

# So You've Got a DATE with a Combat Training Center?

## *Focusing Training for Battalions/Task Forces*

by COL Esli T. Pitts

So you are going to a combat training center (CTC) for a rotation in the decisive-action training environment (DATE)? Awesome! Either it will be a nightmare or one of the most professionally rewarding experiences of your career to date.

The determining factor is how well-trained and ready your organization is upon arrival at the CTC. Obviously, your training readiness is a direct reflection of how much time you've had to train, but it's really more a reflection of whether you trained on the right things. All units focus on the basics of squad and platoon maneuver. Some get to company maneuver. Few get to multi-echelon combined-arms maneuver training. It's up to you to set conditions and make opportunities.

I'm writing this article as a former battalion commander who focused solely on maneuver skills for two years – with a successful National Training Center (NTC) rotation followed by assignment as a battalion observer/coach/trainer (O/C/T) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany – I know units *can* be well-trained and ready for a professionally rewarding experience. To that end, this article focuses on how battalions can build opportunities to expand their training time and improve readiness, regardless of external constraints.

### **Merits of a CTC rotation**

First, I need to clarify what I mean by a CTC rotation: It is a training event designed to produce trained battalions that are ready to plan, prepare, execute and assess unified land operations. It is not just another opportunity to train and fight at the squad and platoon level. By that, I mean it is not just your Soldiers' and subordinate leaders' training opportunity; it is yours (as the battalion commander). The best crews, squads and platoons in the world may overcome deficiencies and friction created by a minimally trained staff and an inexperienced (at echelon) battalion commander. Conversely, a well-trained battalion can generate opportunities to put average subordinates into positions where they can fight and win. This means you cannot spend all of your time training your subordinates at crew, squad and platoon level while neglecting the training of your battalion.

Early on (as a battalion commander), I decided to focus on training "the battalion." There was no brigade or division plan to train us above the company level, so it would be up to me to develop a headquarters that could plan, prepare and execute operations, not just generate collective training at platoon level and below.

I decided to focus on several key areas:

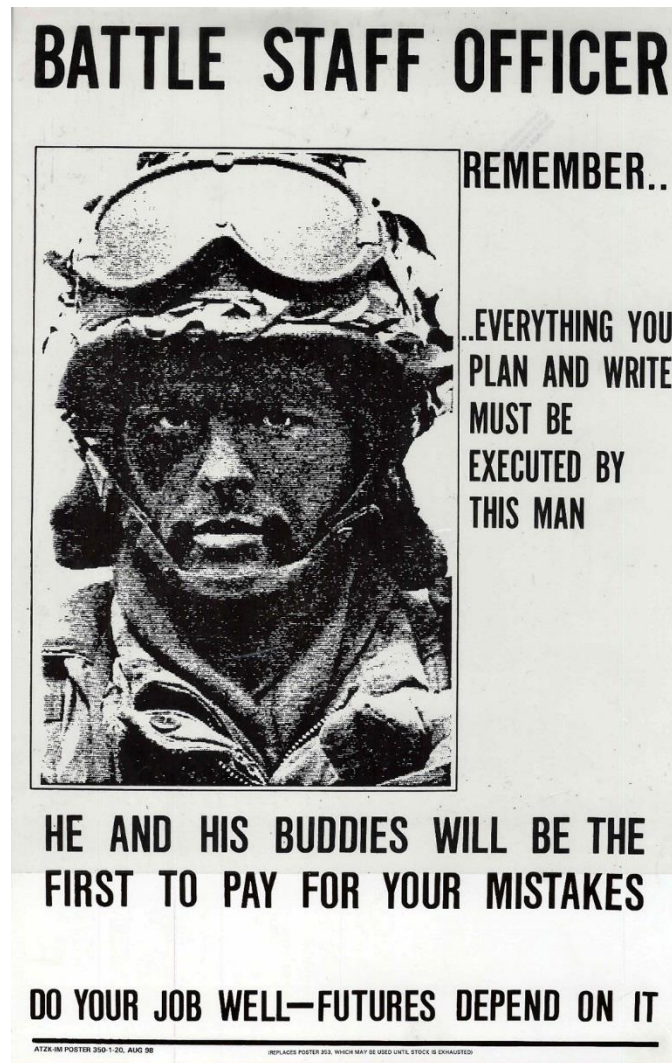
- Planning, rehearsals and current operations;
- Implementing a tactical standing operating procedure (TACSOP);
- Conducting the rapid-decision synchronization process (RDSP); and
- Codifying a "daily dozen" of standardized reportable mission-preparation tasks.

