

Command Under the Pandemic

by CPT Nathan Sitterley

Charles Dickens said it best in *The Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. ...” This article will shed some light on the friction points, risks to mitigate, creative solutions and lessons-learned I encountered as a troop and company commander March 2020-June 2021 during the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic is not over, many Americans, including Soldiers, see light at the end of the tunnel.

To codify this into some sort of after-action review, I will break this article down into three phases of operation. Phase 1 begins with the introduction of COVID and ends with the quarantine process. Phase 2 begins with the lessening of restrictions and ends with my troop’s return from National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 20-09. Phase 3 begins with readjusting to the COVID posture and ends with the introduction of Operation People First.

This article will demonstrate how a troop gathered lessons-learned and implemented them throughout garrison functions and during training exercises.

Phase 1: start of COVID

Apache Troop, 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, was coming off its rotational day March 17, 2020, for a platoon live-fire lane when it got word that COVID had spread to the United States. That news would change the course of history and the operational environment as we knew it for the next couple of years. The following week we started hearing the term health-protection condition levels. The term “essential personnel” was also implemented.

Our guidance from higher was to have no more than 10 percent of the squadron on duty at one time. Soldiers would not work for more than four hours during a duty day. Physical training would be conducted at the individual level. We would suspend all collective training, including weapons qualification, ammunition pick-up/turn-in, physical-fitness tests, driver training and scheduled services.

Minimizing contact. Our main purpose was to prevent the spread and risk of COVID cross-contamination of Fort Carson, CO, and 4th Infantry Division Soldiers, civilians and families. We wanted to protect the force by minimizing contact of Soldiers at work and to ruthlessly enforce social-distancing standards. Overall we wanted to remain isolated to prevent contact with the Colorado Springs community and adhere to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

It would work in theory except for one small issue: our scheduled rotation to NTC in May 2020. In light of these events, however, our brigade had to postpone the NTC rotation until August 2020.

We discovered that technology like video chat and social media were accessible to most Soldiers in our formation. Therefore we used it as much as we could to prevent Soldiers from personal contact, therefore contracting the virus, as well as to check on their welfare.

However, there were still daily physical tasks to complete. To this end, a deliberate troops-to-tasks plan had to be created for the brigade commander to assume risk for activities conducted and not conducted.

There were 10 priority daily tasks to be accomplished by the troops during this phase:

1. The staff-duty officer in charge/noncommissioned officer (NCO) in charge inspected common areas, including the motorpool, company offices and barracks.
2. Charge-of-quarters personnel performed courtesy patrols near our squadron footprint.
3. Sick-call operations were ongoing at the adjacent consolidated clinic.
4. Classes of supplies were processed and picked up at the supply-support activity, especially our Class IX repair parts.
5. Soldier Readiness Program tasks were to continue at the site designated on Fort Carson.
6. We were to install all parts on hand for deadline pacing items.
7. We suspended in-person performance counseling; we distributed these out and used whatever media platform was best to communicate.

8. The daily synch occurred twice daily to maintain accountability.
9. Leadership professional development (LPD) and classes occurred via a network media-sharing platform.
10. Physical training used tools like Strava or Garmin to track workouts.

Changes in personal and work life. My guidance as a commander was to have no alcohol consumption until the end of the duty day. Although this guidance was pre-COVID, it was now stated in COVID counseling for those who weren't considered mission-essential during this period. Soldiers were still expected to train and potentially work within a given four-hour window.

My living room became my office. My basement became my gym. My wife became my work associate. It was hard to differentiate work and personal life now that work had actually moved into the home. My experience was like many others.

This was a high-stress point in the pandemic. The troop had Zoom calls twice a day. The squadron S-2 updated command teams and staffs daily with the number of infections and deaths. There were no solutions, and there was no end in sight.

Essential-personnel readiness conditions remained for about a month. Restrictions started to ease at the end of April/early May 2020. Most Soldiers came back to work then, with a few exceptions for those with high-risk conditions (for example, family members who were older than 65 or who had immunocompromising diseases).

Adapting at range

Our M4 qualification would be the catalyst to show everyone we could train again; the difference was that the training had a lot more mitigation measures in place.

The amount of effort and planning for the M4 qualification required more support than expected. Medics were positioned at our bus pick-up location to take temperatures and to take roll call on who was coming on and off the bus. We separated personnel so they only sat one Soldier per bench. We had the bus driver sanitize the bus after each usage. Each Soldier was provided a magazine for his/her specific use. The Soldiers maintained their own magazine throughout the qualification.

The range had four stations.

- **Station 1:** The reception location/staging area. This was where the bus dropped off and picked up Soldiers. We had an NCO enforce six feet of separation to ensure COVID compliance.
- **Station 2:** The retraining and concurrent training station. This was where the dime and washer drill was being used to train and retrain our Soldiers. We placed another NCO at this location to ensure COVID compliance.
- **Station 3:** The ammo point. This location had one person in the ammo shack to distribute ammo as well as a medic to check temperatures of Soldiers at the range.
- **Station 4:** The range itself. Safeties maintained their mask-wearing. Soldiers who were shooting had to take their mask off because it would fog up their eye protection. This was the risk I was willing to assume based on safety. I did not want our Soldiers shooting if they could not clearly identify their target. The Soldiers were spread out at a minimum of six feet and with one safety per three Soldiers.

