Operational Assessments in the Garrison Environment

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"Assessment is the determination of progress toward accomplishing a task, creating an effect, or achieving an objective." **— Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Operations***

Few words in the lexicon of any profession have undergone the explosion in usage that the word "assessments" has in the last five years in the English-speaking profession of arms. The word now commonly triggers either a cringe or a debate, but rarely is there consensus on a common definition or viable methodology.

Every command seems to re-interpret the doctrinal process of assessments. The widespread desire to do assessments "right" before consensus of what "right" looks like has spawned a cottage industry of scholars and consultants advising on and writing about the topic. Entry of assessments-related terms into your favorite search engine will result in hundreds of thousands to tens of millions of links, articles, and opinions. The opinions about the efficacy of combat assessments do vary across theaters, operations, and units, but the sheer volume of work in the area of assessment — and the consumers of that work — indicates its importance in the deployment environment.

Searching for concepts like "operational assessments in garrison," "home-station operational assessments," "home-station assessments" in Google is fruitless. The search yields nothing, although a search for "assessments in garrison" did result in some thousands of hits — all of which seemed to include towns named Garrison. These results echo the anecdotal comments from officers assigned to assessments teams at the division level and higher regarding assessments within garrison. We simply don't do formal operational assessments outside the combat environment.

In the combat environment, great time and organizational effort are invested in gaining consensus on and developing a viable assessment plan, collecting and analyzing data to support that plan, and communicating and defending the results of the assessment. Leaders "buy in" to the process because it provides information about how far the organization is from its goals and how fast the organization is moving toward those goals. This information is critical in weighing the risk associated with decisions that have life-and-death consequences.

Commanders at all ranks and levels of responsibility — from colonel (and even below) through several layers of general officer commanders to the strategic leaders of the United States and its coalition partners — rely on operational assessments to inform decisions on tactics, operations, strategy, and policy. To rely on assessments in combat and eschew them in garrison is to deny the commander an important, reliable tool.

This article builds upon the doctrine provided in JP 3-0 and asserts that the craft of assessment supports two critical facets of organizational leadership: knowledge of location and velocity. It is through an active assessments process the leader gains insight into where the organization "is" relative to its goals and the rate at which the organization is moving toward (or away from) those goals. Understanding velocity (defined by magnitude and direction) relative to objectives provides information that enables the establishment of priorities, the communication of those priorities, and the resource allocation needed to achieve objectives associated with those priorities. This understanding is necessary for leadership of any sized organization in any environment — combat or garrison.

This case study of how the 10th Mountain Division used a process of assessments to adopt a data-driven decision-making culture has application to brigade and larger units in the military and a wide variety of civilian organizations. This manner of decision making was inculcated into the organization's culture during its 2010-2011 deployment to Kandahar, Afghanistan, as the headquarters in charge of coalition operations in southern Afghanistan.[1] As an indicator of the perceived value of this cultural shift, the assessment approach ensured the unit's transition from a combat environment to its home station despite significant transition of leadership.

The Obstacles to Effective Garrison Operational Assessments

Across the Army, the most deployed division headquarters since 2001 have racked up deployments totaling nearly five years. Five years of deployment means the division headquarters has been in garrison for about seven years (about 60 percent of the last 12 years). Operational assessments are an information stream commanders rely on in the crucible of combat and contingency operations. So, why are assessments abandoned when the unit returns to its home station?

To gain some potential insight into the answer to this question, consider the differences between the deployed and garrison information environments (see Figure 1).

