Transition Planning in Large-Scale Combat Operations

CPT ANDREW BECK
LTC ERIC ALEXANDER

"*In LSCO, we must expect our adversaries to have the ability to interdict both air and ground lines of communication.*"

— MG Patrick Sargent[1]

"*Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth*."

— Mike Tyson

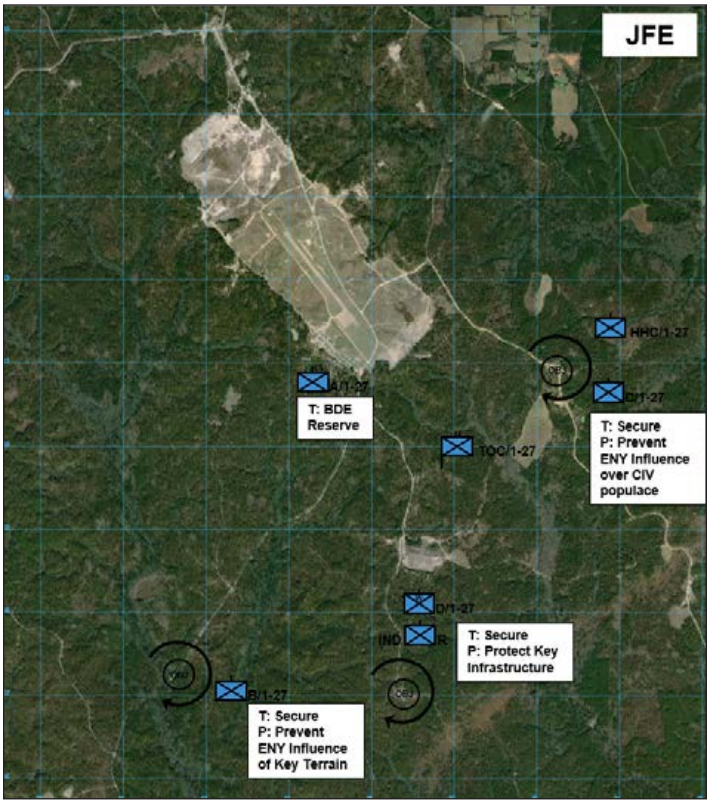
The transitional nature of continuous large-scale combat operations (LSCO) proves to be one of the most difficult aspects of command and control on the battlefield. Most of the training accomplished in a given calendar year focuses on the decisive action fight without acknowledging the deterioration of other warfighting functions (WfF) over the course of time. From the squad to brigade levels, units routinely and effectively train for initial contact but struggle to maintain meaningful offensive tempo beyond the joint forced entry. Casualties are sustained, communications fail, poor reporting leads to an increased "fog of war" surrounding realities on the ground, classes of supply expire, and the current operations (CUOPs) fight supersedes any planning efforts beyond the all-consuming present friction.[2] From the infancy of General Lesley McNair's Louisiana Maneuvers to the comprehensive learning environment at today's Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) focused on defeating a near-peer, decisive-action threat, the lessons of LSCO nearly always involve managing transitions to enable as rapid a tempo as possible and maintain the offensive against the enemy.

JRTC 21-01 Reflections

During its joint forcible entry at JRTC Rotation 21-01, the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment "Wolfhounds" achieved surprise and audacity by conducting a daytime, company air assault rather than the typical air assault during a period of darkness.[3] The result was a successful seizure of key terrain and objectives with limited enemy interference, enabling a foothold for the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 25th Infantry Division to conduct its ground assault entry into the area of operations. As is common in all air assault operations, the reach of communications and sustainment provided significant friction in the synchronization of the ground assault link-up with the forces already retaining key objectives. This resulted in heavy casualties once darkness fell. Once the battalion tactical operations center moved into the area of operations the following morning, the drawn-out CUOPs fight consumed all staff effort as the battalion fought

During Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 21-01, Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment conduct a daytime air assault operation at Fort Polk, LA, on 14 October 2020.

Photo courtesy of Joint Readiness Training Center Operations Group



Graphics by CPT Quintin Weekly

Map 1 — Joint Forcible Entry

to secure key routes, seize low-water crossings (LWCs), conduct key leader engagements in population centers, and evacuate casualties back to the brigade Role II under direct-fire contact. Depicting a common operational picture for the commander became an increasingly difficult task and demonstrated the importance of leaders at the company and battalion level fighting off the same map with the same detailed operational graphics overlay.

