Project Warrior: Bridging the Gap Between Operational and Institutional Domains

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You Haven't Heard? Project Warrior is Back!

As a result of high operational tempo and officer timelines not being able to support this great initiative over the last decade of war, the Project Warrior Program was jump-started by Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Raymond T. Odierno in the spring of 2013. At its foundation, the program is intended "to infuse observations and experiences gained from multiple, immersive combat training center (CTC) rotations back into the Army through select professional military education (PME) courses."[1] Our Army rightly recognizes that through combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, our core of company and field grade officers has built a wealth of knowledge and experience during counterinsurgency operations abroad. However, while unit training and leader development evolve as we focus on the range of military operations associated with unified land operations through decisive action, there is extreme value in placing hand-selected successful post-command company grade officers at our CTCs to serve as observer controller-trainers (OC-Ts) for upwards of 18 months and then placing them in the various Army Centers of Excellence as small group leaders/instructors (SGL/Is).[2] This initiative fuses these talented officers' operational experiences with CTC institutional experiences so they can profitably coach, teach, and mentor other company grade officers not only at the CTCs but also, perhaps more importantly, at the various captains career courses.

An OC-T with the Operations Group, National Training Center, gives a safety briefing to Soldiers from the 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division during Decisive Action Rotation 15-02 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., on 11 November 2014. Photo by SPC Randis Monroe

From the Field to the Classroom — What Are We Seeing?

The comprehensive list of lessons learned both at CTCs and in Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) classrooms could fill volumes, and as the Project Warrior Program matures, there will likely be a continuous flow of recommendations and best practices pushed back out to the operational forces. The relationship between CTC task forces and MCCC faculty continues to grow stronger so we can collectively have a shared vision of the challenges maneuver captains are having at the CTCs; then we, at Fort Benning, can address those issues in our classroom instructions and practical applications. Our Project Warrior SGLs at MCCC have been the connective tissue that has facilitated this blossoming relationship between the organizations.

That being said, this article is structured to provide our observations on the most significant company-level challenges observed across multiple rotations and in the classroom, involving all types of brigade combat teams (BCTs) executing a variety of missions. A number of key observations and lessons learned are centered on a leader's ability to effectively execute each step of the troop leading procedures (TLPs).[3] Many of these trends have residual effects that carry over to the battalion and brigade levels. By identifying and overcoming these challenges at the company level, there will likely be positive second- and third-order effects at higher echelons as well. The following are major trends observed on company-level TLPs:

Step 1: Receive the Mission — Company-level leaders often wait for a complete, written operation order (OPORD) from their battalion before beginning planning. Instead, when possible, leaders should initiate mission analysis and course of action (COA) development prior to receiving the OPORD from higher headquarters. An extremely common error continues to exist when leaders inadvertently set themselves up for failure by immediately getting behind on the one-third/two-thirds rule during the first step of TLPs. This further contributes to their subordinates not having time to plan and at times leads to mission failure or at a minimum creates friction during execution. They simply do not determine their time allocations for planning, preparation, or execution within the TLP process.

At MCCC, we issue a series of battalion warning orders (WARNORDs) during the company-level practical application OPORD process to force students to correct this deficiency and thereby reinforce parallel planning as early as possible throughout the operations process. Units in the operational Army must reinforce and emphasize parallel planning; issuing WARNORDs as more information becomes available during the planning process reinforces this practice.

Step 2: Issue a Warning Order — To compound the issue with step one, company commanders routinely fail to issue timely WARNORDs to facilitate subordinate parallel planning and preparation efforts. While trying to craft a near-perfect OPORD, commanders fail to relate information from their initial COA development into subsequent WARNORDs.

Currently, MCCC requires students to issue complete initial WARNORDs but does not require the issue of subsequent WARNORDs. The SGLs coach the students to issue a second WARNORD, but it is not required at this time. We find that it is an informal measure of effectiveness to see where and when in the program of instruction students start to "get it."

