in any military operation, training must

have a clear and concise purpose on which to base and focus planning. In this case, the battalion commander, LTC Christopher LaNeve, gathered all of the primary staff, along with the battalion executive officer (XO), MAJ Eric Flesch. The staff discussed key tasks to be trained on during the upcoming platoon live-fire exercise. Because the battalion was planning for a possible Afghanistan deployment, the commander stressed key counterinsurgency (COIN) tasks. He also stressed that the training must be as realistic as possible. The newest private and the most cynical team leader must believe that the training was productive and useful.

The meeting was informal, which allowed open discussion from everyone. This facilitated ideas from everyone on the staff, capitalizing on a wide variety of training, combat, and historical experience. This simple brainstorming session around a white board, combined with doctrinal mission essential task list (METL), led to a lengthy list of individual and collective tasks that would be a part of the training event. Some additional specific guidance from the commander was that the training should encompass both mounted and dismounted operations; should cover a period of 24-36 hours of continuous operations; and should focus on key COIN tasks

Figure 1 — Platoon EXEVAL (STX and LFX) Concept



such as cordon and search, local leader engagement, and indigenous security force coordination.

The coordination of three critical elements make up successful planning of platoon-level training. The battalion S3 develops the “what” of the training concept. The “why” is the battalion S2’s development of an intelligence-driven script. The “how” is the support plan developed by the battalion S4. The primary planners for this event were CPT John Baker, the assistant battalion S3, 1LT Nathaniel Tupper, the battalion S2, and myself, the battalion S4. Of the three primary planners, none had yet attended their respective captain’s career courses.

As the AS3, CPT Baker was the lead planner and had two critical and connecting tasks. One was the development of the actual training plan, and the second was obtaining necessary training areas. These two tasks are often mutually dependent. The type and availability of training land has a significant impact on what type of training is actually possible. Many training events fall into the trap of having what geographical areas are available direct the type of training they conduct. It is a difficult balancing act to work both issues simultaneously.

CPT Baker first came up with a general plan. To identify possible training events, he grouped the listed tasks by related concepts. He then developed a simple concept sketch as a visual depiction. It clearly laid out a generic outline from which the staff sections could begin detailed, concurrent planning. On several occasions throughout the two months leading up to the training event, the staff came together through intermediate planning reviews (IPR). These IPRs de-conflicted friction points between the staff, solidified the plan, and slowly began to develop into a detailed scenario.

One of the most difficult aspects of preparing this training event was acquiring necessary training areas. Limited resources, combined with competition for land with other units, made acquiring appropriate training areas extremely difficult. MAJ Flesch brought forward an idea from a previous assignment to create modular walls by building separate sections of wall out of 4 x 8 plywood that were bolted together in