As a result of ongoing wars, few of my senior leaders had experience in traditional maneuver. Therefore, I set expectations to gain proficiency in actions on contact and battle drills at platoon and crew; integration of fires; specialty-platoon training; medical evacuation (medevac); and teaching company-grade officers how to fight their organizations. Essentially, I set out to reverse the ingrained habits of the counterinsurgency environment and restore lethality in mounted maneuver in all conditions, including a chemically-contaminated or night-time environment.

### **Planning, rehearsing and current operations**

There's an old poster that reads: "Battle-staff officer: Remember ... everything you plan and write must be executed by this man. He and his buddies will be the first to pay for your mistakes. Do your job well — futures depend on it." (Figure 1). I wanted staff officers who could do their jobs well and a headquarters that was ready to

plan and execute operations when the companies needed that headquarters. I needed the headquarters to be training at the same time as the companies, not waiting for us to eventually get to battalion training. I had my executive officer begin staff training on the military decision-making process (MDMP), but as soon as possible, we moved to practical application on a brigade order. Our first iteration of MDMP was on a simple brigade daily fragmentary order that required us to deconflict gunnery ranges with a bike race. Sure, it was overly simplistic, but we hit every required element and my staff came away with an understanding of the process without being lost in the details of a big tactical order. We also developed our base staff products for future MDMP.



**Figure 1. A graphic reminder to the battle-staff officer that mistakes may cause casualties.**

In two years, we participated in two brigade command-post exercises (CPXs), the NTC Leader Training Program and an NTC rotation. Over and above these, I built four battalion training opportunities for myself, including two live dismounted operations in the garrison area, one 40-hour live and virtual exercise incorporating training areas and multiple simulation systems, and a battalion attack using the Close Combat Tactical Trainer (CCTT). On average, we did a battalion operation every quarter, affording me the opportunity to go through the planning process, an orders brief, rehearsals, troop-leading procedures (TLP) at the company level and then execution, including all mission-command nodes. Nobody built these for me; I planned them, briefed them in a quarterly training brief, resourced them and executed them.

I did so knowing that in each case, I was impacting the companies by cutting into what they believed to be their training time. I knew I was asking them to do collective tasks they may not have trained. To me, the gain in

effectiveness of the battalion as a headquarters more than offset the loss of training time at company level and below, particularly when they were doing tactical tasks during my training time anyway.

Regarding rehearsals, I'm a firm believer in "FM rehearsals." I've used them at the company, squadron and brigade level, and I continued to use them during battalion command. Having taken a backbrief from subordinates, I understood their scheme of maneuver and didn't need to hear it again during the combined-arms rehearsal (CAR). The purpose of the CAR is to validate that the operation is synchronized and understood. It is also a good time to highlight friction. Therefore we should rehearse those areas where units rub up against each other in the form of maneuver, passages of lines, direct fire-control measures, medevac, etc.

We don't need a laydown of the company scheme of maneuver and a repeat of "my task and purpose is. ..." What better way of rehearsing the operation than to actually execute the operation on a terrain model with all participants "keying the net," making their transmissions and indicating the net they are speaking on. This reinforces net discipline, gets all involved accustomed to speaking on the net, and generates familiarity with whether the tactical-operations center (TOC), tactical command post, commander or S-3 (operations) is taking/submitting reports and when that shifts. It also validates synchronization or highlights the lack thereof.

