

Improvements You Can Make Before Your Company's CTC Rotation

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In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the king loses his horse in the middle of the battle and shouts, "A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse." At the time, the king needed this small item (a horse) and was willing to trade it for something of great value (his kingdom) to win the battle. This example correlates to conducting military training in that the linchpin to a successful operation can be insignificant at any other time outside of that specific time and space. Finding out that something small is missing at the decisive point of the operation can be the difference between winning and losing.

Training for a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation at the company level is often primarily dictated at higher echelons to meet specific gates required to execute each rotation: platoon and company live-fire exercises (LFXs), gunnery, and brigade fielding training exercises (FTXs). Often, once a unit has entered this cycle, it is a sprint to the always moving finish line, where completion of one training event signals another's start. The lack of company-guided and executed training transfers to a CTC rotation. Opportunities to gain valuable training and lessons learned are often lost because the company did not have sufficient time to prepare for the minor but critical things that would have afforded them valuable time during the rotation. This article identifies those things that companies can do at home station before arriving at a CTC. It encompasses 10 areas: sustainment operations, situational awareness, load plans, company rehearsals, reducing signature, recommendations for additional home-station training, signaling, standard operating procedures (SOPs), orders production, and Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) training.



A Soldier assigned to 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment, 81st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, performs maintenance on an M2 .50 caliber machine gun before an upcoming mission at Fort Irwin, CA, on 10 March 2021. (Photo by SGT Adeline Witherspoon)

Unit:				3rd PLT				SHOOT				MOVE			
PERSONNEL				WEAPONS				S QDs				JBC-P			
ORGANIC				.50 CAL				S				M			
ATTACHED				MK-19				JBC-P				FM			
S QDs				CLU				C31				C32			
LOGSTAT				AT-4				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
CL I DOS O/H				M240				WPN:				WPN:			
RATION CYCLE				60MM				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
CL I (B)				120MM				C33				C34			
CL III AVG/FUEL O/H				CO VIC SLANT				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
CL V O/H				CL V NEEDS				WPN:				WPN:			
.50 CAL				STRYKERS				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
40MM LNK				ICVs				HQ				SHOOT			
7.62 LNK				MCVs				S QDs				JBC-P			
5.56 LNK				LMTVs				JAVs				MOVE			
5.56 LOOSE				HMMVVs				C66				FM			
JAV TUBES				ATTACHMENTS				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
60MM								WPN:				WPN:			
120MM								LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
1st PLT				SHOOT				MOVE				MOVE			
S QDs				JBC-P				FM				FM			
JAVs				M240s				C41				C42			
C11				C12				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
WPN:				WPN:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
LOCATION:				LOCATION:				WPN:				WPN:			
C13				C14				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
WPN:				WPN:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
LOCATION:				LOCATION:				WPN:				WPN:			
2nd PLT				SHOOT				MOVE				LOCATION:			
S QDs				JBC-P				FM				M			
JAVs				M240s				C3/C4				JBC-P			
C21				C22				FAULTS:				FAULTS:			
WPN:				WPN:				TRLR:				TRLR:			
LOCATION:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
C23				C24				CONTACT TRUCK				NOTES:			
WPN:				WPN:				G3112				M			
LOCATION:				LOCATION:				FAULTS:				FM			
C23				C24				TRLR:				LOCATION:			
WPN:				WPN:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			
LOCATION:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:				LOCATION:			

Figure 1 — Example of a Company XO's Laminated Vehicle Status Report

Sustainment Operations

Department of the Army (DA) Form 5988s, Equipment Maintenance and Inspection Worksheet — How does your unit conduct and track field maintenance? Does your company executive officer (XO) print off a stack of DA Form 5988s? A recommendation would be to prepare multiple laminated 5988s with the company's administrative details for each vehicle already printed on the form. When completed, the operator can turn in one laminated 5988 to the company XO. The XO can then use this to fill out his or her own overall company tracker before submitting all 5988s to the forward support company (FSC), dependent on your unit's procedures (see Figure 1). Multiple laminated 5988 forms per vehicle will make supporting the constant maintenance cycle easier and enhance continuous tracking for all the company's vehicles.

Platoon Sustainment — Companies should laminate multiple platoon sustainment request forms. A recommendation is for one to be maintained at the platoon sergeant (PSG) level and one that gets turned into the company XO and supply sergeant. The XO can then keep a company sustainment report to turn directly into the battalion S4 or XO. This action will prove to be a better organizational process than PSGs turning in scraps of paper or providing verbal status reports to the XO.

Pre-Formatted Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P) Messages — Company XOs expend precious time filling in the administrative information when sending JBC-P messages. Instead, take the time before beginning a CTC rotation to prefill out these messages with recipients and class; the messages can then be populated with actual data of supplies when needed.

