Take the Training Wheels Off Your CPX:

The Benefits of a Free-Thinking, Free-to-Win, and Equal-Sized OPFOR

MAJ TOM HAYDOCK

In June 2023, the 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment (Dark Rifles) conducted "Rifle Wrath," a command post exercise (CPX) against a battalion-sized opposing force (OPFOR) that was free thinking and free to win with its own command structure. It was by far the best CPX I've participated in, and I'll never go back to the old way with an OPFOR that obeys nice and tidy force ratios and is kept on a leash by the exercise control (EXCON) cell. CPXs should train staffs to overcome chaos, make decisions faster than the enemy, and employ better tactics; overall, they should be contests of wills where either side can win. The Dark Rifles chose to "take the training wheels off," and we will perform even better during our next CPX. This article will compare the traditional and improved CPX models and share other ways you can improve your exercises to train staffs to master chaos and outthink any opponent to win the next fight.

The Traditional CPX Model

The traditional model, or at least how I've experienced CPXs over the course of my 15 years of service, is underwhelming. The typical CPX usually goes something like this:

• Your unit will probably face an OPFOR that is on either snail or turbo mode, with the speed set to meet your commander's training objectives.

• If your commander wants a nice progression for the staff, the OPFOR will probably be on snail mode, and the staff can manage things well and work out processes. Staff members learn, but they won't learn to master chaos and probably won't be forced to outthink their opponent since it's designed for them to win.

Staff members from 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment conduct the rapid decision-making and synchronization process following a change of mission during a command post exercise in June 2023. (Photo courtesy of author)

• If the commander wants chaos, you'll probably face a turbo-mode OPFOR. This can provide the chaos experience, but it's often a no-win scenario by design and doesn't present the opportunity for the staff to quickly outthink their opponent.

• Similarly, the doctrinal force ratios are typically enforced so that you won't attack a unit more than a third of your size or defend against a force more than three times your size. (Exceptions to this are OPFORs on turbo mode that can often drastically outnumber you).

• The OPFOR "commander" is often a retiree-turned-contractor, Department of the Army Civilian, or an intelligence Soldier whose job is to play OPFOR. The OPFOR commander will know your plan and have great clarity as he or she personally controls things in the simulation software. The EXCON will then control the OPFOR to enable your unit to get after its training objectives.

• The CPX will be largely scripted, run off the master scenario event list (MSEL) that will have actions occur at preplanned times. The MSEL will be designed to allow your unit to accomplish training objectives. Events from the MSEL can be OPFOR driven (like an attack on your unit at a certain time/place), happen with notional adjacent friendly units to simulate the wider scenario, or occur to friendly units like a power loss or jamming situation. They can occur in the simulation (like the OPFOR attack) or in real life (like shutting down generators for power outages). MSELs are useful and should be part of every CPX, but they should replicate things that the simulation software can't (e.g., power outages) and not script the event and constrain free will.

This traditional model provides training wheels for the blue force (BLUFOR). It does this by controlling the chaos, following force-ratio guidelines, and not training the BLUFOR to outthink an opponent that wants to win but can also make mistakes. Fortunately, there is a better way.

The Improved CPX Model

• Free-thinking OPFOR. Don't try and constrain or control the OPFOR with MSELs. Have them fight generally in accordance with the doctrine of the threat they're intended to replicate, but let them make choices, be creative, and even surprise you. A free-thinking OPFOR is an adaptive enemy. It will also show your staff the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of the wargaming process they conducted in the military decision-making process (MDMP).

• Free-to-win OPFOR. You can learn a lot when you lose, and it should steel your resolve to win. When you lose, you have the opportunity to pore over the reasons why you lost, learning what does or doesn't work. The right leadership will focus the staff on actually learning lessons.

• Get rid of traditional force ratios. Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, includes the age-old list of recommended planning ratios that everyone is familiar with.[1] If there is a place to disregard this, it's a CPX where only electrons fight each other. In future large-scale combat operations (LSCO), we are deluding ourselves if we think that we will actually have those kinds of ratios every time we want them. We may never have the textbook force ratios, especially against a numerically superior force like China. We could paralyze ourselves by waiting, ceding the initiative to the enemy and squandering fleeting opportunities.

Having two closely matched forces provides a far better experience for a CPX. If you can beat an opponent of comparable size and capabilities, you can beat them if they ever fall in line with the recommended ratios. The CPX is an opportunity to push yourself — you can restart, try new tactics, and weave in deception. You are wasting an opportunity if you don't push yourself.