***Lesson: If you want a trained battalion, you will probably have to train it yourself. Training events include the orders process from start to finish. Put events on the calendar and protect them.***

## TACSOP

Not long after I assumed command, my battalion was off-ramped from the planned Afghanistan rotation. We were told we would shoot gunnery and then go to NTC for a DATE rotation. As such, the battalion's TACSOP for Operation New Dawn was now irrelevant. Nobody had a useful DATE-focused TACSOP available, so I decided to write our own, based heavily on old products from my lieutenant and captain days. We published each card as soon as it was done, and fairly quickly built a real TACSOP. My intent was to get the bulk of it done before we went to the field for platoon and company situational training exercise (STX) before going to NTC, and we were successful. After NTC, we updated it and continued to add new products throughout my command, including battalion-maneuver battle drills.

***Lesson: If you want a TACSOP (or plans, gunnery or garrison SOP), you may have to write and validate it one card at a time.***

## RDSP

RDSP is how you recognize threats or opportunities emerging on the battlefield, understand how you need to adjust your plan, make decisions and then synchronize the new plan. This process is difficult to train but important to incorporate. I incorporated RDSP in two CPXs by injecting changed circumstances on the staff at the end-of-exercise (endex), requiring them to plan a hasty frago while I released the companies to start recovery. What's important is understanding the idea that the staff must stay engaged during the operation. They must look for indicators that something has changed. Given enough planning time, the staff can identify likely points at which RDSP might be required and identify them as decision points, branches or sequels. Even if we don't have that time, it is critical that the battle captain, S-3 and S-2 (intelligence) are alert to indicators of pending opportunities or threats to alert the executive officer.

***Lesson: Units must learn to identify threats and opportunities. They must subsequently take action to synchronize a new plan.***

## Daily dozen

Units focus on what is tracked and reported. TOCs and company CPs can take a huge load off the commander by tracking to completion those things the commander has directed to occur. With that in mind, I established a "Warhorse Daily Dozen" as a pre-mission checklist of actions for platoons and companies. Subordinate units were directed to report completion prior to line of departure. It included both routine activities – such as orders, rehearsals and boresight – and mission-specific requirements such as the status-of-obstacle efforts.

As we prepared for an upcoming mission, at any time companies would report completion of the various requirements. Any final updates were due prior to execution. Before movement, the TOC would call me with an

update on who was not complete. Tracking requirements empowers the TOC's battle noncommissioned officer (NCO) to gather data on mission readiness, and it allows the commander to immediately see who is delinquent both by the tracking charts in the TOC or over the radio. It was initially a struggle to implement, but the team got on board and embraced it.

***Lesson: If it is important to you, the TOC should track it to allow you to see yourself. Establish a standard list of reportable items and supplement them with mission-specific variables as necessary.***

### **Actions on contact and battle/crew drills**

For me, everything platoons do is a battle drill, whether that is changing formation, establishing a support-by-fire (SBF) or executing a contact drill. It is the platoon leader's responsibility to understand the situation and apply the correct drill. Company commanders are responsible for writing orders that put platoons in the right place to execute the right battle drills. Platoon leaders are responsible for recognizing the need for, and execution of, the correct drill.



**Figure 2. The crewmen of Headquarters 60 practice crew evacuation during crew training. (Photo by COL Esli Pitts)**

First among equals are the battle drills for actions on contact, which were codified in my battalion TACSOP with separate cards for each drill. Every officer in the battalion had to memorize the four steps to actions on contact as I learned them:

- Deploy and report;
- Develop the situation;
- Recommend a course of action (CoA); and
- Execute a CoA.