The range was scripted and rehearsed and had no issues until the very last group. A Soldier started to feel symptomatic with fever and chills. I then realized that we lacked an area to quarantine Soldiers on the range if they started feeling sick.



Figure 1. CPT Nathan Sitterley conducts a training meeting with BG John Myer III, deputy commanding general of maneuver, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO, May 7, 2020. BG Myer observed Sitterley's troop during a troop training meeting. One purpose for this observation was to observe how unit commanders planned and prepared before large collective training, as well as for NTC, with COVID restrictions. (U.S. Army photo by LTC Brent Chastain)

Lessons-learned in quarantine

Three lessons were learned from this first range. Lesson 1: Have a designated area for symptomatic Soldiers. This would potentially prevent the spread of COVID to a group of Soldiers. Lesson 2: Have medics begin to screen Soldiers coming off the range and throughout the range time. This would ensure the condition in which Soldiers entered the range was generally the same. Lesson 3: Have a designated transportation vehicle for symptomatic Soldiers. This would ensure that he or she did not get back on the bus full of Soldiers and expose them all to the disease.

The main goal of this was to capture lessons-learned and gain knowledge about how to better prepare for future training events as we began to gear up for NTC.

Phase 2: looser restrictions, NTC rotation

Phase 2 is broken down into two subphases. The first phase (Phase 2A) was to rebuild our team while protecting the force's health. The second phase (Phase 2B) was to get to NTC and accomplish our mission at 80-percent capacity.

There were three key tasks I wanted to accomplish during this phase. Key task 1: Conduct team- to section-level training. Key task 2: Be postured for expeditionary deployment via rail to NTC. Finally, key task 3: Fight the enemy as best as we could during our NTC rotation.

We were guided by four principles in our brigade: Be able to see yourself, understand your higher headquarters, fight for terrain and fight the enemy. Those four tenets helped shape the outcome of any mission we faced.

Phase 2A: I was able to see the turbulence in our formation. Specialists were now team leaders. Team leaders were now squad leaders, and squad leaders were now platoon sergeants. We wanted to start our training glidepath at team level to build cohesion at the lowest level. We called this Operation Apache Stakes.

Teams had to maneuver to different points during 24 hours to train and execute team-level tasks. This was similar to a cavalry spur ride. The purpose was to train teams to be able to execute small-unit tactics such as caring for a tactical combat casualty, establishing an observation post, calling for fire, reacting to chemical attack, maintaining vehicles, boresighting a remote weapon system and optics, and navigating terrain.

This training allowed us to create a course where not everyone was together training, but everyone was training together. It was collective training at the team and individual level. Social distancing was enforced as well as the mask policy. Temperatures were checked, and Soldiers were simultaneously getting acclimated to the extremely high temperatures predicted for our summer month at NTC.

We moved on from this training and began to conduct team- and squad-level certification under blank conditions. It was imperative that each team carry forward its lessons-learned from Operation Apache Stakes to better tackle an area-reconnaissance and operations-establishment mission conducted at squad level. We incorporated several lessons-learned from the first M4 rifle range we conducted after COVID hit, taking necessary precautions to ensure limited contact with main-post personnel while we were in the field for five days.



Figure 2. Alpha Troop plans its first operations order at NTC. (U.S. Army photo by CPT Nathan Sitterley)

Where to rest?

Our newest dilemma was that Soldiers needed to sleep somewhere at NTC while social-distancing. We wanted to create a standing operating procedure (SOP) for how to organize at NTC. We marked off areas with pickets and engineer tape at least waist high. We planned enough room for Soldiers to spread out. They put their rucks in between each other to create a makeshift wall about six feet apart from their neighbors.

We also only allowed two people to sleep inside the Stryker. The driver of the Stryker would sleep in the driver's hull, and the vehicle commander or gunner would sleep in the back on the bench or in a hammock.

Our medical-evacuation vehicle would be off limits to Soldiers except for our medics to ensure it was clean and ready to act as a COVID transport vehicle. We rehearsed this drill and had the senior medic talk through this procedure as well.

For transportation, we had to get creative. We had our driver and gunner inside the Stryker's hatch. The vehicle commander was out of the hatch. The back-left air guard was out of the hatch, and we had the rest of the Soldiers masked up inside.

We even had standardized cards from the brigade distributed throughout the formation. As per our SOP, each Soldier wore one mask and carried a spare in their cargo pocket. All Soldiers were issued pocket-sized hand sanitizers and a quick-reference card for symptoms and battle drills for COVID.

Our culminating training prior to NTC was a Mortar Training and Evaluation Program event. We executed this training in July during one of the hottest summers in more than a decade at Fort Carson. Short rounds and misfires occurred, but we pressed on. In the end, our troop certified the entire squadron's mortars section by shooting about 700 rounds during 100 fire missions.

To maintain COVID compliance, our two gunners were outside the hatch when the squad leader gave commands. Masks were worn when in close proximity. We also conducted temperature checks twice daily, and we had a quarantine tent should anyone become symptomatic.