Step 3: Make a Tentative Plan — When making a tentative plan, company-level leaders often conduct COA development sufficiently but fail to conduct COA analysis (wargaming) before selecting a COA. As a result, the commander hinders his ability to make accurate decisions, identify friction points, mitigate risks, and then synchronize a fully developed plan in time and space. Many of the holes or gaps in their plans can be identified and mitigated prior to execution if they take the precious time to wargame their plans. A wargame will give company commanders the tools (decision support matrix/template, synchronization matrix, execution checklist, etc.) they need to accurately synchronize the warfighting

functions to accomplish the mission. Without going through the mental process of considering their unit's action, the enemy's counteraction, and their reaction to the enemy, company commanders fail to plan for contingencies, develop branch or sequel plans, and develop the tools needed to synchronize the entire operation.

MCCC SGLs are increasing their efforts to teach and coach maneuver captains through wargaming as the Army has been institutionally challenged in this area for more than a decade in our planning processes at the company level and above. Additionally, students in the battalion phases are getting a healthy dose of wargaming to standard in an effort to better prepare them as future staff officers. This is currently an unfortunate shortcoming of many battalion-level staffs. To aid the overall improvement of COA analysis as an Army, staffs must demonstrate the value of the wargame by conducting them to standard and thus setting the example for company commanders.

Step 4: Initiate Movement — Commanders understand the need to initiate necessary movement prior to the execution of their mission, but often lack the trust or confidence in their subordinates to execute the movement without direct oversight. One recent example from the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., highlights a mission in which a commander postponed his reconnaissance of a defensive engagement area to oversee the movement of his company into an assembly area.[4] Failing to sufficiently account for movement during the conduct of TLPs can completely desynchronize a unit's timeline. It is imperative that both institutional and operational training place a focus on fostering a certain degree of trust in and delegating responsibility to subordinate leaders.

Step 5: Conduct Reconnaissance — Currently, companies are severely unpracticed in planning and conducting reconnaissance in support of their operations. All tactical leaders, not just those in cavalry organizations, have to understand reconnaissance and information collection (IC) planning. A common, if not epidemic, trend is that maneuver commanders at all levels rarely develop IC plans in sufficient detail and fail to issue commander's reconnaissance guidance, which informs their maneuver plan. Reconnaissance elements and organic unmanned aerial system (UAS) platforms are not effectively used to answer priority intelligence requirements (PIR) or overwatch named areas of interest (NAIs) or targeted areas of interest (TAIs). The root cause behind this is that commanders rarely visualize or understand how their portion of IC ties into the higher unit's IC plan and their own ground maneuver plan. Companies need to fight for information to increase their chances for operational success by conducting a leader's reconnaissance using organic UAS assets and deliberately planning reconnaissance in support of their operations.

Over the last year, MCCC has made major strides to overcome this institutional gap in temporal understanding of the IC planning and execution, and how it's directly tied to successful mission execution. During both company and battalion-level practical applications at MCCC, the students are required to develop tactically executable IC plans that are thoroughly reviewed and critiqued by their SGLs in an effort to coach them to get more proficient in this institutional deficiency. While it would be developmental for all officers, leaders of specialized reconnaissance units (scout platoons/cavalry troops) should, without exception, be afforded the opportunity to attend specialized courses such as the Army Reconnaissance Course, Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course, and Cavalry Leaders Course in order to further their understanding of IC planning and operations. Doing so would increase the effectiveness of those units, but would also aid in reversing the widespread lack of understanding of IC.

Step 6: Complete the Plan — A reoccurring CTC observation is that companies often do not incorporate the requisite amount of tactical graphic or direct fire control measures to control maneuver and fire. During a recent teleconference with OC-Ts from the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, La., we learned that only an estimated 33 percent of company commanders were assessed to use graphic

control measures sufficiently.[5] One reason contributing to this issue is battalion OPORDs often do not include sufficient operational graphics and/or only provide intent graphics. Leaders later in the execution phase see their failure to use graphics properly when their scheme of maneuver becomes completely desynchronized and/or when fratricide occurs.

