

Maximizing the HHC in Support of TF Maneuver

CPT RYAN J. HUNTOON

On a moonless, cold night at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, a battalion task force (TF) raced across the Mojave Desert through the Whale Gap towards its assigned mission. The battalion's headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) was within doctrinal supporting range and was poised to fully support that mission. The TF ultimately achieved its objectives, but it was a "close-run thing." The HHC — manned and equipped to maximize assigned and attached combat enablers — never received the clear orders that would have assured TF victory. In that imperfect planning vacuum, the leadership of the HHC took the initiative and executed a creative and nested concept of support. If the HHC had received more clarity of purpose and detail in the TF orders, the battalion would have achieved a clear and synchronized victory instead of a close one. We have seen this outcome repeated several times during training rotations here at the NTC; outstanding leaders at all levels are not fully providing the opportunity for their infantry, Stryker, and armored battalion TFs to fully employ the key capabilities of the HHC. There are ways to do this better in training which will have a positive result in combat. In this article, I will briefly describe how the HHC should be doctrinally employed, how it is often utilized in training rotations, and then propose ways to improve its performance during that training to improve the readiness our force needs to best deliver on the battlefield.

The HHC is often underutilized in infantry, armored, and Stryker battalions to enable their TFs to fight and win in a decisive action environment. The HHC's roles, responsibilities, and mission sets may not always be maximized to support the battalion's training mission for several reasons. These may include that the HHC's role was minimized through the orders process during a rotation at NTC or that there was a misunderstanding of the full combat power of its commonly attached units. There are several ways to fix these problems and best employ the enabling combat



An HHC commander provides the tactical task and purpose to his Soldiers while at NTC.
(Photos courtesy of author)

power of the largest company in the battalion. For example, the HHC's role in the battalion fight can be directed in several critical roles to give its battalion a maximum tactical advantage and strengthen its value. The HHC commander can fight forward and take charge as a fourth maneuver commander. The HHC commander can also marshal the company's assets and enablers to best allow line companies to focus on their part of the close fight. Combat enablers such as psychological operations (PSYOP) and civil affairs (CA) teams, and external attachments such as engineer or explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) detachments, are often allocated to the battalion without an assigned headquarters to command them. The HHC command team is the right headquarters to take on that task. The HHC commander is the senior leader solution to command and control that the battalion does not have time to create. Army doctrine should be rewritten to redefine HHC roles and responsibilities and best position the TF to use its full capacity to shape the fight.

Current Doctrine on the HHC's Role

Current doctrine has the HHC commander used as the mission command conduit for the battalion trains. The HHC should provide "direct interface" and mentorship between the battalion trains operations and battalion command posts (CPs).¹ The HHC commander can be a guide to the battalion staff and forward support company (FSC) command teams operating there and move forward toward the fight. To accomplish this, the HHC must see itself as a battalion asset, not as a traditional company. In general, the HHC must evolve from an outdated doctrinal position in the battalion trains and lead in the tactical fight. As a fourth maneuver commander, the HHC commander can relieve the weight of the complex tasks with leadership and mission command of battalion specialty team enablers, attachments, and the battalion reserve. The arrival of the FSC to the fight relieves logistical roles the HHC has. The doctrine also specifies that the HHC can lead multiple tactical tasks in maneuver, security, or mission command-oriented roles, and also lead local area, helicopter landing zone, and route security for all offensive, defensive, and stability mission sets. Applications of current Stryker and combined arms doctrine to visiting rotational unit observations at NTC does not always reflect these opportunities to maximize the strength of the HHC in its direct support of the battalion TF mission.

The HHC commander is a maneuver leader and belongs forward in the tactical fight. Current doctrine describes the roles, responsibilities, and mission of the HHC and headquarters and headquarters troop (HHT) in general terms. Those roles are logistics-focused, less leader intensive, and limit the mobility of the HHC command team to positively influence the fight. Combined arms battalion (CAB) doctrine describes the role of the HHC as to provide "reconnaissance, sniper, mortar, communication, supply, administration, and medical support for battalion."² This reference limits the command team to be centralized around the company trains command post (CTCP); it states that the HHC commander "has the responsibility" of the CTCP and is assisted by the battalion logistics staff officer (S4).³ This reference does note that the primary function of the FSC is to execute battalion sustainment. It states, "The FSC in direct support of the CAB provides most sustainment to the battalion."⁴ Stryker doctrine is almost identical in its definition of the roles and responsibilities of the HHC.⁵ There are historical reasons why the doctrine recommends that the HHC commander be positioned at the CTCP. Prior to the FSC's creation, the HHC was wholly responsible for the battalion concept of support and its sustainment. With the arrival of the FSC on the battlefield, the HHC should not have to position itself permanently at the CTCP or brigade support area (BSA) and be wholly accountable for sustainment coordination.