• Give the OPFOR a command structure. A CPX introduces friction and fog, and it's better if both sides experience it. Carl Von Clausewitz defined friction as "the concept that differentiates actual war from war on paper." The BLUFOR naturally experiences friction from battling communications hardware, misunderstood orders and reports, and the difficulty of coordinating so many moving pieces. It experiences fog with an incomplete understanding of the enemy, terrain, and friendly units. Give your OPFOR a command
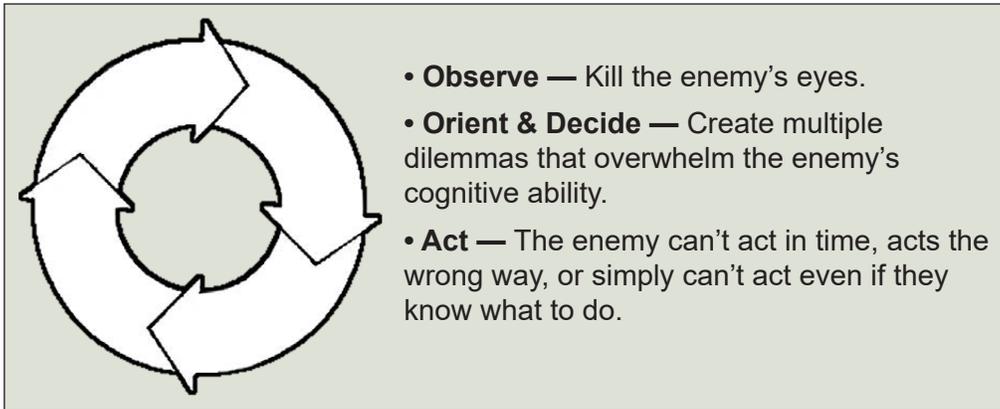
Figure 1 — Techniques for Getting Inside an Enemy's OODA Loop that a CPX Can Facilitate

structure rather than having those personnel just sit in front of the computer playing a video game.

With a command structure, the OPFOR will experience fog and friction — and make mistakes. Most importantly though, it's an opportunity for the BLUFOR to try and overwhelm the enemy's command and control. Let the BLUFOR try and create multiple dilemmas to paralyze the enemy (part of the "disintegrate" defeat mechanism) and overcome the enemy's observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) Loop.[2] Reward BLUFOR for creative thinking — if they request jamming (and higher control approves it), replicate that against the OPFOR by forcing them to turn off radios for a while or some other means.

Further, whoever serves as the OPFOR commander and staff will get real training value from a command structure. They will probably be a secondary training audience, but they will learn how to manage operations, how to think in order to win, and have to really learn how to fight in accordance with the doctrine of the chosen OPFOR. If you do this right, they can get just as much out of the exercise as the BLUFOR.

• Use MSELs for the training objectives that the simulation software can't replicate. As I previously stated, MSELs should be part of the CPX, but they shouldn't be used to constrain the OPFOR. MSELS are great for things like captured enemy prisoners of war (EPWs), power loss, and general things that OPFOR can't replicate for BLUFOR; the converse is true if you are also training the OPFOR. MSELS can do one more thing — they can keep up the tempo, especially in the beginning or end.

Figure 2 — Example MSELs that Won't Constrain the OPFOR

Friction (what OPFOR can't replicate) and **Initial Tempo** (to ease the BLUFOR into the simulation)	**After Culmination Tempo** (to keep things going after culmination)
• Enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) • Power loss • Jamming or similar electronic warfare/cyber effects • Vehicle stuck/rollover • Displaced civilians • Route congestion from other units • Emergency resupply	• Change of mission (for example, winning side receives a new order to conduct a pursuit or exploitation) • Commitment of OPFOR reserve • OPFOR higher headquarters uses unconventional munitions or destroys key infrastructure
* To better replicate real life, both BLUFOR and OPFOR should experience friction MSELs.	

The beginning of the simulation is generally slow paced as one or both sides have to find the other. Using MSELs in that initial period, say a simulated vehicle rollover that requires medical evacuation and maintenance recovery, is a way to allow the staff to practice before things get intense (see Figure 2, left column). These don't constrain the OPFOR and allow the BLUFOR to get a low-key practice rep, and you can regenerate the friendly unit in the software after the situation has been resolved. They also simulate the friction of real life that units need to train for (see Figure 2, left column). Similarly, using MSELS at the end, after one side has culminated, will keep up the tempo and keep units learning and under high stress. And, if you are serious about training the OPFOR, you can do the same for them.