Within 72 hours of the initial forced entry, the battalion needed to establish a defensive posture oriented west of LWC5 and south to protect the flank of the brigade headquarters and main effort located in vicinity of Dahon Bawang. The battalion did not produce an eight-page, detailed, base operation order with all WfF annexes and conduct a detailed combined arms rehearsal (CAR) with all company commanders as happened prior to the battalion's infiltration. Instead, the battalion published a defense fragmentary order (FRAGO) in a message with fewer than 1,200 characters over Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P) and conducted brief map rehearsals in the face of continuous contact at LWC5. The battalion commander was able to meet with the two most forward company commanders, but the lack of detail and rehearsals became abundantly clear once the enemy attacked from south to north.

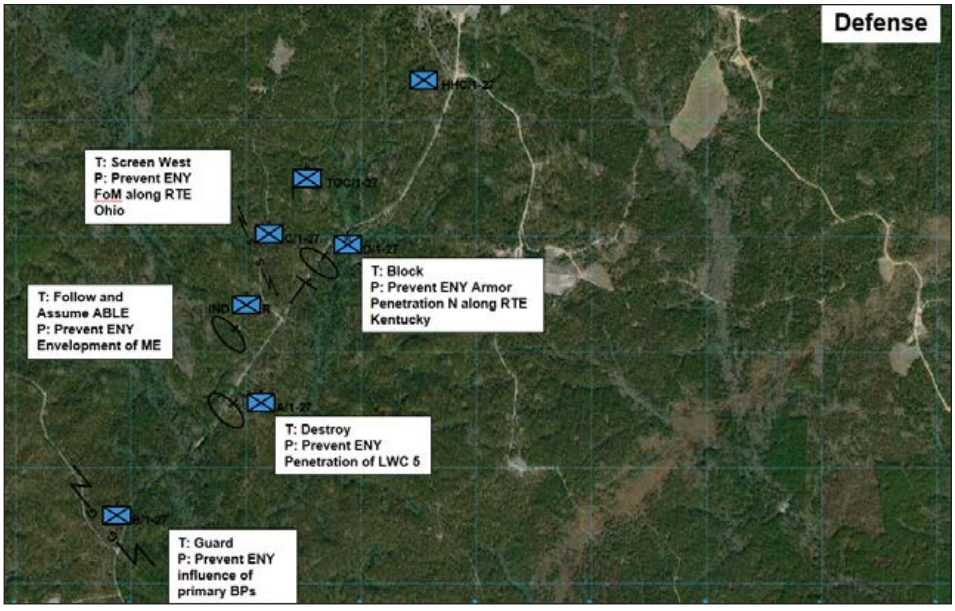
At JRTC 21-01, the world-class opposing force (OPFOR) maintained a significant level of enemy contact and disruption throughout the rotation by skillfully using special purpose forces (SPF) and managing tempo. This disruption consumed the staff and came to bear on the companies during subsequent phases of the operation. The Wolfhounds' main lesson from this rotation was the need to understand and plan for transitions while in contact. We had to resolve three main issues: relocation of subordinate units with part or the entire battalion in contact, continuous medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) while also maneuvering assets towards the forward line of own troops (FLOT), and resupply of the unit as a supplementary tasking before it demands exclusive effort.

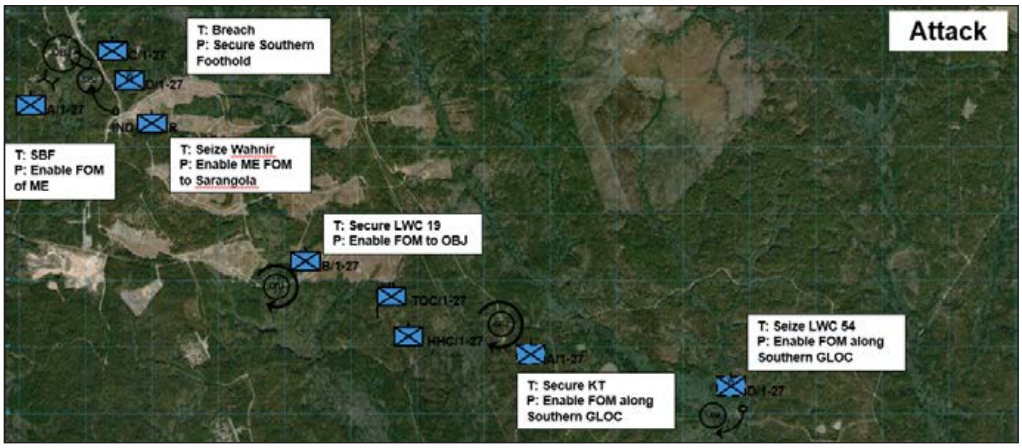
Managing Transitions in Offensive Movement

