

The Army National Guard Light Infantry Battalion at xCTC

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During the summer of 2019, the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 28th Infantry Division participated in Exportable Combat Training Capability (xCTC) rotation 19-02 from 7-29 June at Fort Pickett, VA. While the 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment gleaned a great amount of value from this valuable developmental training rotation, gaining the full training value was somewhat hampered due to a lack of understanding of what an xCTC rotation entailed.

According to the xCTC website (www.xctc.org), the Army National Guard's xCTC program "is an instrumented brigade field training exercise designed to certify platoon proficiency in coordination with First Army. xCTC provides an experience similar to a Combat Training Center to Guard Soldiers at home station or at a regional training center, minimizing cost and time away from home and jobs. The program brings full training resource packages to National Guard and active-duty bases around the country, allowing units to train on their schedule, close to home."

With externally resourced lanes and evaluators from First Army and an externally resourced active-duty opposing force (OPFOR), xCTC simultaneously frees units from the significant burden of resourcing their own training while providing neutral, third-party observation from both the OPFOR and observer-coach-trainer (OCT) perspective. While xCTC offers some aspects of what a CTC rotation presents, xCTC is not a CTC rotation. It is undoubtedly a valuable training experience, but it does not provide the same level of sustained, whole-formation, broad-spectrum operations that CTC rotations are notorious for. In practical terms, xCTC is a platoon-centric training exercise with a small amount of company-level lanes, culminating in (at least for rotation 19-02) a brigade-level exercise.



Soldiers from B Company, 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment, assault the objective through obscuration smoke during Exportable Combat Training Capability rotation 19-02 at Fort Pickett, VA. (Photos courtesy of author)



A Soldier assigned to A Company, 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment, engages a target during Exportable Combat Training Capability rotation 19-02.

Similar to the issues experienced by the battalion staff, the battalion's forward support company (FSC) operated exclusively out of a "forward logistics element" that had an administrative, not tactical, footprint and security posture. Due to a directed support course of action, the battalion was unable to gain the training value of executing the echeloned "battalion concept of support" as detailed in ATP 3-21.20, *Infantry Battalion*, exercising the challenges of moving supplies by echelon from a brigade support area to a battalion combat trains command post to a company-level logistics release point. As a result, the battalion did not have the opportunity to exercise and practice a doctrinal logistical flow. Units preparing for their own xCTC rotations should be aware of this dynamic and either embrace it in the name of expediency or push against it to provide additional training value for the tactical integration of FSC operations with the battalion's staff. This is not a light consideration; units will be adding artificial, self-imposed friction to gain training value for the battalion staff with the potential to have negative impacts on company-level training lanes.

Due to low manning, the lack of a comprehensive and over-arching scenario, and conflicting lanes-based training while at xCTC, the battalion's medics, fire supporters, snipers, scouts, and Raven small unmanned aircraft system (SUAS) operators were never fully integrated into the battalion's operations or actively employed by the companies and platoons. Here as well, home-station decisions fed in-exercise outcomes: Fire supporters, medics, and scout/snipers had not been integrated into home-station weekend drill training periods. That freedom provided to these sections enabled them to easily satisfy their specialized training goals and mandatory certifications, but it had done so at the expense of true integration with line units. The challenge of employing SUAS in the highly restricted airspace surrounding the unit's stationing in the national capital region meant that SUAS operators had been trained across the battalion, but as siloed efforts apart from the companies and with no clear means of integration in the battalion's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) flow.

Overall, while the battalion staff did not accomplish all planned objectives and gain significant development, unit leaders and staff actively conducted after action reviews (AARs), solicited feedback, and quickly set about

developing materiel and standard operating procedure (SOP) solutions to remediate identified shortfalls for the next training year.

While the companies performed superbly at xCTC, they acutely felt the repercussions of many of the previously mentioned staff-level shortfalls. The gulf between what the battalion expected at xCTC and what the unit experienced was wildly different, and the battalion inadvertently promised a training event that differed significantly than what the unit encountered at Fort Pickett. While at xCTC, the units conducted a multi-day company defense followed by a multi-day battalion defense. While the effective conduct of the defense is a core mission essential task (MET) of an infantry battalion, it lacks the “wow” factor that makes an extended annual training period memorable. The practical implication of the previously mentioned high-quality defensive posture meant that most Soldiers never engaged the OPFOR for multiple days. The battalion could, and should, have programmed more stimulating training, such as air assault operations or military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) training during the ample white space that xCTC contained.