Factor	Deployment Environment	Garrison Environment
Unity of command	One commander-one mission	Several commands/missions
Unity of effort	Common purpose unites staff	Multiple staffs lack synchronicity
Cohesion	Team is formed to deploy	Team is disbanded after deployment
	Emphasis on team building 24/7	Personal life vs professional life
Amount of effort	100+ hour work week	40-50 hour work week
Sense of urgency	Decisions make/take lives	Bullets are not flying

Figure 1— Some Differences Between the Deployment and Garrison Information Environments

In a combat or contingency environment, all forces are led by one commanding officer, resulting in a clear chain of command and little question of whose vision to follow. Unity of command in the deployed environment results in unity of operational and staff efforts — including the area of operational assessments. Not only is the team formed with the sole purpose of accomplishing a mission, but the crucible of the mission pulls the organization closer together as an instrument to realize the commander's vision. The sheer amount of will and effort expended to accomplish the deployed mission is staggering, with 100-hour work weeks the norm for many. Most importantly, the fact that decisions in the deployed environment make and take lives causes those hours to be worked at peak performance.

As Figure 1 asserts, the garrison environment is characterized differently than the deployed environment. The result is practices that work while deployed suffer at home station. By applying certain principles, an organization can benefit from lessons learned while deployed to leverage a process that works in combat — operations assessment — in support of decisions made at home station.

Principles of Effective Assessments: Focus, Teamwork, Leadership, Diversity

Certain principles guide productive staff work in any discipline, any environment, and any organization. Though some are not typically associated with analytical work, assessment teams that have applied

these principles have found success in making their analysis and assessment products relevant and appreciated by commanders and staff officers alike.

Focus on the result — support to command decision making.

"For conventional conflicts, well-developed theories of war give a good understanding of the objectives to pursue and how to pursue them… In unconventional conflicts, the theories of war are more complex, objectives and ways to achieve them are less straightforward, and notions of 'winning' and 'losing' are more difficult to define."[2]

The above statement highlights the challenge of focus in garrison assessments. In a conventional, symmetric, force-on-force fight, success may be measured by the progress of the forward line of troops (FLOT) or the combat power of the enemy destroyed in an attack — both pieces of information that are readily attainable with today's technology. As conflict becomes less conventional or less symmetric, the theory of what it takes to "win" and the way we measure progress becomes less clear. Assessing progress in home station is more complex yet — there are not even any belligerents! How do we tell if we are "winning?"

The idea of "winning" can be abstracted from combat to apply in a useful sense to the garrison environment. We win in combat if we accomplish our objectives in accordance with a given timeline. We can define a "win" in garrison the same way. Though the objectives will differ from combat, in garrison a commander still desires to achieve certain objectives before some pre-determined condition manifests. The decisions surrounding achievement of established objectives provide the assessments team with the focus it needs to provide timely command support. Specifically, it is through answering the following questions that the assessments team determines what data and information to collect, the appropriate style of analysis, and how to display the results so those results are clear to and impactful on the audience:

- Which decisions need to be made?
- When is the earliest time each decision can be made?
- When is the latest time each decision can be made?
- What is the risk of not making the decision on time?
- What is the expected effect of the decision?

The Mountain Readiness Conference (A Vignette About Focus)

The 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum used a monthly event known as the Mountain Readiness Conference (MRC), run by the division's operations officer and facilitated by the assessments team, to gauge if it was going in the right (the commanding general's) direction. The MRC is a venue for senior command-level discussion including all lieutenant colonel and above commanders in the unit and on the installation (commanders from the 4th Brigade Combat Team attend virtually from Fort Polk, La., for topics that are not specific to Fort Drum).

Due to the size of the organization and the amount of data available, it was not possible to discuss all the possible analysis considered interesting by all parties. Command priorities and objectives, coupled with the five decision support questions previously stated, provided a focus for the analysis to be presented at the MRC. Only the highest priority topics impacting decisions that needed to be made "soon" and affected a large part of the organization were discussed in the conference. Items identified as having secondary importance were analyzed, and insights generated were promulgated to each unit and staff section.

Assessment is a team sport.

The late Ray Kroc (former CEO of McDonald's) made an observation about organizational effectiveness at McDonald's — all of us is better than any of us — that applies to the assessment team. Staff cohesion makes or breaks the assessment process. In any environment, operational assessments are driven by data collected by people. The set of data is analyzed by professionals and synthesized into information. Refined information is discussed with subject matter experts, gleaning the "why" behind the "what" and turning information into knowledge that is shared with decision makers.