Among the greatest challenges for a light infantry company is its inability to organically move itself. This can allow for greater flexibility on the battlefield if using aviation assets. However, a rifle company can only move 15 percent of its formation at a time with organic battalion transportation assets. This proves as a significant constraint when rapid, long distance movement is required. Additionally, wheeled transportation creates a large signature, and movement down high-speed avenues of approach using this method proves particularly vulnerable in LSCO. Even during air assaults, redundant pick-up zones and known landing zones allow the enemy to anticipate our future offensive action and disrupt movement operations in depth using indirect fire and SPF attacks.

Throughout JRTC 21-01, the Wolfhounds relied heavily on dismounted movement for all movements under 7 kilometers. Although counterintuitive, it actually proved faster, more reliable, and more secure for the Wolfhounds to move

Map 2 — Defense





Map 3 — Attack

by foot to an objective rather than rely on any method of transportation from either the battalion's forward support company (capable of moving one platoon of dismounts at a time) or brigade assets. The best example came from the final assault when eight Family of Medium Tactical Vehicles (FMTVs) were ambushed along with the battalion tactical command post (TAC) during pick-up operations. Another rifle company destroyed the ambushing force, and the two walked the 6 kilometers to the final objective, able to bypass key obstacle belts emplaced by the enemy that would have left them vulnerable to future ambushes had they continued to move mounted in FMTVs with a heavy weapons' section providing security.

Managing Transitions for MEDEVAC

LSCO MEDEVAC requires makeshift platforms like FMTVs since casualty numbers may rapidly overwhelm the organic assets in the battalion's modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). The competition for FMTV assets between MEDEVAC and offensive maneuver creates a tension and decision point for the commander. Perhaps out of habits established during the Global War on Terrorism and route clearance, light infantry companies often wait for vehicular assets to arrive for transportation rather than continue dismounted movement to seize key objectives. Some of this comes from the battalion headquarters inaccurately predicting when these assets will become available. Another factor is the heavy load often required of the modern Infantryman. Careful intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and tactical risk assessment are needed to facilitate dismounted movement.

During the transition from joint forcible entry to the defense in JRTC 21-01, the Wolfhound companies that met the least amount of contact were the ones that moved dismounted to their objectives immediately upon receiving the FRAGO via JBC-P and FM transmission. Essentially, dismounted movement proved more responsive than utilizing "dedicated" brigade assets for the 4-5 kilometer movement. They reached the key terrain before the enemy, and as a result, they could establish a hasty defense to allow large, dig assets freedom of maneuver to the designated engagement areas. The brigade and battalion dedicated FMTV assets could not support movement forward until ongoing MEDEVAC was complete, preventing a mounted offensive maneuver during these operations.

Beyond allocation of mounted resources, one of the best ways to manage transitions comes from the ability to rapidly treat individuals and not let offensive operations outpace the ability to evacuate casualties back to higher levels of care. Understanding the battlefield geometry between the forward aid station (FAS), main aid station (MAS), and Role II proves lifesaving. Due to its numerous air assaults beyond the FLOT, 1-27 IN struggled to move casualties with air assets due to competing brigade demands. Our inability to get a ground line of communications open quickly resulted in a high died-of-wounds (DOWs) rate, diminishing the trust between Soldiers and their organization. We learned that MEDEVAC platforms and personnel, such as the FAS and MAS, need to be forward. We cannot afford to be so risk adverse with these platforms and personnel in LSCO.

Often, completely secure ground lines of communication are not available. According to MG Patrick Sargent, "one of the primary challenges to the MEDEVAC force in LSCO will be battlefield access — the ability to get to casualties/patients in order to evacuate them. In LSCO, we must expect our adversaries to have the ability to interdict both air and ground lines of communication."[4] Additionally, we need to be less reliant on air assets for MEDEVAC. Across the brigade battlefield with multiple companies in contact, there will rarely be assets available for large numbers of air MEDEVACs, and it cannot be our primary planning factor.