The Problem with HHC Being Tied to Battalion Sustainment

What is the major risk with giving the HHC commander too much of a logistical support role? Without established roles and responsibilities, there may be confusion, dangerous assumptions, and failure to complete tactical requirements. If the HHC does what the previously described doctrine states, it usually will become wholly sustainment focused — a common occurrence during some NTC rotations. The HHC command team then maximizes its time and energy synchronizing the logistical flow of support from the BSA forward to all CPs and units. This was exemplified during several recent rotations where HHC commanders committed most of their energy to maintaining a 24-hour focus on logistical support operations. Their time was occupied with understanding the CTCP's capabilities and working with the FSC to determine logistical requirements (originating from reporting tools such as expenditure reports and combat slants), shortfalls to support the forward line, and what their mitigation was (managing resources of transportation assets, class of supply distribution, etc.).

These tasks derive from a battalion concept of support, one charged naturally to the FSC. During one recent rotation, the HHC led the logistical sustainment mission as part of its oversight of the battalion trains. The FSC commander was positioned at the BSA during the rotation and separated from his company, which then staged out of the CTCP under direct leadership of the HHC commander. Other key logistics planners directly involved with battalion sustainment —



A combat trains command post moves into a new position during an NTC rotation at Fort Irwin, CA.

the S1 and S4 — operated from the battalion main CP. Ammunition expenditures were coordinated and synchronized with next available assets to support the line companies prior to an upcoming battalion defensive operation. A critical, no-fail request for Javelins and AT4s to replenish company combat power was expedited on the next logistics package (LOGPAC). The S4 submitted the requirement to the CTCP via FM and Joint Capabilities Release (JCR). The requirement was delayed at the BSA when sent to higher because there were no expenditure reports, a problem that could have been solved early on in the request process with a better system. Each key leader involved — the S4, HHC commander, and FSC commander — assumed others were accountable to follow up, remedy the issue, and complete the requirement. Is the HHC commander responsible for ensuring assets and resources are allocated to the units? Is it the FSC commander? Or is it the S4 or distribution platoon leader? Once expenditure reports were submitted, the BSA could not support the AT4 and Javelin requests in time, and it took commander involvement to ensure the ammunition was prioritized and the resupply mission completed. Ultimately, the ammunition ended up arriving at the logistical resupply points (LRPs) too late for the companies' no later than (NLT) defend time. The failure of timely logistics contributed to their depleted available combat power to support the battalion defensive operation.

What is the lesson? When everyone assumes someone else is responsible due to no clear task delineation, no one is accountable. This is apparent in the multiple chains of command the logistical requirements went through and the failed accountability and leader checks at each point. Battalion commanders need to clearly delineate these roles and responsibilities to ensure proper sustainment. The doctrine should be rewritten to give the sustainment mission solely back to the FSC. Otherwise, the HHC will overlap in duties and responsibilities and can create mission failure in logistics.

Get the HHC Commander into the Fight

HHC commanders often have additional tactical experience, maturity, and judgment. They can assist in synchronizing warfighter functions through mentorship of the key leaders of the battalion trains: the S1, S4, medical operations officer (MEDO), FSC commander and executive officer (XO), and HHC XO and first sergeant. With training and mentorship, these leaders can take on these elements within the battalion trains. This will release the HHC command team to get into the forward fight with confidence in the leaders they left behind to direct those positions. Stryker doctrine describes this mentorship as providing “direct interface” of mission command of the battalion trains and their logistical, medical, and support operations.⁶ “To be effective, the HHC commander must understand not only the breadth of his authority and responsibility, but also his relationship with, and the role and function of, every leader with whom he interacts.”⁷

The HHC commander instinctively takes the role as a battalion officer-in-charge (OIC) of the CPs because that is where his personnel are and it is what doctrine tells him to do: operate at the CTCP (CAB doctrine) or back at the BSA (Stryker doctrine). For example, CAB doctrine describes the purpose of leadership across the battalion trains; it states

that HHC and FSC commanders “provide the CAB commander with a degree of command oversight for the battalion trains. A technique for these two commanders in the field is a split of location and responsibility.”⁸ The overall purpose is to ensure there is senior company-grade leadership at each battalion trains CP and accountability rearward while the battalion commander focuses forward to win the tactical fight. The battalion commander relies on accountable leaders to provide tactical judgment and “direct interface” of his guidance rearward to synchronize the warfighter functions forward to support his fight. Charge that role and responsibility and delegated leadership of CP footprints to the option of the S1, S4, and HHC XO.