I have specifically deviated in Step 3, which was originally “select a CoA.” In my opinion, the subordinate in contact does not have the right to select and execute a CoA that may obligate his higher headquarters to fight in a particular way. It is the responsibility of the subordinate to develop the situation, report accurately and recommend a CoA while the senior leader makes that decision based on “the bigger picture” and prioritization of assets.

Rapid and violent execution of drills allows platoons to survive contact and buys time to figure out what to do next. Everything from establishing a battle position to crew evacuation, reloading tube-launched optically-tracked wire-guided missiles or preparing vehicles for recovery is a drill.

Note I also referenced crew drills, which is the most overlooked echelon of training. We think crew training consists of gunnery, and then we put four qualified crews together in a platoon without taking the time to train those individual crews how to fight their vehicles. To mitigate this, I allocated one of our few real training opportunities to the companies for them to train at crew level. We followed that up with a week in the field for platoon training that culminated in a platoon STX requiring some or all of each platoon to demonstrate proficiency in multiple drills (Figure 3). Also, we used the CCTT as often as we could. We also conducted maneuver physical training (PT) in the morning and focused on platoon maneuver and battle drills. (See the April-June 2015 issue of **ARMOR** magazine for details.)

Tactical tasks and battle drills	
Receive frago	Change formations
Issue warning order	Contact drill
Issue frago	Action drill
Conduct rehearsals	Passive air-defense measures
Conduct pre-combat checks/pre-combat inspections	Salvo vehicle smoke grenades
Move tactically	Change movement techniques
Conduct forward-passage-of-lines	React to indirect fires
Occupy SBF	React to engine or turret fire
Occupy attack-by-fire	Conduct crew evacuation
Plan platoon direct-fire control measures	Conduct medevac
Assault	Cross-level Class V
Call for fire	Manage muzzle-reference sensor at platoon level
Plan smoke	Conduct in-stride/assault breach
React to anti-tank guided missile	React to electronic warfare/jamming
Consolidate and reorganize	Prep vehicle for recovery
Submit reports	Conduct emergency resupply
Integrate dismounts	Emplace target-reference points

Prepare hasty defense	React to chemical attack
Provide security/operations security	

**Figure 3. Tactical tasks and battle drills.**

One of the most critical drills for me, at all echelons from platoon to battalion, was the breach. We spent a significant amount of time learning the breach, including in professional development, and during platoon and company training events. Incorporating breach considerations into most training events resulted in thorough grounding in the operation.

**Lesson: *Everything is a drill. Actions on contact is first among equals. Know it.***

## Integration of fires

By definition, maneuver includes fire support – or at least the potential for it. My expectation was that we would always have a plan for fires at every echelon from platoon to battalion. I reinforced this during maneuver PT and in every training event. Early on, I had an officer professional-development session consisting of a fire-coordination exercise (FCE) in a large classroom. It was apparent that we didn’t know how to effectively integrate fires. To improve at this task, I attached my fire-support officers (FSO) to their supported companies most of the time. We ran another FCE and conducted a leader certification/competition in the Guardfist trainer as part of a week-long leader-training event. Also, we emphasized “do not move without fires” in every training opportunity. I did caveat that platoons and companies won’t always get fires, but they should still know how to employ them if they do.

My mortar platoon was my asset used to shape the battalion’s fight. Only after that was accomplished was it allocated in support of company maneuver. It was my asset to the extent that I occasionally called missions to them myself just to expedite the process. I trained on this every time they were in the field, including at NTC. This might have been unusual, but it was my asset, so I conditioned the mortars and the FSO to the priority to get the mortars into the fight. I wanted them to shoot where I wanted them to focus. Because I expected them to fire, and fire a lot, I allocated them a truck to manage their own resupply for all training missions at home station and at NTC.

