

Learning after CTC Rotations: *An Approach*

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The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand.”¹

After a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation, it is difficult to ensure battalion-sized organizations learn. The unit finishes the rotation, people are exhausted, relationships may be strained, and generally, people want to get back to home station and recover. At some point, we will address what we learned, right? Oftentimes, the answer is no. Upon return from a CTC, significant recovery operations begin, leadership changeover increases, and the focus of the unit shifts to the next major event. Meanwhile, the fight to train and maintain readiness continues. Individuals learn lessons during the CTC rotation, but the fixation on events after the rotation prevents efficient organizational learning for the unit.²

One way to combat the trend of failing to learn from a CTC rotation is to plan time for the unit to reflect on its previous experience. After exercise Dragoon Ready 19 at the Hohenfels Training Area in Germany, the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment set aside valuable time to reflect by conducting weekly working groups focused on one warfighting function (WfF) per week.

Conducting a working group with leaders at all levels serves two functions: increases learning for the unit and facilitates leader development. The battalion commander should chair the working group, so the staff and company commanders can hear his or her input. This process is important because it helps improve the unit



Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, run through the breach point on 27 October 2020 during the unit's rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, LA. (Photo by SGT Thomas Calvert)



A 2nd Cavalry Regiment Soldier fires an M2 .50 caliber machine gun during a live-fire exercise as part of Dragoon Ready in Germany on 17 October 2018. (Photo by Markus Rauchenberger)

through reflection and improves subordinates through feedback and dialog — two critical steps to learning.³

Depending on the schedule and the nature of the fixes for deficiencies in the rotation, the working group can have the full staff or just key players in attendance. Making allowances for the training calendar, it is good to spread understanding among the staff about how the unit functions as a system. For example, having the maintenance chief in the working group might give him or her better understanding of how the tactical operations center (TOC) functions with the combat trains command post (CTCP) and the field trains command post (FTCP), and the chief's input into the flow of deadlined vehicle tracking and recovery might help the system for reporting and dispatching recovery assets from the forward support company (FSC).

By conducting these working groups once a week and only focusing on one WfF at a time, it is easy to track organizational improvements. The executive officer can keep track of the improvements in standard operating procedures (SOPs), maintenance, supplies, or any other readiness issues that caused problems during the rotation.

An example of a post-CTC focus on reversing trends:

After exercise Dragoon Ready 19, the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment had multiple after action review (AAR) comments from the observer-controller-trainers (OCTs) regarding a lack of SOPs on chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear (CBRN) operations. There was no SOP for marking "dirty" (contaminated) routes or for chemical casualty evacuation. The CBRN team (chemical officer, chemical NCO, and chemical specialist) met with the S3 operations section leadership and medical staff to discuss techniques for CBRN operations. After discussion, the decision was made to come up with a simple way of labeling routes (troop name + "DIRTY") that would be extremely easy to understand. For medical evacuation, due to concerns with contaminating medical Strykers, an SOP was devised where casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) would be done for chemically contaminated patients using non-medical vehicles, preserving the medical Strykers for trauma cases. The squadron XO recorded this on a tracker designed for capturing AAR topics and tasked the staff officer working on SOP refinement to incorporate the changes into the squadron tactical SOP (TACSOP).

The working group can be formal or informal, with formal sessions immediately following the rotation, and possibly transitioning to a working lunch as improvements are solidified. The XO or other designated representative is the keeper of the tracker that records AAR fixes.

One note on SOPs: If you have big (many page) products for SOPs, very few people will read them. A technique that has proved helpful is to not replicate information that is available in doctrine, taught in professional military education (PME) courses, or technical knowledge. SOPs should be "this is how this unit does business," not an

attempt to recapitulate doctrine. Ideally, the SOP should be about 40 pages at max — something someone can commit largely to memory.

We hope this idea can help commanders and staffs. CTC rotations are costly, frustrating, and exhausting. Our Soldiers deserve our best efforts to continually improve our organizations, and we hope these meetings can be a tool to avoid letting these key experiences go to waste after return to home station.

Notes

¹ Donald A. Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: John A. Wiley and Sons, 1987), 93.

² Peter Senge, author of the *Fifth Discipline*, describes the fixation on events as an organizational learning disability because generative learning cannot be sustained in an organization if people's thinking is dominated by short-term events.

³ Carey Walker and Matthew Bonnet discuss the importance of feed and dialog to improve subordinate learning in their Army University Press article "A Better Approach to Developing Leaders." Accessed from <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2016-Online-Exclusive-Articles/A-Better-Approach-to-Developing-Leaders/>.

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