The HHC commander executes the original doctrinal role of “direct interface” — a main conduit of mission command for leaders of the battalion trains. With tactical-level experience and operational understanding, the HHC commander can translate guidance from the field-grade level to the company-grade level battalion trains leaders. They can then understand it, relay and report, and then adopt the responsibility of “direct interface.” In order to measure the effectiveness of his mentorship, an HHC commander can assess how well mentees report friction points that delay or halt synchronization of warfighter functions. They can then have complete flexibility of the HHC commander to circulate between all mission CPs and develop the right subordinates to move fluidly throughout all major CPs — the field trains command post (FTCP), the CTCP, the main CP, and the tactical command post (TAC). For security, as outlined in CAB doctrine, the HHC commander can develop his XO and 1SG to oversee initial entry on the battlefield, security, and survivability, supported by oversight on each node’s security posture, gaps, site selection and use of terrain, and overall contingency and displacement readiness.⁹ This will allow the CTCP to act as the reserve CP, too. For operations at the CTCP, the HHC commander can mentor the S4 into running the CTCP as he is accountable to report on combat power. The S4 can best support the battalion XO’s concept of sustainment from this footprint.

This command and control enables FSC key leaders — its most senior logisticians — to work freely across the BSA, CTCP, tactical operations center (TOC), TAC, and forward line of own troops (FLOT). During NTC rotations, the HHC commander has been the catalyst to reinforce relationships between sustainment leaders (such as the S4 and the FSC) when confusion develops over roles and responsibilities or miscommunication delays sustainment operations. In other observations, the HHC commander has advised the MEDO on use of terrain, time, space-distance analysis, “golden-hour criteria,” and security fundamentals to help the MEDO best place the forward aid station during the fight. The commander’s coaching of those players enables them to get involved in the planning and sync their warfighter function with the plan. It also directs their systems toward the fight. It then enables them to operate with tactical perspective and translated guidance from the field-grade level to the company-grade junior leader levels. The HHC commander’s direct leadership and mentorship across the battalion trains — combined with delegating leadership of



An HHC commander coaches the medical operations officer at the Role 1 Aid Station.

these elements to the S1, S4, HHC XO, and 1SG — further allows him to be freed up to support the battalion forward fight for maximum battalion tactical advantage.

Goal: HHC Commander as Additional Maneuver Commander

Having the HHC commander as an additional maneuver commander will help reduce tactical weight on the battalion mission. Through strengthened leadership, the HHC commander is freed to support the battalion tactically as an additional maneuver commander. In this capacity, the HHC can reduce the weight of tactical tasks and enablers/ attachments that often overwhelm line companies. The HHC commander and 1SG can maneuver the battalion reserve forward at the battalion commander's call. They can also maneuver battalion assets — augmented with security — to include medical, enablers, fires, and emergency resupply forward logistics elements (FLEs). Once the battalion's tactical tasks have been determined during the military decision-making process (MDMP), the HHC headquarters section can take much of those enabler tasks, to include PSYOP, CA, unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), and any battalion attachments assigned for the operation. During multiple NTC rotations, the HHC commander was assigned combat power of a section of M1s and a dismounted squad to provide outer cordon security while CA and PSYOP teams were safely injected into the village to conduct their key leader engagement (KLE). In two other rotations, HHC commanders mission-commanded deception TOCs. The TOCs included PSYOP and CA trucks, tents, antennas, and other vehicles in addition to brigade CP node team communications equipment to appear as a mission command node. The TOCs were positioned near a main supply route to be in minimal view for the opposing force (OPFOR) to identify but not obvious enough in an unconcealed or covered environment. The deception TOCs successfully drew and separated OPFOR from the main attack body which had been directed at company defensive positions.

Moreover, the HHC commander can also provide the enabler teams a voice during the MDMP process to make sure they get used. Most enabler teams are led by junior company-grade leaders who may have trouble communicating how they are added value in the mission and how they are synchronized effectively in the maneuver plan. They may also struggle to understand guidance from a field-grade battalion XO or S3. The HHC commander can help to translate that guidance to the enabler team leadership.