**Lessons:**

- ***Develop a habit of always integrating fires.***
- ***Mortars shape the battalion fight first and then enable the companies in their fights.***

## Incorporation of attack aviation

I followed two guiding principles in the planning and employment of attack aviation. First, if attack aviation was allocated to me, I kept it as a battalion asset to shape the fight for the companies rather than enabling the companies. Despite that, I would allocate either live or notional aviation assets during platoon and company training to get them familiar with employing it. Secondly, it is more appropriate to mass attack aviation at the right time and place to kill the enemy than it is to have long-term coverage up at non-essential times.

**Lesson: *Mass attack aviation assets at the right time and place to kill the enemy in support of the battalion fight. Don’t push them lower and don’t dilute assets to provide long-duration “coverage.”***

## Specialty-platoon training

Focusing first on the line companies, it took me a while to turn to the scouts’ and mortars’ training plans. We started by putting an external evaluation on the calendar for each platoon with enough time available to train for it. Working with key leaders, we established training objectives and then built a concept for each platoon. The model was a 96-hour exercise during which the platoon received a battalion order on the first day and then participated in confirmation and back briefs, CAR, fires and sustainment rehearsals. On the second day, they continued platoon TLPs and conducted mounted rehearsals. The third day consisted of a battalion attack, transitioning to a hasty defense in the evening.

All elements but the platoon were replicated by scripted radio traffic. That night, they received a frago directing a battalion counterattack to occur on the fourth day.

A hot wash with the platoon leadership and the observers/coaches would identify the areas to retrain, and those would be incorporated into the counterattack mission on the fourth morning with a final after-action review on the afternoon of the fourth day. We wrote a battalion operations order that worked for both platoons. I provided a cadre of officers and NCOs from the S-3 shop (including fires) to run the exercise, which primarily consisted of replicating battalion operational traffic and calls for fire. We used scouts or mortars from an adjacent battalion for the actual evaluations. Ultimately, we completed two external evaluations of both platoons.

Findings:

- **Scouts:** Don't forget the sniper for the scout platoon. While I planned to have a well-trained sniper section, I did not achieve it. This was partly due to my own neglect and partly to manning shortfalls. If you want a sniper section, man it, protect it and ensure that it gets training time. I was not successful.
- **Mortars:** I worked extensively with my mortar platoon. For success, you must share your vision and expectations for mortars with the platoon leader and the FSO. It's also important for all to understand the types of missions they can shoot and to ensure training is conducted for all of them. A well-designed exercise evaluation ensures that the platoon gets multiple repetitions, both dry and live, for all missions you expect them to fire. In my opinion, it is a mistake to use the mortars to support Table XII because that training is highly scripted, and you can achieve the training effects of integrating fires without actually firing canned mission data.

## Medevac

The first leader professional development (LPD) I conducted for the battalion was in *ground* medevac. I say "I" because it literally was me teaching the class. Even my medical-platoon leader did not understand how to do it. The reality was that the frame of reference for essentially every officer and senior NCO in the battalion was air medevac.

Medevac training can be broken into several component parts. Company leaders have to get proficient at point-of-injury (PoI) and casualty-collection-point (CCP) operations. Company medics need to get proficient at evacuation of crewmen from combat vehicles, treatment and triage at CCPs and evacuation to the forward or main aid station (MAS). Aid stations need proficiency in triage, treatment and evacuation to the ambulance exchange point. Lastly, the combat-trains CP and S-1 need practice at tracking casualty flow and requesting replacements. All this requires a high volume of casualties. Unfortunately companies usually want to get their casualties back quickly, and trainers are hesitant to inject too many casualties. A few of the selected casualties are evacuated further than the company CCP.

Given a short amount of time before NTC and limited institutional knowledge, I did the following things:

- Conducted the previously mentioned LPD;
- Addressed medevac in our TACSOP with markings and standards for PoI and CCP; and
- Included medevac in our sustainment rehearsals.

