The Modern Light Infantry Battalion Command Post

Modular, Minimalist, and Mobile

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The modern battlefield presents the commander with a seemingly inflexible problem. On the one hand, the standard of lethal, sensor-driven fires to lower echelons seems to demand a main command post (MCP) be able to tap the avalanche of real-time information at their fingertips while synchronizing effects across every warfighting function and domain. On the other hand, the technological trends that make this first vision of a robust MCP so attractive also spell its doom in the high-pitched sound of an enemy's quadcopter. The war in Ukraine provides ample evidence of the threat to the modern, tent-based MCP. Ever-present unmanned aircraft systems and a variety of precision fires options—from the long-range ballistic missile to the loitering munition—are real and lethal threats to command posts. The Ukrainians have pursued a "programmatic approach" to targeting Russian command-and-control nodes, so much so that some authors have dubbed Ukraine the "graveyard of command posts."[1] This unstable and complex battlefield is the environment in which the battalion MCP must operate and thrive. How does the commander then balance these competing priorities, design an effective command post, and win on the modern battlefield?

Though much studied, the answer to this question rarely produces concrete, actionable proposals. In May 2024, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment's rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) was our laboratory to seek an answer. While there is still much to practice, this article outlines a proposal for a lightweight, modular MCP and to support that recommendation with specific solutions achievable by any light infantry battalion. The MCP of the near-peer conflict must be vehicle-centric because it allows the commander different designs with three guiding principles: modularity, minimalism, and mobility, all with the goal of increasing the survivability of the command post.

The main command post in the "TOC Heavy" configuration during operations on 6 May 2024 at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Johnson, Louisiana. (Photo by William A. McNutt)

The Concept

Before we jump into why we think this redesign is imperative, we must illustrate our idea and variations. This MCP redesign centers on the M1097 HMMWV equipped with a tarp and bows (the proverbial "high back HMMWV"). This vehicle offers a blank, self-contained palette for command post design. At its heart, the proposition is simple: mount all key systems in vehicles; anything that leaves a vehicle is a liability, and its utility to the commander's ability to visualize and fight his/her battalion must outweigh their cost in mobility.

Once vehicle-mounted, the design of the remainder of the tactical operations center (TOC) must be kept simple and modular. The Modular Command Post System, Small (MCPS) is a ready-made solution (a.k.a. the SICPS). It is light, easy to erect, and infinitely expansible. Most importantly, this concept easily accommodates vehicles with the addition of a boot wall, creating an enclosed space from the elements and allowing for noise and light discipline. The modularity of the MCP enables the commander to control the scope of his command post with minimal additions to the load plan. The three stages of MCP design—unimaginatively dubbed TOC Heavy, TOC Light, and TOC Ultralight—allow the commander and staff to expand or contract the size of the TOC to meet mission requirements.

TOC Heavy: Modularity defined. The core design consists of three M1097 high backs outfitted with vehicle-mounted, battery-powered communications mated to a single central MCPS, serving as the hub of the current operations (CUOPS) fight. Even in a TOC Heavy configuration, field testing during collective training and JRTC reveals the MCP can effectively displace in under thirty minutes in daylight, so long as the staff remains ruthlessly disciplined in refusing to allow extraneous equipment to leave the confines of a vehicle. The operations sergeant major and TOC noncommissioned

The main command post in the "TOC Ultralight" configuration during operations on 6 May 2024 at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Johnson, Louisiana. (Photo by William A. McNutt)

officer (NCO) must especially monitor the work/rest cycle, ensuring that all staff members keep rucksacks affixed to vehicles save for the bare minimum required for protection from the elements.

TOC Light: A seminomadic option. In the TOC Light, the basic configuration of three M1097 HMMWVs with vehicle-mounted communications remains identical to the TOC Heavy; however, rather than halt and establish tentage (SICPS), the TOC Light remains largely on the move. The most helpful aspect of this MCP concept is its ability to remain seminomadic, emplacing and displacing frequently. It may halt for hours at a time to facilitate planning and battle tracking, but the staff remains mounted or near their vehicles, forming a loose semicircle among the three key vehicles. At night, ponchos and plenty of camo netting assist the staff in maintaining light discipline without tentage.