Fort Drum's Suicide Prevention Task Force (A Vignette About Teamwork)

The three commanding generals that led the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum from 2009-2013 consistently focused on Soldier wellness as a primary area of command attention. Unfortunately, there is/has been no set of quantitative measures identified to date that successfully predict when a Soldier will commit some act of indiscipline (such as driving while drunk) or self-harm (such as a suicide event). However, the assessment team at Fort Drum developed qualitative findings that could help small unit leaders keep their Soldiers safe from both acts of indiscipline and self-harm by leveraging the fact that "human relationships save human lives."

Fort Drum's Suicide Prevention Task Force (SPTF) had collected story boards over a six-month period in 2012 that included the details of every suicide ideation, attempt, completed suicide, or other self-harm incident. As the SPTF was challenged to make sense of the data, the assessments team assisted. Three of the 14 factors identified in the suicide prevention "Gold Book" manifested more often and were more causal than the other 11 factors. In a manner of speaking, these factors "bubbled to the top" of importance in this issue. The three factors (relationship problems, military work stress, and substance abuse) manifested at a rate about two-thirds higher than the next "layer" of risk factors. These three factors give leaders insight into how to diagnose their most at-risk Soldiers.

No one agency could have collected the data, analyzed it, and reported it. It took the entire SPTF, as a team, to produce the insights that enabled leaders an important facet of taking care of the most at-risk Soldiers. Subsequently, it was the leadership teams that must pick up the information and use it, or the information is useless.

Leadership is paramount.

For any team to maintain its focus and be successful, it must have strong leadership. The leader of a command's assessment team must be a team builder who has the savvy to maintain the relationships that keep a diverse team together after it's formed. This leader also needs to be an individual viewed as a "closer" within the organization, a person who can manage a complex task through its completion.

Who is this leader? The individual that should be in charge of the command's assessments initiative has been a source of contention for some time. As discussed by Dr. Stephen Downes-Martin (Naval War College) and Dr. Jonathan Schroden (Center for Navy Analysis), this responsibility typically falls on the person with technical expertise in the area of analysis — those school-trained in operations research and systems analysis (the dreaded ORSA). If the command does not have an ORSA, it finds the person on the staff regarded as a "quant" or an analytical thinker. It needn't be so.

Quantitative analysis is but one part (and not the most important part) of the assessments process. An observation that pains an analyst to make is that while "number crunching" is interesting to the folks doing it, it's rarely interesting to anyone else. What is interesting to many is the discussion surrounding analytical outputs. It is what comes out of this discussion that is valuable to the commander (or any decision maker) — not necessarily what goes in to it.

While the assessments leader does not have to be a numbers person, the ability to conduct high-quality quantitative analysis is required for a productive assessment process. Few mistakes damage the

reputation of work that includes analysis more than bad science. Downes-Martin observed "the proliferation of 'junk arithmetic' and flawed logic [damages] commanders' credibility and decision support..."[3] Consider that "high-quality" quantitative analysis is not the same as "complicated" analysis. Einstein is attributed with the thought that "everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." It is so with decision support. Find an analyst who understands the problems at hand, knows what the boss needs, and doesn't add superfluous complexity.

The ability to conduct appropriate, scientifically correct analysis isn't the only specific talent the assessment leader must recruit. The second is communication. Insightful analysis is only useful if it's heard and understood by decision makers. There must be at least one person on the assessment team who can transform a wide variety of inputs into a useful message to the intended audience. This communicator must be able to capture the essence of discussions throughout the assessment process, combine this essence with outputs of the process, and relate potentially complex ideas in plain language to a diverse audience, both orally and in writing. Without such a communicator, the message of progress is potentially misunderstood, lost, or does not reach the entirety of the intended audience.

