The Best Classroom:

Reflections from the MCCC Field Exercise Pilot

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The outcomes of the Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) state that graduates will master troop leading procedures (TLPs), utilize critical thinking to understand and apply mission command, and be precise and lethal in the synchronization of combined arms maneuver. Above all, the course expects that graduates are ready to successfully serve as either a company commander or staff officer on a battalion or brigade staff. Historically, these outcomes were accomplished during MCCC's company and battalion phases, primarily through classroom-based instruction, TLP operation order (OPORD) writing and presentation exercises, and the use of simulations. Understanding that the course must provide graduates who can thrive in a complex environment to win, the staff and a select number of MCCC student captains piloted an initiative that added a five-day field training exercise (FTX) to the course's syllabus to exercise and evaluate students in a live training environment where they plan and execute company-level operations.

The FTX was the result of much leader dialogue at the Maneuver Center of Excellence in collaboration with operational units and the Combat Training Centers (CTCs), which have found that MCCC graduates need "hands-on" practical application of the fundamentals the course is instructing in a field environment in order to set them up for success in their post-graduation unit of assignment.

As a result, this FTX grades students in their ability to meet the company phase course outcomes in a time-constrained, austere field environment. Throughout the five-day FTX, students are required to plan tactically sound, synchronized company-level operations that accomplish the mission. During planning and execution, they must be flexible and adaptive in their approach to solving problems while effectively communicating their vision and orders in a way that is thoroughly understood and inspires confidence in their subordinates (peer MCCC students). Additionally, the FTX provides a venue for students to demonstrate proficiency in the art and science of tactical planning and mission command at the company level.

MCCC students maneuver during an FTX at Fort Benning, Ga., on 18 November 2015.
Photos by Markeith Horace

The initial FTX pilot was conducted by Active Component Class 02-15 in May 2015. Twenty-two student captains from various backgrounds formed a reduced force light Infantry company. Graded company leadership positions assigned during execution included the company commander, first sergeant, executive officer, and fire support officer. Additionally, all remaining students not assigned to company positions served in platoon leader, platoon sergeant, fire support specialist, and squad leader roles, which were observed but not graded positions. Leadership positions were rotated after every change of mission, and all students were assigned a position within the company headquarters at least once. To maximize training value, all students were issued AN-PRC-119 VHF radios and were able to monitor the company command net throughout the operation. This allowed all participants to monitor the progress of the mission, maintain situational awareness of commander decisions, and ensure students were able to take away lessons learned during all phases of the operation.

For exercise design, a select group of small group leaders (SGLs) received guidance from the chief of tactics to construct a field exercise that would meet both his intent and the course outcomes to produce practiced MCCC students in planning and executing company-level operations in an austere field environment. During exercise execution, a battalion command post was employed to oversee range control requirements and, more importantly, serve as the reporting higher headquarters for the company and the white cell for the exercise. SGLs served as the observer/controllers for the exercise, teaching, coaching and grading MCCC students throughout the FTX.

This five-day field problem took place on the challenging terrain of Fort Benning's western training area. On the Friday prior to the FTX, all participants received the battalion OPORD that laid out the overall situation and unit's mission within the context of the established decisive action training environment (DATE) scenario. Early on the first morning, students occupied the tactical assembly area and conducted priorities of work that included the development of a company defensive sector sketch and fires plan. The company command team received a fragmentary order (FRAGORD) and had 24 hours to conduct TLPs. Throughout the week, students would receive multiple FRAGORDs that required the unit to conduct a raid, two attacks, one movement to contact, and one company defense. Applying a "crawl, walk, run" methodology for the event, planning timelines were continually compressed from 24 hours to only one hour as the exercise progressed. This methodology gave students the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency in the science of tactical planning at the company level.

Students utilized parallel planning with the command team working in concert with platoon leadership to develop a tactically sound and synchronized company-level OPORD. Student company commanders used terrain models to brief their plan in a way that was thoroughly understood by their subordinates. Prior to execution, commanders received confirmation and back briefs to ensure their intent would be met by their platoon leaders. Additionally, reduced force rehearsals and combined arms rehearsals on a terrain model ensured all elements understood the scheme of maneuver, were ready to execute the mission, and were prepared to respond to contingencies. Throughout this entire process, SGLs provided the requisite teaching and coaching to reinforce learning objectives.

During execution, dismounted movement typically ranged from four to seven kilometers over restricted terrain. Throughout the movement and during actions on the objective, students received scenario injects from SGLs that included observing enemy movement via mock unmanned aerial system (UAS) feeds, reacting to unexpected enemy contact, and receiving casualties. This forced company leadership to evaluate the situations, report, and make decisions to adjust their plans appropriately to exercise adaptive and flexible problem solving on-the-move. During the execution of each mission, MCCC students faced a reduced force opposing force (composed of Infantry Basic Officer Leadership Course snowbirds). The command team needed to demonstrate proficiency in the art of mission command by issuing mission orders to platoon leaders, accurately battle-tracking their subordinate units, and synchronizing numerous supporting assets including simulated fires and UAS. At the conclusion of each iteration, the student command team led a formal after action review (AAR). Guided by the senior SGL, the AAR highlighted lessons learned, ways to improve group performance during follow-on operations, and most importantly, the implications for their future assignments post-graduation.