Managing Simultaneous Transitions of Operations and Sustainment

Finally, one of the largest inhibitors to managing transitions between phases of the operations involves the resupply of key classes of supply and assets, mostly because these supplies come from a brigade-level prioritization. Particularly in the transition to defensive operations, the movement of Class IV and V require planning and synchronization up to 72 hours prior to their delivery and emplacement. As with all resources, scarcity across the brigade is one of the major decision factors, and prioritization by engagement area is important. This can only be accomplished with detailed, accurate reports from subordinate units to feed running estimates that accurately paint a picture for staff planners and commanders at echelon.[5]

When it comes to the movement of supplies, aviation assets are often underutilized because they are focused on combat operations and air assaults rather than resup-

ply missions.[6] Some commanders are hesitant to endanger aviation assets for a seemingly nonessential aerial resupply, but this is often due to a lack of proficiency in sling-load training and low cost/low altitude resupply drops.[7]

Additionally, within Appendix H of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-21.20, *Infantry Battalion*, the onus of resupply responsibility is on the lower unit to reach back to a higher echelon's coordinated area. Anything that requires the higher headquarters to commit its resources to move supplies directly to a unit invariably takes away from its ability to supply other portions of the formation. Subordinate units' inability to move to resupply points, the combat trains command post, or even the brigade support area becomes a large reason that offensive operations have to halt for support-affected units. During air assaults, this inability to reliably resupply units within 12 hours can prove hugely detrimental to any management of transitions or effective future planning.

The Way Ahead: Reassessing Risk, Maneuver, Force Ratios, and IPB

Operational reach consists of momentum, protection, and endurance.[8] The First Wolfhounds' after action review highlighted the tensions between extended frontages, extended lines of communication, and the successful employment of military capabilities. While this statement is obvious on its face to many, we believe that commanders and staffs should specifically consider and deliberately decide on risk, maneuver, force ratio, and IPB implications of operational reach limitations in LSCO.

When extended frontages and lines of communications become reality, special attention must be paid to the balance between protection of sustainment assets and their critical role in enabling momentum and endurance to infantry formations. Our assessment at the end of rotation 21-01 was that we had gotten it wrong by placing too high a premium on the protection of sustainment formations, systems, and personnel at the expense of effective enabling of maneuver forces. If we fought again, we would commit these assets, specifically logistical and medical support assets, further forward to enable effective support to achieve momentum and endurance forward. Often, logistical assets remained uncommitted or in contact at the brigade support area as Soldiers and formations at the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA) saw critical supplies dwindle. This reduced the options for commanders from the company through brigade combat team level. Similarly, endurance and especially momentum suffered as casualties accumulated forward and awaited evacuation to the rear. This problem manifested itself in sometimes egregious rates of Soldiers who could have been saved instead dying of wounds. Indirectly, the same events of awaiting resupply or casualty evacuation sapped critical time required to prepare in the defense and degraded rates of advance on the attack.

The battalion failed to achieve maximum potential in its tempo because we did not maximize the capabilities of our formations in the attack. In our assaults, we witnessed that our companies and the battalion twice maintained an attack for approximately 24 hours. It was after about 24 hours that we experienced a dramatic decrease in momentum. Partly, this was our failure as a battalion to sequence fresh companies to the front of the attack to maintain tempo. While we could have helped ourselves, doing so requires a reassessment of the tempo we seek to achieve and several underlying factors. First, we did not realistically evaluate the duration each of our subordinate headquarters could sustain offensive operations. Partly, this requires sober assessments of how much we are bound to roads and trails for the vehicles that carry our supplies. When these ground lines of communication were severed, we did not effectively execute aerial resupply and medical/casualty evacuation. Often, the false

Photo by SGT Thomas Calvert

Infantrymen with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment fire at the enemy during JRTC Rotation 21-01.

choice that we perceived was between leading with mounted formations to maximize tempo or pulling vehicles forward with dismounts. All too often, we failed to effectively integrate mounted and dismounted forces. The effective integration of mounted and dismounted forces was essential to maximizing tempo, as anything less resulted in meeting engagements with enemy forces that sapped the battalion's momentum and endurance. Additionally, each of our actions would have been independently more successful had we better tailored Soldiers' loads for each operation. In this regard, we saw failures to achieve detailed, timely planning requirements compounded by ineffective logistical planning and support to enable tailoring of loads by company command teams and below. The unfortunate result for individual Soldiers and our formations was that they went into combat forced to carry everything they might need for any operation or contingency. This is due to not adequately knowing the enemy they would face and not believing they could quickly access additional equipment they may require. We must do better to fight effectively as light infantry.