From a tactical standpoint, insufficient weapons qualifications and LFXs were conducted in the months prior to the rotation, decisions that would directly impact unit operations while at xCTC. From an operations perspective, the unit did not aggressively pursue the administrative and tactical xCTC orders, resulting in incomplete and immature battalion-level products with which the companies were forced to contend. Insufficient numbers of trained drivers and a lack of deliberate advanced echelon (ADVON) manning resulted in the need to shuttle personnel back and forth from xCTC just to move all of the unit’s equipment. The ammunition forecasting, drawing, and delivery woes meant that companies went on lanes with insufficient ammunition. A lack of clarity on the amount of downtime the units would have during the TLP days while at xCTC prevented their ability to plan additional training or even well-resourced morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) events. A lack of a cohesive intelligence picture degraded the immersive nature of lanes, inhibiting the ability of companies to both use and train their subordinate leaders on integrating intelligence and sustainment considerations into their the TLPs.

Successes at XCTC

At the platoon- and company-level, the subordinate units of 1-175th performed magnificently. First Army evaluators provided two MET ratings for units — one with respect to manning and one taking manning into account. The unit’s manning mathematically prevented the unit from receiving above a “P” on any MET. However, with the “weighted” evaluations, all but one platoon in the battalion achieved a “T” on all of their tactical tasks. After the culminating brigade defense, the OPFOR commander and First Army evaluators specifically highlighted the competence and professionalism of the 1-175th’s line units. Specifically, the commander of the OPFOR from 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment of the 10th Mountain Division, stated during the brigade AAR that the OPFOR could not effectively find 1-175th positions. He said when they could, they were effectively engaged by indirect fires; and that they ultimately made the decision to bypass the 1-175th and engage other formations. In doing so, they ultimately penetrated an adjacent battalion’s defenses and were able to nearly overrun the brigade headquarters. One First Army evaluator stated that his screening criteria for a quality unit were to assess the “give a --- factor” and “willingness to learn,” with neither being an issue with the 1-175th. Another quipped that the unit had the “uniform discipline of a unit on its second tour in Vietnam but with the fieldcraft of a unit on its second tour in Vietnam” — unit leaders actually walked dead space with Soldiers and gun teams and created accurate sector sketches.

At the brigade level, the brigade S6 section’s foresight in requesting multiple field service representatives to support the critical mass of communications equipment across multiple C4 platforms present at the rotation; as a result, the battalion was able to make leaps and bounds of progress in updating radios, computers, and receive subject-matter-expert training to help troubleshoot and repair equipment.

Finally, to highlight one tactical innovation, the unit’s SUAS operators, S2 section, S3 section, and fire supporters developed an impromptu battle drill in which the unit’s Raven operators would actively search for enemy patrols under the direction of the S2, report through S3 to confirm friendly positions, and rapidly push targets to the fire supporters, resulting in multiple OPFOR kills.

Lessons Learned

A fully functional, operational battle staff was not truly necessary at xCTC, and the companies had tactical-level mastery that helped supplant the battalion’s shortfalls. A lack of understanding of what xCTC entailed resulted in

an unfocused training plan leading up to the rotation. However, this did not inhibit the companies from drilling the fundamentals, and that focus on fundamentals led to small-unit success. The missed opportunity was failing to develop our battalion-level staff and our company and battalion leaders on their individual competencies to knit lethal companies together into a cohesive battalion. We owe our staff and leaders enough “sets and reps” to enable tactical and intellectual mastery when we need them to leverage and synchronize all of the battalion’s internal and external enablers, systems, technology, and other resources. Once “decisively engaged” in the administrative rhythm of xCTC, the battalion staff lacked the ability to develop and implement deliberate staff training and operations. Engaging with your local Mission Command Training Support Program (MCTSP) prior to an xCTC rotation is a potential solution for additional staff training. MCTSP mobile training teams can come to your location during xCTC and provide training on mission command systems or processes, be it a full cycle of MDMP to engage the entire staff, or Command Post of the Future (CPOF) or Joint Capabilities Release (JCR) operator training for specific staff members.

In tangible terms, along with the standard friction and confusion inherent in every operation, the companies were unable to maximize all of their white space at xCTC and endured several long days in a well-executed defensive posture with little respite. The battalion was unable to exercise doctrinal sustainment, communication, or operational planning functions to their utmost. For units embarking on their own xCTC rotation, an xCTC rotation will only test your companies and platoons in a regimented manner. Make sure you understand the training calendar, what your Soldiers will be tested on and then prepare and resource them well, and have a plan to supplant what xCTC provides. Your sustainers and staff will be engaged sparingly; have a deliberate plan to test and develop them with an operational on-ramp similar to that of which you insist the companies engage. At the company level, train on the fundamentals of platoon tactics and have a plan to supplant xCTC with additional training — not generic hip-pocket training but running additional lanes and ranges at whichever location you attend your xCTC rotation. For the battalion staff, both in the lead-up to xCTC and during the rotation, force the deliberate integration of enablers down to the companies and have a deliberate “plan to plan” for the staff. Ensure you make the most of your rotation!

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A Soldier assigned to C Company, 1st Battalion, 175th Infantry Regiment, fires a star cluster, signaling a shift fire during training as part of xCTC rotation 19-02 at Fort Pickett.