Feedback from students who participated in the event was overwhelmingly positive. Participants noted much of the value in this experience could not have been learned in the classroom. An in-depth AAR identified several key takeaways that will guide future iterations of the event. The reduced timeline and austere environment forced students to rethink the TLP process from the method they had used previously in the classroom. The importance of warning orders became apparent as the compressed timeline forced students to rely on parallel planning. While previous orders in the classroom were completed by a single student, the collaborative planning (including the XO, 1SG, and FSO in the planning process) in the field highlighted the value of parallel planning with both the battalion and platoons. Students noted its use established valuable shared situational understanding among their subordinates. The value of clearly articulated tasks and purposes to subordinate leaders — as well as a clearly defined commander's intent — became clear as company commanders were forced to delegate greater portions of the planning process to their command teams and platoon leadership. Especially in a time-compressed environment, students found that subordinates with a clear task and purpose were able to execute within their commander's intent.

During mission analysis, students quickly learned to focus on the enemy's essential tasks during their evaluation of the threat as part of their intelligence preparation of the battlefield. A focus on friendly essential tasks during mission

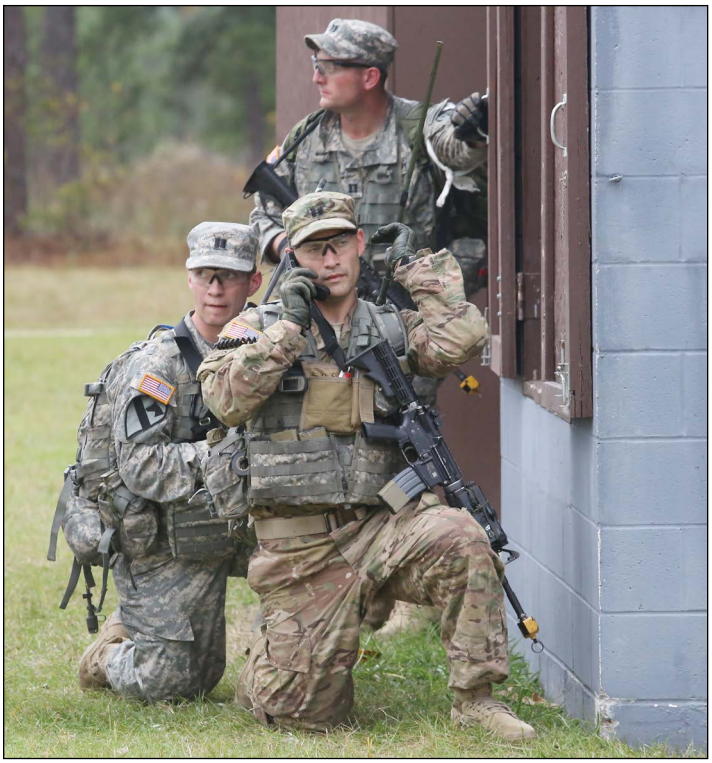
analysis expedited the identification of the initial decisive point. The importance of rehearsals — particularly reduced force rehearsals for movement to contact and raids — also became apparent as the company progressed through the exercise. These rehearsals promoted shared understanding throughout the operation. Using these techniques, students learned to produce quality company orders that were tactically sound and synchronized in the field environment.

Students found previous systems and products that had worked well in the classroom would not stand up to the field environment. As students struggled to use traditional map boards and binders that had become common in a temperature-controlled classroom environment, the value of pocket-sized OPORD shells and battle-tracking products became clear. The students also developed techniques for briefing in the field, which included having subordinates brief their portion of the scheme of maneuver, fires, and sustainment paragraphs of orders. The field environment also reinforced the importance of leader's physical reconnaissance during execution. Students were reminded that direct fire-control measures and phase lines need to be tied to terrain to ensure the successful execution of movement and actions on the objective. Students also realized the need to identify decision points and a phased casualty evacuation plan after casualties were taken during a long dismounted movement and company leadership had trouble deciding which ambulance exchange point to move the casualties to for evacuation.

During execution, students were forced to become adaptive and flexible in their approach to solving problems through injects and constraints from the environment. In one specific operation, planned target reference points that were reconnoitered using imagery were unable to be confirmed on the ground. This forced the company commander to be flexible and adjust his plan to ensure that the support-by-fire element had visual contact with the assault element. Lessons like these cannot be learned in the classroom!

Throughout the FTX, students were able to "dust off" field craft that may have been lost in the months or even years prior to attending the course. As the FTX progressed, basic skills such as noise and light discipline, proper rucksack packing, basic small unit tactics, and battle drills were refreshed. Students also witnessed firsthand the effect extended field training has on the cognitive process. These skills, the grasp of which is unique to the austere field environment, will prove invaluable as these officers go on to take command of companies throughout the Army.

Overall, the FTX pilot conducted by MCCC 02-15 added great value to the course while utilizing minimal resources. This initiative will enrich the course and allows officers a valuable opportunity to put into practical application the requisite skills they have learned in the classroom that need to be mastered to be successful company commanders. All future students coming to the course can expect continual refinement to the FTX that will support the course's outcomes and better prepare them for service in the operational Army. In due time, the FTX may expand beyond the current five days to include mounted maneuver, but that will be sorted out in the future as improvements occur in time and space. Brigade and battalion commanders can expect that MCCC graduates will arrive to their units better prepared to serve as combat leaders who can win in a complex world.



During the FTX, students were forced to become adaptive and flexible in their approach to solving problems.

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