The HHC commander can also lead a reinforced reconnaissance platoon combined with any array of infantry or armor to support it. The platoon's purpose can be to operate in an intermediate security zone and handle tactical tasks in lieu of a supporting brigade cavalry squadron in the area of operations. This was attempted during one rotation but with a staff officer who had not previously worked with the recon platoon. The HHC commander is the ideal leader for this mission as he has spent the most time with the reconnaissance platoon supporting their training readiness in garrison. An example of the HHC taking tactical task weight off forward line companies would be handling all local outer security, the battalion reserve element, helicopter landing zone and its local security, and passenger screening of evacuated personnel during a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO). This enables companies to focus on their primary tactical tasks without becoming overwhelmed with additional assets that the battalion allocates to them before or during their mission.

Integrate the HHC Early On to Get It into the Fight

Where can HHC commanders affect input for effective placement of their teams during the mission? One way is to position them left of the planning timeline, ideally during the course of action (COA) development step of the MDMP. By then, mission analysis is complete and the headquarters staff is prepared to begin identifying key battalion tactical and enabling tasks, and those tasks and/or attachments are then ready to be assigned to company headquarters. During COA development, HHC/HHT commanders can redirect enablers and attachments under their headquarters section.

The Importance of HHC Command Team Selection

These recommended roles for the HHC are connected to HHC company-grade leader selection. That selection in garrison is based on criteria of tactical experience, judgment, and maturity. Selected HHC commanders, company XOs, and 1SGs are almost always prior line company command teams. They are picked on their ability to lead and synchronize training readiness of the headquarters staff, battalion medics, scouts, and mortar platoons in garrison. They are charged with leading several mission essential task list training pathways and ensuring combat readiness. In short, selection of HHC commanders should be carefully considered since they are called to manage the most complexity in competing training interests of all company commands. That same experience, maturity, and judgment can be applied in the planning



During an NTC rotation, an HHC commander mission-commanded a deception tactical operations center.

and execution of the battalion mission in combat training. Problems arise due to the absence of battalion TF guidance for the HHC prior to planning and execution. As a result, an HHC command section may adopt a less leader-intensive role across the mission command nodes of the battlefield, and capabilities may be misemployed. That cascading effect can decrease an HHC's value to the battalion. The HHC command team should evolve and adapt its roles and responsibilities from the garrison to the combat environment — not take the garrison duties with it.

Deliberately manned and equipped to best support the TF mission, the HHC is often an untapped battalion asset for key supporting roles. The HHC commander should be placed forward in the tactical fight and be taken out of the battalion trains. This commander can become a fourth maneuver commander to mobilize, deploy, and lead key battalion enablers and attachments in support of the mission and to reduce tactical task weight from the line companies. The HHC commander is able to leave an outdated doctrinal role and move to support the fight by becoming a coach to battalion staff and FSC command teams operating throughout the battalion trains. He can also provide tactical perspective, translate guidance from the field-grade levels forward, and delineate roles and responsibilities throughout the battalion CP nodes. The HHC commander is the right person to maneuver additional combat power and combat enablers in support of the battalion, has the maturity and command experience to manage multiple non-standard capabilities and time, and is able to effectively phase HHC force multipliers on the battlefield when required by the TF.

As warfare progressively becomes more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, the need for more specialized supporting mission sets grows. We require all our leaders to be able to operate jointly with other branches of service and allied formations with little time to adapt. The HHC commander is the best leader who can quickly harness those capabilities and employ them into the battalion TF maneuver plan and ensure its overall success.

Notes

¹ Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.21, *SBCT Infantry Battalion* (March 2016), 7-28.

² ATP 3-90.5, *Combined Arms Battalion* (February 2016), 1-59.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ ATP 3-21.21, 1-58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-28.

⁷ ATP 3-90.5, 1-62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-26-37.

CPT Ryan J. Huntoon currently serves as an observer-coach-trainer with Scorpion Team, Operations Group, National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA. His previous assignments include serving as commander of Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, NY; rear detachment battalion commander of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 2nd BCT, 10th Mountain Division,

Fort Drum; support platoon leader, Regimental Special Troops Battalion (RSTB), 75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Benning, GA; and assistant S4, RSTB, 75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Benning. CPT Huntoon has completed three deployments to Afghanistan. He earned a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Washington.