Other Ways to Improve Your CPX

Begin with the mindset of "taking the training wheels off." It's possible to take this too far, but in general most CPXs go the opposite, making things too easy and not replicating the effects of real LSCO. But to win in these operations when we're fatigued and stretched thin by coughing up personnel for liaison duties, security, day/night shifts, etc., we need to take the training wheels off and train hard during the CPX.

Figure 3 illustrates ways to scale your CPX up or down. You can include real-life command post protection exercises or jumps. Also, you can — and most definitely should — surprise your staff.

Surprising the staff is one of the most effective ways to build a capable group of winners who can outthink any adversary. You can give the OPFOR a totally different task organization than what the friendly operation order (OPORD) predicts or give them a mission that BLUFOR isn't expecting (such as having the friendly OPORD assess the enemy to be defending but they have actually been reconstituted and are now attacking). Further, a surprise change of mission, like a follow-on exploitation or pursuit following an attack, will allow you to keep up the tempo (and thus keep the learning going). A change of mission also forces rapid decision-making, tests branch or sequel plans (or emphasizes why you should have them), and exercises current operations and future operations simultaneously. There is tremendous value in surprising your staff — it builds mental agility, forces the staff to reexamine assumptions and mental paradigms, and really trains them to outthink an opponent. If you aren't surprising your staff, you aren't using the potential of a CPX to train for dilemmas at a level as hard or harder than real life.

Conclusion

A CPX should be a major training event for staffs that both improves and tests them. It should teach them to master chaos and outthink the enemy so they can win our nation's next fight. However, the traditional model of the CPX leaves a lot of untapped potential. It usually has an OPFOR that only completes actions dictated by the MSEL in support of training objectives. Thus, on one side we typically have a staff that is conducting what should be a major training event, and on the other is someone who may be halfheartedly playing a video game while following a script. There is a better way.

Figure 3 — Example Good/Better/Best Methodology for Scaling a CPX

	Command and Control (C2)	OPFOR
Best Platinum	Transfer C2 to a secondary command post (combat trains command post [CTCP] or tactical command post [TAC]) and practice comms emissions controls (including blackout windows)	Two different units (for example, 3-161 IN vs 1-161 IN)*
Better Gold	Practice comms emissions controls (including blackout windows)	Day shift (BLUFOR) vs. night shift (OPFOR)
Good Silver	Unrestricted comms	Assistant S2 with a small staff
	*Next level would be two dissimilar formations vs each other (for example, a combined arms battalion vs an infantry battalion, but with terrain that either side can turn to an advantage with creativity).	

The better way is to make the OPFOR and BLUFOR comparable in size and capabilities. We can't expect traditional force ratios very often in future LSCO, and we should always practice harder than real life. There are multiple ways to give the OPFOR a command structure, and doing so not only gives this team a learning experience but allows the BLUFOR to try and outthink the OPFOR. BLUFOR can try and create multiple dilemmas to paralyze the enemy and overcome their OODA Loop, which you can't do with the traditional CPX model. A free-thinking OPFOR, empowered to win, will teach your unit so much more by serving as an adaptive enemy. It will also allow for more effective after action reviews (AARs) as staffs can explore why they lost and judge the effectiveness of their wargaming process.

The sky is the limit with ways to take the training wheels off and make a world-class CPX. Generally, units go too easy in these exercises and end up training at the little league level when we need to train for the major leagues. MSELs should replicate things that the OPFOR can't: friction. MSELs are also good for building or maintaining tempo — in the beginning they can ease the unit into the exercise with events that are easier to manage. At the end, a change of mission or enemy reserve can keep up the tempo, keep the learning going, and present unexpected surprises, like switching to an exploitation or pursuit.

A CPX is an opportunity to train staffs to master chaos and outthink an opponent, not just a training block to check off. To reach the potential, CPXs need an OPFOR that is free thinking, free to win, and has a command structure. The OPFOR should be comparable in size and capabilities, since that's what a peer fight will look like. Following this model revolutionized the CPX experience for the Dark Rifles. Innovative thinking and experimentation are what premier organizations do — join us!

Notes

[1] Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, May 2022, 5-29.
[2] FM 3-0, *Operations*, October 2022, 3-20.

MAJ Tom Haydock is currently a student in the Advanced Military Studies Program within the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He previously served as the executive officer for 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment (Dark Rifles) and was the battalion's S3 prior to that. MAJ Haydock served as the exercise director for Rifle Wrath 2023.

Soldiers from 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment take part in a CPX on 13 June 2023.
(Photo by Joseph Siemandel)