Most students report to MCCC untrained or unpracticed in the use of control measures (though most just came from the operational force). Therefore, MCCC SGLs spend a great amount of time emphasizing the proper use of maneuver graphics and direct fire control measures in all modules of the instruction throughout the course. The SGLs ensure the students strike the right balance between a lack of control measures and too many, then ensure they are using the right type of control measure within their plan's construct. The doer does what the checker checks so increased emphasis in the operational force through back briefs and leader checks on subordinate graphics will help all tactical leaders properly apply the science of control to their operations successfully.

Step 7: Issue the Order — The CTCs routinely state that the MCCC OPORD format and course standards are an effective model to build future company commanders who can provide logical, succinct, and complete orders to subordinates. At MCCC, we found that the operational Army through a decade of war has developed a "CONOP (concept of operations) generation" of officers. Officers have turned the CONOP, which was originally intended as a briefing tool, into a lazy man's way to plug and play tactical operations. This has led to officers simply filling in the blanks on a preformatted PowerPoint slide that has no depth of thought and fails in execution. The OC-Ts at JRTC have recently reported that approximately 66 percent of company commanders use the standard OPORD format they were taught during the MCCC while 33 percent revert to using a CONOP format.[6] The CTC observations have concluded that map boards and other analog OPORD products work well, and digital OPORD templates often lead to a more incomplete brief because digital formats tend to be based on CONOP templates. To fix this issue, the operational force should increase emphasis on ensuring company-level leaders brief complete OPORDs, which will facilitate a deep and shared understanding of the plan.

Step 8: Supervise and Refine — The CTCs often report that company-level leaders do not perform effective and thorough rehearsals prior to mission execution. Rehearsal guidance is supposed to be issued in the initial WARNORD and then executed to enforce tactical situational awareness prior to execution by all Soldiers in the formation, ensuring all assets and enablers are synchronized in the plan. Synchronization tools — such as execution matrices, decision support matrices, IC matrices, and operational graphics that are developed through wargaming — are used during these rehearsals.

Currently, MCCC provides instruction on the conduct of rehearsals, and students execute seminar-level rehearsals in each module of the company and most battalion phases. We also use virtual and gaming simulations to conduct execution of their plans to reinforce the importance of proper wargaming and rehearsals. The operational force's battalion-level leaders need to continue this effort by forcing company leaders to have solid standard operating procedures for rehearsals so they become well practiced in their conduct.

The Road Ahead

The Project Warrior Program has been instrumental in MCCC connecting with the CTCs, which are conducting evaluated tactical operations in a field environment, to purposefully refine our classroom instruction to produce a better maneuver captain upon graduation. Currently, MCCC has two Project Warrior SGLs, but over the next year we are projected to increase that number up to seven. Their wealth of experience from not only their time as successful company commanders but also as OC-Ts will undoubtedly contribute to our efforts to teach and prepare our MCCC students for the challenges ahead as they lead Soldiers in a complex world.

For this project to be successful well into the future, brigade and battalion commanders throughout the operational force must identify and recommend their strongest performing officers for this program to their Human Resource Command (HRC) branch manager. As per Military Personnel (MILPER) Message 13-137, officers can be identified as early as senior lieutenants and must undergo several screenings through their progression to SGL.[7] These officers not only require a high level of institutional knowledge but also a natural ability to develop other leaders. With the right officers, the Project Warrior Program will continue to serve as a conduit to incorporate observations and lessons learned from the Army's operational force to its institutional instruction well into the future.

U.S. Army Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, prepare to rehearse a night mission during Decisive Action Rotation 15-02 at NTC on 11 November 2014.
Photo by SGT Charles Probst

Notes

[1] MILPER Message 13-137, "Project Warrior Program Eligibility Criteria and Selection Process," issued 3 June 2013.

[2] ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, dated May 2012.

[3] FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Officer Organization and Operations*, Chapter 10, dated May 2014.

[4] Monthly CTC and MCCC Lessons Learned Conference Call, dated 13 June 2014.

[5] Monthly CTC and MCCC Lessons Learned Conference Call, dated 24 August 2014.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Project Warrior Program Eligibility Criteria and Selection Process, issued 3 June 2013.

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