Situational Awareness

20-Minute Boards — Imagine that you are a rifleman or a tank driver. Some questions you may think about when trying to understand the overall company/battalion/brigade operation include: What you are fighting for and how do you level the common operating picture throughout your company? A solution is to use 20-minute boards — a concept utilized within the airborne community. At the 20-minute warning from exiting the aircraft, small clipboards are passed through the aircraft with operational graphics, re-stated mission, and command and signal information used as a quick refresher for Paratroopers before jumping into the fight. This same concept can prove useful in the mechanized community for dismounts sitting in the back of an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle or Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicle. Soldiers might be sitting in the back for 30 minutes to several hours after the ramp goes up

so a quick refresher of the current situation can ensure a clear operating picture across the formation.

FM Rehearsal Script — Companies often have very little time to disseminate information to the lowest level or conduct effective rehearsals. Companies are often rushed to a REDCON-1 status and then wait several hours for operations to start. An FM rehearsal script can maximize the use of the limited available time. This script allows quick dissemination of information and then lets subordinates talk through their actions throughout the operation. It also ensures that the unit stays organized and limits long transmissions on the company net and broadcasting signal. This rehearsal enables dismounts in the vehicles to listen to the talk and obtain situational awareness and a common operating picture over the company channel.

Load Plans

Load plans are critical, especially when conducting mounted operations. Generally, while maneuvering, it is not the rollover that causes the most significant damage. It is the damage inflicted by unsecured items due to a failed load plan. Units must conduct a deliberate process when developing a known company load plan.

Mounted Operations — Company and platoon leadership need to develop a plan for how and where extra gear, tuff boxes, and extra sustainment items will be stored. There must be a standardized process for the location of sustainment and basic issue items (BII) and how these items are adequately secured within the vehicles across the company. Having standard locations across the company for specific items cuts down the time to search for needed equipment. Additionally, before deployment, take the needed time to organize the placement of supplies and items within the company trains. This effort will allow for more rapid and easier access to necessary items when they are needed.

Dismounted Operations — Identify those aid and litter, enemy prisoner of war (EPW), and Javelin (JAV) teams now! Ensure that they can properly carry all necessary equipment. This pre-operational planning is critical when it comes to the JAV teams. Unless doing a financial liability investigation of property loss (FLIPL) on the command launch unit (CLU) when you return to home station is preferred, decide ahead of time how to transport it effectively while mitigating loss. The proper way is not merely to attach it to the missile and have the youngest Soldier carry it for the entire force-on-force period.

Company Rehearsals

Scripts — Establish a script for company rehearsals and ensure that you include all forces and enablers. The script will enable you to stay on topic and not turn the rehearsal into a two-hour conference. Additionally, ensure that all leaders and Soldiers know who is required to participate in the rehearsal. Have a plan for how security will be



A company commander meets with his platoon leaders in the back of his M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle. (Photos by MAJ Jonathan Buckland)



Figure 2 — Example Company Terrain Model

conducted when leaders meet and a plan if platoons are pulled off the line to conduct their internal rehearsals. Planning for and establishing these procedures before your rotation will provide you additional time to conduct your rehearsals and enhance preparation for the impending operation.

Terrain Model Kits — Have a good company terrain model kit with all the necessary items that allows for a detailed terrain model to be built promptly and properly. Having the prepared kit will prevent the need to run around at the last minute to put together a model with engineer tape and rocks. A pre-built kit will allow the company to add this to the priorities of work as soon as it occupies its assembly area and will substantially aid the commander in providing a detailed operation order.

Reducing Overall Signature

Camouflage Netting — Companies should not begin thinking about camouflage netting placement at the intermediate staging base (ISB). They should do so at home station before deploying to a CTC. Proper mounting and placement of the netting are vital to ensuring that the nets can be safely and effectively stored when moving. Placement will prevent the nets from getting caught in wheels or tracks while ensuring successful camouflaging of vehicles. When mounting camo netting, commanders also need to consider openings for MILES sensor gear to ensure that the net is not blocking their ability to read opposing force (OPFOR) lasers.

Company Headquarters (HQ) Location — When establishing a company HQ location, one of the best practices observed during National Training Center rotations involved having the XO's and 1SG's vehicles park with rear ends facing each other with connected camo netting erected between the two. The configuration allowed for some concealment of the vehicles and a shaded area for meeting with company leadership. The commander's vehicle can easily link into this configuration while still providing it the ability to move more freely to higher headquarters meetings.