Taken as a whole, our battalion's experience at JRTC 21-01 was that the tempo and operational reach required exceeded our capacity. This is not to say it was unrealistic; the demands of combat and especially LSCO are unyielding to our capabilities. The frontages, lines of communications, and tasks allocated to our battalion task force successfully stressed the battalion and its subordinate headquarters. If we were to fight the same fight a second time, we would prioritize tasks more rigorously, seek adjustments to tasks that did not directly accomplish the decisive operation, and maintain a more robust reserve to exploit opportunity. This will reduce risk of catastrophe associated with employing economy of force to those missions that are not directly associated to the decisive point. Additionally, we would commit more combat power to a more aggressive security operation when preparing our defense. We also observed that increased simplicity in our planning would have better enabled our subordinate headquarters to better plan and tailor Soldier loads. While there is always attendant risks of not bringing something "just in case," this risk is offset by the increased tempo and likelihood of mission success when properly managed.

Similar to maneuver considerations in the paragraph above, our intelligence preparation of the battlefield must be prioritized and sometimes triaged. Prioritizing decisive operations and the shaping operations most directly related to mission success is essential in the time-constrained environment of LSCO. Too often, we worked to complete all IPB tasks across the entire battalion area of operations instead of completing detailed and refined IPB on the most important and urgent aspects of the battalion's operations. The plan to develop and clear planning priorities must enable the S2 and the battalion staff to meet operational demands and support the companies' planning, preparation, and execution.

Conclusion

Most units inherently know that successful transitions between operations create the conditions for continued success on the battlefield. Our experience as a force in Iraq and Afghanistan significantly influenced the way we visualize and plan for transitions. Just like in LSCO, the enemy sought to disrupt U.S. operations and deny the initiative to coalition forces. However, our adversaries were rarely able to disrupt operations over long durations or to seize the initiative for significant durations. This led to a focus on "finishing the fight" as the catalyst to transition. Coalition forces could ultimately bring to bear overwhelming technology and force ratios to finish the fight, which became the de facto criteria to initiate transitions.

We must plan for transitions in contact. Finishing the fight is no longer the only criteria for initiating transitions in LSCO. Near-peer adversaries will have the resources and technology to continue very successful disruption operations throughout the bulk of future conflicts. U.S. forces must adapt the conditions required to initiate transitions to reflect the reality of a truly contested battlespace in multiple domains. This has profound implications on planning for unit movement, MEDEVAC, resupply, and all activities conducted during transitions. Failure to plan against realistic conditions will result in a loss of initiative and increased casualties.

Notes

[1] MG Patrick D. Sargent, "Evolving Mass Casualty Combat MEDEVAC," *Combat & Casualty Care* (Summer 2019), accessed from https://tacticaldefensemedia.com/evolving-mass-casualty-combat-medevac.

[2] Brian P. Schoellhorn, "Preventing the Collapse: Fighting Friction After First Contact at the National Training Center," *Military Review* (March-April 2020): 8-9.

[3] Army Doctrine Publication 3-90, *Offense and Defense*, July 2019, 3-2.

[4] Sargent, "Evolving Mass Casualty Combat MEDEVAC."

[5] Schoellhorn, "Preventing the Collapse," 13-15.

[6] CPT Ed Richards,"Sustaining in the Decisive Action Fight Using Army Aviation Assets," *Army Sustainment* (7 February 2019).

[7] LTC Paul Bonano, MAJ Casey Seckendorf, and CSM Ruth Drewitt, "Winning the Future Sustainment Fight," *Army Sustainment* (4 November 2019).

[8] In Joint Publication 3-0, *Operations*, operational reach is defined as "the distance and duration across which a joint force can successfully employ military capabilities."

CPT Andrew Beck is currently a student at the Military Intelligence Captains Career Course and recently served as an assistant operations officer for 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, during Joint Readiness Training Rotation 21-01. He received his commission from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, as a military intelligence officer with an Infantry branch detail. His previous assignments include serving as the battalion logistics officer for Pacific Pathways Rotation 19-03 to Australia, Indonesia, and Fiji; as a company executive officer (XO); and as a rifle platoon leader.

LTC Eric Alexander commands 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment. An Infantry officer, he received his commission through ROTC and attended Drexel University; he holds a master's degree in public policy management from Georgetown University. His previous assignments include serving on the Joint Staff as XO to Vice Director, J3, Joint Staff; battalion and brigade operations officer while assigned to the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard); and battalion operations officer and XO while assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division. He also commanded two companies and served as a company XO, platoon leader, and battalion chemical officer. LTC Alexander's operational experience includes three deployments to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.