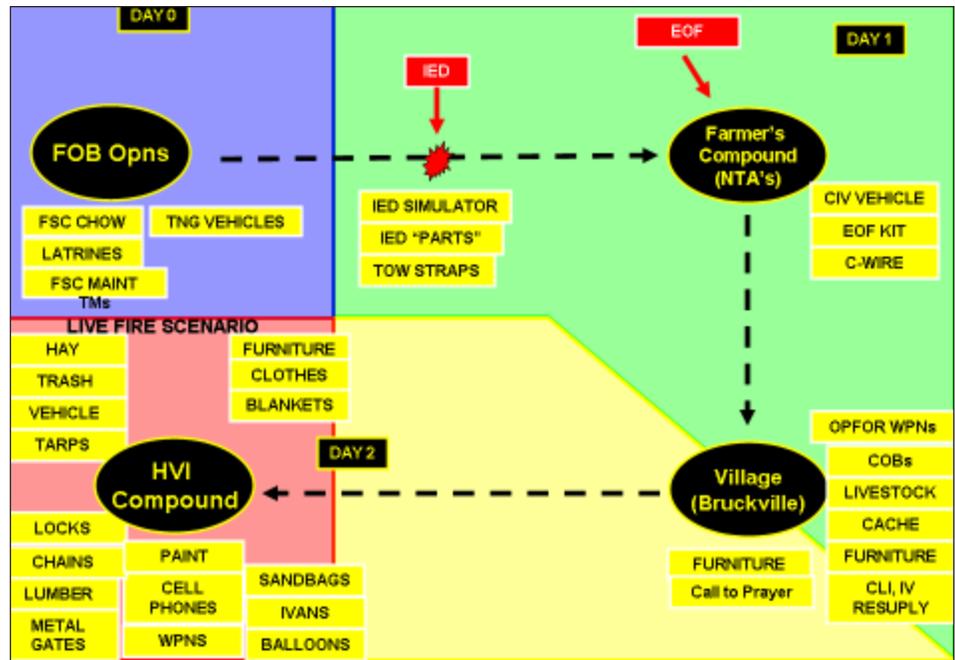


Figure 2 — Platoon EXEVAL (STX and LFX) Concept of Support

any one-room or multi-room configuration. CPT Baker’s scenario required a village to conduct a cordon and search. A “village” could be created almost anywhere by building small shacks out of plywood, negating the need for a complex, and difficult to coordinate, MOUT training area.

LTC LaNeve’s requirement to give the platoons a lengthy mounted movement presented a particular problem due to the limited land and training areas available. Other units were frequently using training areas at the same time our training was scheduled. However, the roads surrounding them or even running through them were usually not part of a unit’s training plan. CPT Baker conducted prior coordination with land-owning units throughout Fort Bragg and obtained permission to use the roads running between and through training areas. Combined with creative use of checkpoints throughout the post, he was able to ensure a lengthy mounted movement with a limited amount of “owned” training area.

Once CPT Baker completed the concept sketch, 1LT Tupper was able to develop an intelligence-driven scenario that would act as the script. Each platoon would begin the mission by conducting a mounted patrol to meet with a local leader. The intelligence from higher would indicate that the local leader was a coalition forces (CF) supporter who had information on anti-coalition forces

(ACF) operating in the area. While at the farmer’s house, observer/controllers (OCs), would evaluate the platoon on establishing a traffic control point while the platoon leader met with the farmer. Depending on the level of rapport built by the platoon leader, the elder would give varying degrees of information. Improper actions of the evaluated platoon could lead to them discovering very little information, such as a mere general area in which ACF were operating or even no information at all. However, successful platoons could gather specific intelligence such as names, descriptions and house locations of individual ACF leaders.

The platoon would then move from the farmhouse compound to the village identified to conduct a cordon and search of the area. Enroute to the village, the patrol would encounter an IED and have to react. The OCs would then give the patrol guidance to self-recover its vehicle to the objective village. Once there, the platoon leader would coordinate with support personnel, conduct a link up and facilitate the evacuation of the damaged vehicle. This had the added benefit of incorporating the forward support company into the training.

Once at the village, the platoon would begin its cordon and search operation. Proper searching and tactical questioning techniques would give the platoon additional intelligence, eventually leading

to the exact location of a terrorist planning cell. The villagers would be generally less than supportive of the platoon's activities in the village, causing additional planning considerations for the platoon leader. The platoon would be tasked with the follow-on mission of conducting patrol base activities in the village overnight and assaulting the terrorist compound the following morning.

The above scenario describes the "what" and the "why" of the training event. The next critical piece was the "how." The "how" identified support requirements the S4 needed to provide to ensure successful conduct of the training. CPT Baker's concept sketch provided a useful tool to plan support requirements. I developed a clear and concise checklist by identifying support requirements at each phase or station using the same format as the training plan.

The goal of the support plan was to give the S2 and S3 the necessary tools to ensure the training was as realistic as possible. The smallest detail can go a long way towards convincing a Soldier that training is relevant and realistic. At the farmhouse site, the "elder" was given a teapot, hot plate, and tea set along with some "easy-to-boil" rice and chicken. With this, he was easily able to recreate the image of a local Afghan giving a guest a meal. To add to the realism of an Afghan farmhouse, we obtained live animals to place in pens. A little research can locate local farmers, petting zoo owners, or ranches

willing to rent livestock. For this particular training event, we had 20 chickens, 12 goats, and a llama.