Recommendations for Additional Home-Station Training

Maneuver training does not need to occur in vehicles; in fact, that is the "running phase." Companies can start at the "crawl phase" in the motor pool or an open field at the team and platoon level — with walk-throughs to practice crew movement formations and teach different formation changes. Doing these slow and methodical practice sessions will ensure, for example, that the PSG's wingman always knows that he/she is going to the right or left or the gunner learns how to pick up a specific sector of fire immediately. This training will help units to react immediately upon contact and not waste time giving orders. Focusing on target identification (distance, direction, and description) and more rapid target engagements will ultimately increase lethality.

Recovery operations training is best conducted before an actual recovery takes place. During this process, you can ensure that vehicles have the proper BII to prevent stalling operations during engagements. Training on self-recovery once a week, perhaps during motor pool maintenance, will ensure that everyone learns the procedures

before execution. This basic but important training will help keep more mobility platforms in the fight during your operations. Always ensure that you have the correctly rated tow straps or tow bars for your company vehicles and remember to ensure that heat shields are present for self-recovery of tanks.

Engineers — Training with your engineers is essential to success when conducting a breach. Do not meet your engineers for the first time at the combined arms breach rehearsal. Reach out to your counterparts at home station to conduct training together to build the team. This team building can be as easy as conducting physical training (PT) once or twice a month together, or it can be more complex, for example, by having the units conduct suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, and assault (SOSRA) drills using an open field. The SOSRA training will allow the maneuver Soldiers to see what the breach process entails and what the engineers need to complete a successful breach. This training will prevent problems like running on the wrong side of the handrail and getting caught in the concertina wire.

Routines — Good units train routine things routinely. The most sacred time in the Army should be PT time. Whatever happens to the weekly or daily schedules, Soldiers know that at least from 0630-0800, daily PT is going to take place. Use the last 10-15 minutes of PT during the cool-down period to conduct specific training throughout the week. I utilized a model that focused on separate areas each day of the week (Monday: weapons; Tuesday: medical; Wednesday: communications; Thursday: chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear [CBRN] defense; and Friday: tactics). The training was always something very specific and functioned as a quick refresher course. For example, you can cover how to utilize a Joint Chemical Agent Detector (JCAD) or disassemble and assemble an M240 machine gun. The block of instruction also allows junior leaders to teach and demonstrate their future leadership potential to their superiors.

Signaling and Marking

Vehicle Markings — Vehicle markings are extremely important during a CTC rotation for both daytime and nighttime operations. Most units develop a quick solution after the first night movement or fratricide incident and that is too late. Some successful companies have used cut up VS-17 panels on antennas, where the left or right dictates the platoon and the other side represents the position within the platoon. Others, not as effectively, have used 100 mph tape on the side, which usually lasts about a day or two in the dust or rain. Develop a system before deployment that is durable and understood within your formation and your battalion and brigade.

Degraded Communications — In a degraded communications environment, it is critical to know how you will communicate between vehicles without FM communications. Most units already go through a primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency (PACE) plan while dismounted — FM, whistle, star cluster, runner, etc. — but what are the actions when mounted? Simple solutions might include reaching back into history and pulling out those old flag command signals or ensuring that your formation is fluent in hand-and-arms signals.

Dismounted Markings — Dismounted markings are vital at the breach and in an urban environment. Colors may vary across the Army, but chemlights are used to mark the breach and communicate that a room is clear. Foxtails (VS-17 panel tied to a rock) might indicate the shifting and lifting of fires or mark a friendly unit's frontline trace when hanging outside of the blackside (facing friendly forces) of a building. Some additional questions to consider for dismounted markings include: Does your unit have a "Moses pole" and marking system for the frontline trace of friendly units clearing a trench, or will you result to using an antenna at the last minute, and how and where do the engineers mark the handrail of the breach? The key is not developing these signals in a vacuum. They should be codified in the brigade/battalion tactical SOP (TACSOP). If your unit does not have a TACSOP, be proactive and start a conversation with your command sergeant major and develop one.

Company SOPs

Assembly Areas — Does your company already have an SOP to occupy an assembly area (AA), or are you going to have a 10-minute conversation on the company net about how you want to emplace? Establish the SOPs for occupying AAs both dismounted and mounted before your rotation. It can be as simple as this: The lead element always has the 9 to 3 by way of 12; the second element has the 3 to 6 by way of 6; and the third element has the 6 to 9 by way of 6; and company trains will locate just above the 6. Whatever you decide it to be, establish it and rehearse while at home station. Do not try to do it for the first time at 0300 in the rain while in the middle of a force-on-force engagement.



A Soldier occupies his Javelin battle position at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin.

Priorities of Work — Are the priorities of work known throughout the formation, or do leaders have to publish them every time they occupy the AA? Publish beforehand so that drivers know to get out and immediately conduct preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) — checking track tension and POLs (petroleum, oils, and lubricants); gunners know to bore sight; dismounted teams and JAV teams know to build fighting positions, etc. Plan for the safety factors as well, especially when locating sleeping areas. By doing this, Soldiers will already know where to sleep, and if drivers must move, they will know where those areas are.