Once we set baseline standards, we included medevac in all field training, including a directed mounted medevac rehearsal during Gunnery Table (GT) XII. The most complex event was during company STX lanes. On the final day, during four simultaneous company lanes, I directed that we conduct medevac until 70 casualties had been evacuated to the aid station and the S-1 shop had correctly documented all of them. It was their one opportunity to battle-track casualties in the volume I anticipated taking at NTC. I also ensured that all damaged vehicles underwent recovery or battle-damage assessment and repair as necessary before I allowed endex.

After NTC, we turned to improving the quality of training for the medics. During a random training event, I had my crew call for a medic to come evacuate us. After taking nearly 30 minutes to evacuate myself and my crew (the buttoned-up driver being the primary issue), we trained all medics on how to evacuate crewmen from combat vehicles.

Next, we programmed them for an external evaluation. We put the medic platoon's MAS in the field and exercised the treatment squad in receiving, triaging and treating a high volume of casualties while also jumping periodically to simulate participating in a battalion attack. Then we did another evaluation, this time with the full platoon and using the line medics to bring casualties to the aid station.

The final training event prior to my departure from the battalion was a company-level medevac live-fire. We used the battalion's GT XII range, but instead of running a platoon down four lanes, we ran a section from each platoon down a lane under the platoon sergeant. During the range, we injected casualties and, while the commander "fought" from the range tower, the first sergeant managed assets to evacuate crews from the tracks, treat at the Pol, move to the CCP and evacuate them to the aid station. This was done while nearby combat vehicles continued to fight.

## How to fight

I thought it was important to coach company-grade officers how to fight their organizations. Some of that instruction was the sum total of all the aforementioned focus areas. Understanding the fundamentals was big, but the intangibles are even more important. I vividly recall as a mortar-platoon leader listening to how my commander fought the battalion at NTC. I decided I wanted to fight like he did. Moreover, I had a theory of how leaders should fight their organizations, and I wanted to pass that vision on to my platoons and companies, none of whom had ever heard of a battalion fighting in the field. In the field, particularly during GT XII, I dropped onto the platoon or company net and added as much of a load on the platoon leaders as they could handle, and then added one more thing. Some could handle more than others, and they became my specialty-platoon leaders and executive officers.



**Figure 4.** *The battalion stages before conducting the NTC task-force live-fire exercise. (Photo by COL Esli Pitts)*

Time spent listening to lieutenants and captains fight their organizations and then coaching them was invaluable. I wasn't above pulling the platoon leader's driver out of the simulator in CCTT and jumping in myself (much to their surprise) to drive for them and listen to them fight their platoons.

What did we talk about? We talked about:

- The balance of control and reporting between platoon leader and platoon sergeant;
- When to speak and when to listen on the net;
- How much talking is too much talking;
- When to engage, direct or redirect on the radio, vs. how much we can lead just by monitoring;
- How much leaders physically do rather than supervise.

The key is that, first, you have to understand how you want to fight your organization, and then you have to articulate that to your subordinates. Another important teaching point was that leaders who talked too much were



unable to think ahead. Because of that, my expectation is that platoon sergeants, and both battalion and company executive officers report up, freeing platoon leaders and commanders to fight their organizations.

My vision was of an old stagecoach driver. As long as the horses (or tanks, platoons or companies) are running down the right trail, there is no need for the driver to do anything but loosely hold the reins and watch. It's only when something changes that the driver needs to grab the reins and take control. In the same way, a platoon leader, company commander or battalion commander can just sit back and watch the mission unfold, listening to the crosstalk. Only when something big happens or when changes are required does the leader need to key the net.

***Lesson: Leaders eavesdrop, listen to the crosstalk and interject only when necessary. Leaders who always talk are not always hearing.***

I've spent the last two years at JMRC watching a variety of U.S. and multinational battalions fight in one of the most complex training environments available. What I've seen has validated that I focused on the right things while in battalion command. My time at JMRC also added significantly to my thoughts on the topic.

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***Figure 5. A plow tank from Dragoon Company conducts a breach during a platoon STX. Note the loaded vehicle smoke grenades. (Photo by COL Esli Pitts)***