The TOC Light lends itself especially to rapid emplacement in an urban setting, a key feature of the modern battlefield.[2] The vehicle-mounted communications systems, carefully designed to allow speakers and push-to-talk microphones to separate from their radio mounts, enables staff to enter a hardened structure and seek shelter in the physical and electromagnetic noise of an urban area. This method avoids the time-consuming process of transporting tough boxes of communications equipment from a vehicle to reassemble in a structure.

TOC Ultralight: A large-scale combat operation necessity and the TOC's quartering party. Finally, the MCP is designed to operate from a single vehicle when necessary. While not part of the MCP establishment during normal operations, the TOC Ultralight forms the core of the concept, as it enables a critical segment of the TOC and key leaders to immediately displace all lower tactical infrastructure capabilities *in extremis*. In the case of unexpected enemy unmanned aircraft systems overflight, the TOC Ultralight immediately disconnects from the MCP and relocates, serving as the

quartering party for the remainder of the TOC. This method proved successful at JRTC with the ever-present enemy quadcopters roaming the battlefield; the key to this is always having identified jump locations for the MCP—black and gold plans. The key members of the TOC Ultralight at JRTC were the commander, S-3 (operations), fire support officer, S-2 (intelligence), battle NCO (serving as the driver), and a TC (truck commander) usually a battle lieutenant. This configuration allowed for continued battle tracking of operations while simultaneously preparing to receive the remaining vehicles of the MCP at the new location. The remainder of the TOC may be destroyed by enemy fires, but the critical core of the MCP will survive and continue to control the fight.

Redundancy in configuration and uniformity in the construction of command-and-control vehicles means that each can operate independently without a significant degradation in capability. Early testing of a no-notice field jump indicates that a single vehicle—the "Ultralight" configuration—can displace from the MCP in approximately eight to fifteen minutes with full lower tactical infrastructure capabilities. Now that we have explained our three command mediums, let's move over to the tenants that drive them, starting with modularity.

Modularity

Mobility stresses modular construction. Modularity equates to the command post's ability to assimilate in any environment without additional equipment, not losing function due to form, and the ability to execute mission command on-the-move and at a standstill with minimal degradation to capability.

The TOC Heavy configuration is the epitome of the modular necessity for the new MCP. The modular feature of our proposed MCP is the most luxurious, which in our profession usually means the least likely to happen. Nonetheless, having the ability to expand our command post in times of lesser danger is an opportunity that is necessary in the ever-changing nuances of war. While Spartan and simple, the TOC Heavy remains easily expandable. In a permissive environment, the modularity of a second or even third MCPS tent to the CUOPs hub provides a tented planning annex for extended sessions of the military decision-making process. Aside from the construction of vehicle-mounted communications systems, covered in detail in the annex, no special tools are required. On emplacement, the primary HMMWV, equipped with slide-out table and a balanced communications suite, sets the apex of the MCP. The staff erects the lightweight tent around this vehicle as the remaining HMMWVs maneuver into position, and the staff clips in their still attached boot walls. An S-6 Tactical Communication Node–Light establishes approximately fifty meters from the remainder of the TOC Heavy, deploys a series of Mi-Fi pucks for encrypted Secret Internet Protocol Router service, and provides alternating current power to the CUOPS hub. The plans section, when the commander opts to colocate it with the MCP, locates at least one hundred meters from the MCP and works primarily from the back of a self-contained Lightweight Medium Tactical Vehicle outfitted with tables, chairs, map boards, and printing capabilities. Modularity creates the commander's ability to scale the MCP based on the situation, but he or she must also consider the necessity of minimalism and how that relates to command and control, and mobility.

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Minimalism

Mobility also demands minimalism. Minimalism equates to fewer people, less equipment, mission-essential rolling stock, and a lower electromagnetic signature or we will be detected, targeted, and destroyed.

At its most minimalist, the modern MCP is not a workspace for anything beyond the CUOPS fight. The MCP features no chairs, tables, or other luxuries often found in a larger tent-based system. All of these must be housed in each HMMWV and accessed from the center of the tent. This arrangement yields several important benefits. First, it means the TOC can easily transition form factor to meet the tactical situation without significant change to its makeup or the training required of the staff. At its lightest, this package most closely resembles a traditional three-vehicle tactical command post than it does a large TOC complete with tentage. In fact, hard-mounting communication systems means the MCP can operate on the move in the same manner as a traditional tactical command post.