Pre-combat Checks (PCCs) and Pre-combat Inspections (PCIs) — PCCs/PCIs are terms that are thrown around throughout the Army without specific guidance as to what they are or when they are conducted. Ensuring that subordinates and junior leaders understand the difference between PCCs and PCIs and what they are looking at is key to ensuring that Soldiers have the right equipment for their operation. PCIs are actually that — an inspection, not an interview. This inspection is the opportunity for a first-line supervisor to put hands on all their Soldiers' equipment and verify they are 100-percent ready for the mission. PCCs are the ability for leaders to conduct spot checks within their formations to verify that inspections have been conducted. A standardized checklist needs to be published at the company level to guarantee that all leaders know to confirm the same equipment. This way, if a squad is attached to another platoon, the leaders have the same expectations.

Orders Production

How will you develop a company operation order (OPORD) at 0200 in the morning? Is your XO going to brief sustainment operations? Is your 1SG going to brief the medical portion? Who is present at the company OPORD? These are all questions you should be asking now, before deployment, to ensure you are prepared to give a detailed and timely OPORD. The OPORD should provide enough information so that everyone knows their mission and responsibilities while ensuring that your subordinates have sufficient time to issue their orders. There are many

WARNO _____ TO	
OPORD _____	
Initial Task Org: _____	
Effective: <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
1. SITUATION - General Enemy Overview:	AO: North South East West
Who the CO/TM is fighting:	AI: North South East West
BCT Mission:	BCT CDR Intent:
BNTF Mission:	BNTF CDR Intent:
2. MISSION - Upcoming Task and Purpose or Type of Operation/General Location:	
3. EXECUTION:	
Movement Instructions/Movement to Initiate:	Recon Tasks/Recon to Initiate:
Our Current Location: _____	1.
Our Next Location: _____	2.
Objective Location: _____	3.
	Information Requirements
Recon Team:	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.

Figure 3 — Example of a Company Laminated Warning Order

templates that you can use; the key is finding the one that works best for you. I have seen a commander use his computer to type up orders and use downloaded maps to make graphics. It was a great technique until he ran out of paper and ink. An option is using carbon copy paper to write the order and issue the copies to your subordinates. Another practice is to have laminated order templates that every leader can fill out while the OPORD occurs (see Figure 3). Whatever method you choose to utilize, practice it before your rotation in the operational environment.

Operational Graphics — Once you have published your order, how are you publishing operational graphics? Do you have your overlays available from higher for your subordinate leaders to copy? Operations graphics allow units to communicate clearly and quickly in a complex operational environment. Battle boards or hard backings that maps mount to with clear overlays that show obstacles, targets, target reference points, battle positions, or adjacent unit locations are common in the mounted community. These boards are just as easy to make within the light community — compact enough to fit in a rucksack or cargo pocket. Building these boards before an operation will ensure that leaders can copy graphics with the expectation to use them during a rotation.

MILES Training

Every rotational unit that comes through a CTC thinks that the OPFOR cheats somehow with their MILES gear. The reality is that the OPFOR is lethal in the MILES environment because those Soldiers regularly use and train on the equipment. You should not be using your MILES gear for the first time at the ISB or the rotational unit bivouac area (RUBA). Draw the equipment at your home station and incorporate it into your training. Become proficient with it, and lethality against an opposing force will follow suit. Do not just draw MILES for your individual weapons. Train with MILES on your Stingers and Javelins so that you can be lethal against red air and armored formations as well. The same home-station training should be conducted for mounted MILES — boresight and zero both your M1 Abrams or M2 Bradley. You can conduct lethality checks on your lasers all day in the box, but if you have not bore-sighted or zeroed out to the range that you think you are going to engage the enemy, then it is a waste of time. These techniques will tip the scales in your favor for a more successful rotation. Rotations are infinitely more fun when you win.

Final Thoughts

This article is not intended to provide company-level leadership with all the information needed to prepare for a CTC rotation. It is meant to start a dialogue within the company leadership to begin to think through their SOPs and determine areas in which the company is lacking. If these areas are addressed before deployment to the CTC, it will allow the company and its observer-coach-trainers (OCTs) the opportunity to focus on other areas that need improvement during your rotation.

Enjoy your time during your rotation with your company. Always ask for feedback from your OCTs. You are there to make your team better and to do that you need to avoid wasting precious time learning things you could have thought about, and practiced, before deployment to your CTC rotation. If you ever get the opportunity to serve at a CTC, take it. It is one of the most rewarding and professionally developing assignments in our Army!

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A company commander conducts an operation order brief with company leadership.