

Maximizing Combat Training Center Rotations

by CPT Robert W. Stillings Jr.

As the Army refocuses brigade combat teams (BCTs) on the complexities of decisive action (DA), it has become evident that some capabilities have atrophied.

It has generally been accepted that it will take time for the Army to transition from counterinsurgency (COIN) or advise-and-assist brigade (AAB) missions to conducting DA operations. This acceptance stems from realism among leaders of the tasks that must be accomplished to execute the transition. It also comes from an understanding that our country faces a decade-long generational gap between high-intensity conflict/full-spectrum operations and DA with COIN in the middle.

Speed it up!

It is critical that we compress the timeline as much as possible as the Army, and specifically our BCTs, make this transformation because our future adversaries have not been embroiled in a decade-long COIN fight. They have been honing their warfighting capabilities and desire to see our transformation take as long as possible. Therefore we *must* alter how the Army uses combat training center (CTC) rotations to compress the transformation timeline and prepare our Army to fight and win our nation's future wars.

The cost and time commitments, along with the yearly changeover of people and command teams, make it imperative that CTC rotations no longer train only one BCT. The CTC rotations must train one BCT directly and the other 29 BCTs indirectly.

Captured knowledge

The CTCs are not a "final exam" for battalion and brigade commanders, as was the case in the 1980s and '90s, nor should they be in our Army's current state. The Army stands to gain much more from the CTCs actually being training centers. As such, the lessons-learned from CTCs should be available for public consumption. In fact, those lessons-learned should not only be available for public consumption, they should be *forced* public consumption (within the Army). This is a matter of training readiness.

Lessons-learned at CTCs are captured in a myriad of ways. Observers/coaches/trainers (O/C/Ts) capture photos at platoon through brigade levels each rotation. These photos depict things units do well and things they need to improve. The O/C/Ts also use after action-reviews (AARs) and storyboards to summarize battle periods or phases. There are more large-scale AARs done throughout the CTC rotation.

Also, there are "Star Wars" video presentations. They show how enemy and friendly elements moved, where decisive points were and how enablers were used. The Star Wars presentations have a voice-over to orient viewers as they "walk" through the battle. These videos are normally, by far, the best representation of how a battle went and what action or inaction led to the eventual outcome. Finally, at the end of each rotation, Operations Group builds a post-rotational packet for the brigade and battalion commanders to take home.

However, lessons-learned by the BCT serving as the rotational training unit and lessons-learned by the Operations Group (because the O/C/Ts will admit to learning every day) end where they started: at the CTC. This is a problem because it means no other units or leaders see those lessons, and individuals in those BCTs quickly (or at least eventually) leave the unit. This outcome is simply not acceptable as our Army continues its transformation and fights with budget constraints. It costs \$15.5 million just to get a unit to a CTC. For that dollar amount, our Army must get more from the experience.

Spread knowledge

There are two ideal venues to achieve this. First is Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) at the Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning, GA. It is the only place in the Army where there is a conglomerate of experienced maneuver officers.

MCCC should be able to build a course comprised of documents, images and videos they put together in coordination with the CTCs. I emphasize that *MCCC* builds the product to ensure that they don't get watered-down versions and that course materials provide the information future company commanders need. This course should

be specific, not generic, and point at things you should or shouldn't do (e.g., good vs. bad camouflage, boresighting, tactical-assembly area location, use of terrain, formations, gaps in the screen line, security, fires planning, engineer efforts, casualty evacuation, tempo, recon-planning guidance). With MCCC building the product, it would also be possible to incorporate tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) from the opposing-force elements at the CTCs to identify best practices and enemy TTPs.

Future company commanders should be able to learn via images and AARs what previously worked and what did not so that, as they train their formations, they can make new mistakes that progress the Army – instead of encountering old pitfalls. This could potentially provide the best way to proactively close the generational gap.

There is also the advantage of unforeseen possibilities when small-group instructors at MCCC begin interfacing with O/C/Ts and incorporate advancing lessons-learned into daily work with their small groups. The possibilities could be endless when a relationship is cultivated that allows our most highly achieving former company commanders to teach our future company commanders by using lessons-learned from our current company commanders on the “battlefield” at CTCs. Worst-case scenario: our future maneuver company commanders leave with a chapter on a disk that they can refer back to once they are in command or when they get word of a pending CTC deployment.

The second venue (or opportunity) to spread the knowledge gained at the CTCs is to get it into the hands of all battalion and brigade commanders across the Army. This could be done as a breakout group during the Pre-Command Course or simply by mailing the “post-rotational take home packets” to the other 29 brigade commanders in the Army. The Army's initial reaction is to protect the units and commanders as the lessons-learned may embarrass them; an answer is to “sterilize” the packets, removing bumper numbers and unit identifiers from AARs and images. Our goal as an Army is to get better as quickly as possible as a team, not as individual units. Thirty lethal brigades are better than one.

Be ‘real’

There is simply too much knowledge being gained and lessons-learned happening at the CTCs to fail to pass them on to our other units. However, this method only works if the products being developed are specific, credible and not watered down due to too much review or a lack of candid observations. This method would also allow lessons-learned to get into the hands of artillery battalions, sustainment battalions and other enablers. Battalion and brigade commanders could then incorporate them into home-station training, professional development, leader-training programs or as they deem necessary to help improve their unit's training readiness.

This method would also help solve the long-standing uphill battle we face with Army National Guard units. They have significant constraints on training time and dollars. Distributing lessons-learned from the CTCs would be a creative way to maximize their training and knowledge without any more dollars or training time being allocated.

Regardless of which method we use, or if there is a different one developed, it is imperative that we maximize training value at the CTCs as an enabler to compress the transition timeline from COIN/AAB to DA. Units arriving at CTCs often make the same mistakes as the unit before them, regardless of the echelon of command. While it is important that each unit be able to make mistakes at the CTC and learn from them, it is equally as important for the Army as a whole to progress past the mistakes its units make. If the Army can make “progressive” mistakes while maintaining ideas that are working, there is no downside.

Spreading ideas may be nothing more than a battalion commander giving a group of company commanders tips about what to expect from a CTC rotation. But there could be more. The potential could be limitless for the Army's maneuver force if lessons-learned were implemented in training and schools instead of being shelved.

CPT Robert Stillings Jr. serves in Current Operations (G-33), U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous assignments include commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 2nd Battalion, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), Fort Irwin, CA; commander, Killer Troop, 2-11th ACR, Fort Irwin; rear detachment commander, 1st Battalion, 3rd ACR, Fort Hood, TX; squadron S-4, 1-3 ACR, Fort Hood; and support-platoon leader, 1-3 ACR, Forward Operating Base Q-West, Iraq. His military schools include College of Naval Command and Staff and MCCC. CPT Stillings has a bachelor's of arts degree in psychology from Washington University, St. Louis, MO.