It takes an effective leader to be able to bring together the right personnel with the right experience and knowledge to have a productive dialogue. As mentioned, the team must have an analyst and communicator. The remaining members of the team must be selected to form a representation of the organization as a whole. Often, the right people have no direct linkage within the organization; they have to be "asked rather than tasked" to participate. Recruiting people to the assessments process and motivating them to stay is an exercise in (usually) peer leadership, generally thought to be the most difficult form of leadership.

Diversity enables knowledge generation.

The importance of diversity in thinking has already been suggested in this article. It is quite simply, the "wisdom of crowds," to borrow a phrase made popular by James Surowiecki's book of the same title.[4] In the book, Surowiecki highlights characteristics of "wise" crowds and "failure" crowds, summarized in Figure 2. Consider these factors in choosing who to recruit into the assessments process.

Figure 2 — Characteristics of "Wise" and "Failure" Crowds

"Wise" Crowd	"Failure" Crowd
Diversity of Opinion	Homogeneity
Independence	Centralization
Decentralization	Division
Aggregation	Imitation
	Emotionality

In the military environment, it may be easier to identify experts that fit the characteristics of the "wise" crowd than in other organizations, as military staffs are compartmented by skill set and experience. However, the importance of a dynamic leader shines through as someone who needs to bring a group of diverse group of independently thinking people together. The more difficult task is then to manage the time and discussion in an unconstrained, decentralized manner so opinions are aggregated and productive outputs are generated for decision makers.

The benefits of a diverse assessments team reach well beyond the primary effect, which is to generate the most useful, timely, refined knowledge to support decision making. The assessments process also serves as a staff-integrating and synchronizing function. The wider net cast to comprise the assessments group, the wider the direct message of analytical and assessment findings and results are spread. The staff receives information going to the commander firsthand rather than through layers of filters that pervert the actual message. As actual results are promulgated, the primary staff officers and subordinate commanders see where the data they send goes and how it is used. The utility of the process becomes evident, the amount and fidelity of data and information received increases, and the process becomes more useful — a virtuous cycle.

The four principles of effective assessment (focus, teamwork, leadership, and diversity) may take different practical forms in garrison compared with the combat environment, but they are the foundation of a useful, productive assessment process. Strong leadership is paramount in not only assembling the assessments team, but getting the most out of this diverse talent pool. Having to ask for help and not being able to task for support can be more of a challenge but results in unity borne of choice rather than compliance resulting from orders.

When strong leadership builds a diverse, cross-functional team, the resultant outputs are greater than what would be possible from each of the individuals. Ideas bounce off each other, merge, grow, and mature, providing synthesized knowledge and insight that is "graduate-level" support to command decision making. When this intellectual capacity is focused on those decisions the commander deems critical to move his organization forward toward its goals (on time), the entire organization benefits.

Conclusion

Assessments are deemed critical in the combat environment, yet seem to be largely forgotten about in the garrison environment. There are many forces at work causing this to be so — from the emotional letdown upon returning from a life-and-death environment, to units being ripped apart and re-assembled, to the presence of multiple commanders and conflicting priorities. Even so, the fact remains that even the most-deployed units have spent more than 60 percent of the last 12 years in garrison. A process so relied upon in combat cannot be disregarded in the very environment we spend the most time. Use the 10th Mountain Division's assessment principles (strong leadership, assessment team diversity, and focus on command priorities) and realize the benefits of analytical support to decision making — even at home.

Notes

[1] William P. Upshur, Jonathan W. Roginski, and David J. Kilcullen, "Recognizing Systems in Afghanistan — Lessons Learned and New Approaches to Operational Assessments," *Prism*, Vol. 3, No.3 (06/2012): 87.
[2] Jonathan Schroden, "Why Operations Assessments Fail — It's Not Just the Metrics," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Autumn 2011): 89.
[3] Stephen Downes-Martin, "Operations Assessment in Afghanistan is Broken — What is to be Done?" *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Autumn 2011): 103
[4] James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (NY: Random House, 2004).

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