The appropriate mix of staff required inside the MCP must be adjusted throughout operations. Certain members of the battalion staff, including the S-1 (personnel), S-4 (logistics), and S-6 (signal), would not always reside inside the MCP at JRTC; they would be present for specific battle rhythm events or would remain in the vicinity of the command post and enter as required by the commander. The S-2 maintained a presence in the MCP and was best positioned near the commander and the S-3/fire support officer. This ultimately reduced targeting time and allowed for better situational awareness of the fight.

Displacing in all configurations was found to be most effective if the CUOPS team ensured that they could transition immediately to the TOC Ultralight configuration. Throughout the JRTC rotation, the common operational picture and battle tracking systems were adjusted to maximize the information for the commander while maintaining operations during a MCP jump. This resulted in the TOC Ultralight configuration being able to displace within fifteen minutes while the remaining personnel and vehicles prepared to move to the next location. Minimalism ensures the mobility of the MCP. Without minimalism, the commander and his or her necessary staff could expect a much higher chance of enemy disruption.

Mobility

Mobility ensures survivability. Mission command systems must be vehicle-mounted to ensure rapid displacement and movement to a new location. This also ensures the MCP can operate on the move or stationary with minimal setup. In operation, NCOs guarantee this mobility. The TOC NCO—an experienced, decisive NCO with knowledge of all key systems—must immediately begin displacement rehearsal, focusing primarily on vehicle egress routes, and ensure the staff remains disciplined and ready to move at any time.

Early testing indicates that two key constraints severely limit the MCP's ability to displace: trailers and traffic jams in restricted terrain. Trailers invariably require backing, ground guiding, and complex maneuvers in the tight confines of any suitable TOC location. Second, a good location will situate the TOC in dense terrain with thick overhead cover. This necessity tends to restrict easy access to

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turnaround points or trails to the nearest high-speed avenue of approach. If not carefully planned and rehearsed, a single vehicle can snarl the momentum of the entire displacement. At a minimum, the key leaders of the TOC—battalion executive officer, operations sergeant major, and the TOC NCO—must ensure the Ultralight vehicle maintains immediate access to the most accessible path away from a compromised MCP, ensuring it can displace even as the staff breaks down tents and antenna masts around it.

It is important to note that everything revolves around mobility. Modularity is a luxury, and minimalism is necessary to create mobility, which lies at the center of the redesigned MCP concept. These three tenets create the best environment for a functioning MCP in the large-scale combat operations environment.

The Modern Light MCP in Conclusion

A commander must have a vehicle-centric command post guided by three principles: modularity, minimalism, and, most importantly, mobility. The modern battlefield presents a complex challenge for commanders seeking to establish effective MCPs capable of navigating the ever-evolving threats while maximizing operational efficiency. This article outlined a proposal for a lightweight, modular MCP tailored to the needs of an infantry brigade combat team.

By focusing on vehicle-mounted communication systems, such as with the M1097 HMMWV, and utilizing ready-made solutions like the MCPS, the proposed MCP concept offers flexibility and adaptability to varying tactical situations. The TOC Heavy, TOC Light, and TOC Ultralight configurations provide options for scaling the command post based on mission requirements while leveraging existing equipment within the light infantry battalion's inventory.

Field testing and operational simulations like those conducted at JRTC have provided valuable insights into the feasibility and effectiveness of the proposed MCP design. After further testing at JRTC, the modular and light MCP proved effective at maintaining command and control across the battlefield.

Ultimately, this article is a starting point for a broader conversation on modern MCP design and operational concepts. It acknowledges the need for further field testing and refinement, recognizing that practical solutions must be informed by real-world experience rather than theoretical conjecture. By continuing to iterate and improve upon the proposed MCP concept, commanders can better position themselves to succeed on the modern battlefield, balancing the imperative of information dominance with the realities of a dynamic and contested operational environment. ■

Notes

1. See, for example, Milford Beagle, Jason C. Slider, and Matthew R. Arrol, "The Graveyard of Command Posts: What Chornobaivka Should Teach Us About Command and Control in Large-Scale Combat Operations," *Military Review* 103, no. 3 (May-June 2023): 10–24, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2023/Graveyard-of-Command-Posts/. This recent, much-lauded piece contains a host of prescient observations about the future of the main command post in large-scale combat but provides few concrete recommendations for what units should do with the equipment they have.

2. Craig Broyles and Charlotte Richter, "Concrete Command: Why Combat Training Centers Should Prioritize Training on Urban Command Posts," *Military Review* 103, no. 4 (July-August 2023): 12–19, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/July-August-2023/Concrete-Command/.