At the village site, we set up a small village using the previously described modular walls. We furnished those buildings with furniture obtained through the post Defense Reutilization & Marketing Office (DRMO). The DRMO had information on when post facilities were to receive new furniture. With some prior coordination, we obtained a great deal of old furniture from these facilities for use as props inside village buildings. For additional realism, we used a sound system from the battalion S6 to play a recording of the call to prayer throughout the day. All of these small details, combined with livestock, worked to create a realistic Afghanistan village setting.

An important part of any training is to ensure that it is multi-echeloned. This training event is an excellent example of that. While the rifle platoons were the primary training objective, many other training opportunities were incorporated at the battalion staff level as well as at the company level.

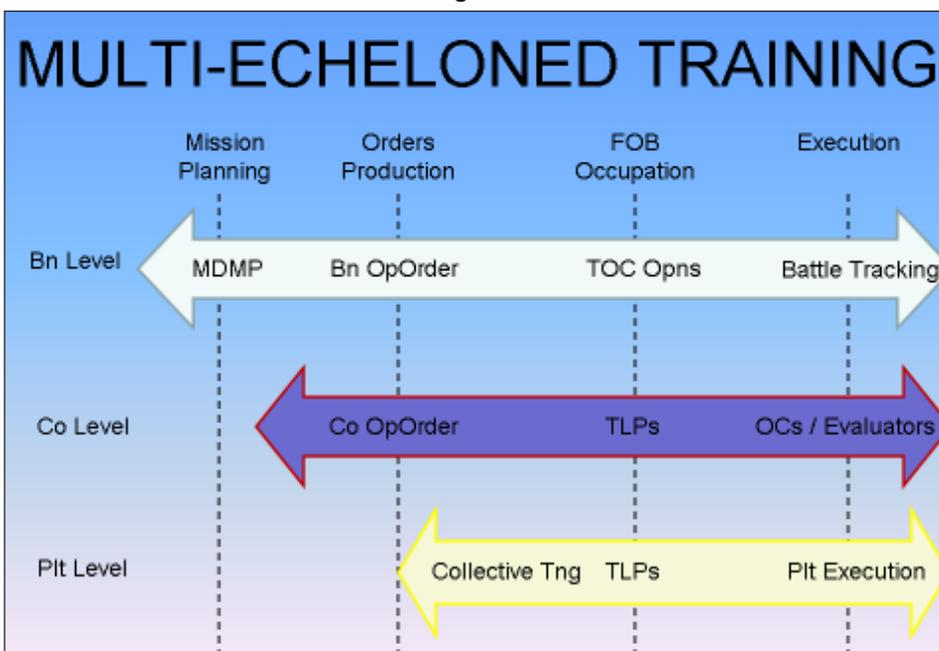
The battalion staff had multiple training opportunities throughout the exercise. The training event began with a base operations order created and briefed by the battalion staff to company commanders. This was a chance for the battalion staff to work through the military decision-making process and

orders production. Company commanders then had the opportunity to create company operations orders and brief them to their company key leadership.

The actual execution of the training event provided additional training opportunities for the battalion staff. As the platoons rotated through the scenario, they were closely coordinated and monitored. The battalion tactical operations center (TOC) did this through checkpoints and reports sent in from the platoons. This became an excellent way for the battalion TOC to train on battle tracking multiple platoons conducting patrols in different locations throughout the area of operations, a critical task easily comparable to actual operations in theater.

The above scenario is an actions-based training event that can be reactive to the actions taken by the platoon creating realistic and challenging training. This basic training plan can be a basis for an unlimited variety of scenarios. This outstanding training event was effective and productive at every level. While there was clear and consistent guidance from the battalion XO throughout the process, none of the primary planners for our platoon live-fire exercise were graduates of their respective career courses. All of us had limited exposure to garrison training management because of lengthy deployments. However, that did not stop us from planning and executing challenging and realistic multi-echeloned training. FM 7-0 states that there is "a direct correlation between realistic training and success on the battlefield." This example shows that lack of experience in training management among staff planners is no excuse for failing to provide our Soldiers with the tools to be successful in combat.

Figure 3



At the time this article was written, **CPT Paul Benfield** was attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He was commissioned from Officer Candidate School in September 2005. He served as a rifle platoon leader and company executive officer with the 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division and deployed with them to Baghdad for the Surge from January 2007 to March 2008. Upon redeployment, he became the battalion S4. His next assignment is with the 4th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Ga.