This was a five-day process that included unpacking and repackaging ammunition and dunnage. The lesson-learned was to have a government vehicle or non-tactical vehicle. This allowed immediate transportation of COVID-symptomatic personnel to and from the range, but it didn't impact training assets like the medical-evacuation vehicle.

Phase 2B: The pack-out for NTC was a significant emotional event – especially if the pack-out was also considered a deployment-readiness exercise. However, during our COVID mission-essential readiness conditions, some of our leaders were able to get into troop schools/classes like “unit movement officer” and “container control officer,” etc. Therefore we were postured to conduct rail-load and expeditionary-deployment operations at troop and squadron level.

All troop commanders in the squadron were placed in charge of nodes. From the motorpool cargo-staging area all the way to the rail yard, commanders ensured that proper safety precautions were used and COVID mitigation guidelines were followed.

Our time to get tested for COVID arrived seven days before we went to NTC. After getting tested, we had to restrict our movement to ensure we were not exposed to the outside community. To make this process more efficient, our brigade divided us into multiple groups for testing by using departure times; it took about seven days to get everyone tested.

Our advance party was postured to begin to move and stage vehicles for all of us at Fort Irwin, CA. Once we arrived, we were told that our unit was going to be the first to try to conduct an expeditionary reception, staging and onward integration while inside “the box.” This was where things got interesting.

Most of our Soldiers stayed near our containers at a makeshift container yard. We were able to scrounge up camouflage nets from our Strykers to create improvised shelters that would temporarily deny the beating California sun. Morale was high because we had worked so long for this moment.

Ice coolers started arriving at all units. We were able to store ice within our coolers. It would not be surprising to know that we drank the icewater together. Feel free to use your imagination for our fight to remain socially distant and adhere to COVID guidelines at NTC.

Our troop mainly stayed together in the box. Not one of our Soldiers tested positive for COVID because we had trained so much together already before we came to NTC. We fought hard, broke a lot of equipment, learned a lot of lessons and redeployed to home station during one of the hottest summers at Fort Irwin in decades. Our unit grew strong because we added a different operational environment into the mix as well. The unit was close. I've never felt more proud of my Soldiers, NCOs and officers.

How we prepared for NTC was a different process during the pandemic. We used the book, *The Defense of Hill 781* by James McDonough as a guide. Using Microsoft Teams to display a map and going over the terrain was vital to my platoon leaders when it came to understanding key and restrictive terrain. We did this LPD for four weeks.

Phase 3: Operation People First

There was no playbook for this pandemic. A lot of us were just trying to be creative to take care of our Soldiers. Technology is a great asset when used properly to bring people closer together to share ideas; however,

technology, network mediums and social networks can also deny the ability for leaders to empower and strengthen their subordinates' trust. "Turn on the Global Positioning System tracker on your phone so I can know exactly where you are" was a common phrase.

Back in garrison, commanders tried to do Soldier family-readiness-group activities via digital, social or network-sharing platforms. It got the point across but still lacked the interaction of a face-to-face conversation. We found ways to reach out to our Soldiers' families once a month through Operation People First by contacting their close friends and families.

In March 2021, the new battalion I was with had to send our medics off to support a U.S. Army North mission in Los Angeles, CA. Their mission was to vaccinate some 6,000 people per day. During the 40 days they were deployed, our medics, alongside various agencies, vaccinated about 200,000 people.

Meanwhile, our battalion was still ramping up a collective-training glidepath. We were able to accomplish this through careful calculations of what was the absolute minimum requirement of medic support we needed and what ranges could be mitigated with tactical combat-casualty-care trained personnel. Also, as the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) commander at this time, I gained control of the remaining medics to create a very detailed daily troops-to-tasks plan.

We were able to accomplish a battalion-level training exercise, which included three rifle-company certifications under blank conditions and nine rifle-platoon certifications under live-fire conditions with 10 medics and a physician assistant. The lesson-learned was that if you do the analysis ahead of time, you can posture your entire battalion for success.

It was an extremely stressful time for me as a leader. From dealing with COVID, NTC, Operation People First and two change-of-command inventories, the No. 1 lesson-learned is that social distancing can only work if you maintain some close connections with your friends and families. Going through it alone is never easy.

Our new Soldiers were of course stressed, too. Those who graduated basic training since March 2020 generally only know about operational procedures under COVID restrictions.

Takeaway

I hope this article can provide some insight on some lessons-learned that can be used to better posture a unit for a pandemic operational environment in the future. Those of us who joined the military prior to COVID probably missed Stable Calls, hails and farewells, troop/company/battery-level functions, battalion balls and even our infamous mandatory-fun organizational days. However, by continuing to take the necessary steps and mitigations, we are moving in the right direction to increase unit cohesion and enhance unit morale.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABOLC – Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course

COVID – coronavirus disease

HHC – headquarters and headquarters company

LPD – leadership professional development

MCoE – Maneuver Center of Excellence

NCO – noncommissioned officer
NTC – National Training Center
SBCT – Stryker brigade combat team
SOP – standing operating procedures