

Harmony in Battle

Training the Brigade Combat Team for Combined Arms Maneuver

Col. Michael R. Fenzel and Lt. Col. Shane Morgan, U.S. Army

IN JULY 1941, Gen. George S. Patton Jr. addressed the soldiers of his 2nd Armored Division and advised them that “to get harmony in battle, each weapon must support the other. Team play wins.” This fundamental concept is substantially easier to talk about than to carry off on the ground under pressure. The team play that Patton refers to must be drilled well on the practice field. On the battlefield, there is no opportunity to stop and then retrain to standard. You will be only as effective in combat as you have trained to that point.

Ordering and integrating all weapons platforms to “support the other” at the decisive point was no doubt a challenge for Patton on the battlefields of North Africa and Europe. Doing so on a modern battlefield will be an even greater challenge. Advancements in technology and modernization of platforms have added layers of complexity that render a grasp of battlefield geometry elusive to young leaders who do not prepare for it. One constant in warfighting at the tactical level is that team play still wins. Training our junior leaders to play like a team with these weapons platforms will always be an essential component of any brigade combat team’s (BCT) training progression.

Col. Michael R. Fenzel, U.S. Army, is the commander of 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C. He holds a B.A. from Johns Hopkins University, an M.P.A. from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in national security studies from the Naval Postgraduate School.

Lt. Col. Shane P. Morgan is the commander of the 1st Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C. He holds a B.S. from Norwich University and an M.A. from Webster University.



We suggest that the development of a logical BCT training progression includes three crucial components:

- Time set aside for senior brigade leaders to consider their long-range training path as a group.
- A dedicated block on the training calendar that gives the BCT commander an opportunity to see every company commander in action.
- Zealous application of a commonly overlooked training step—retraining to standard.

This article offers one approach to a BCT's training progression and the logic behind it.

Company level combat readiness requires a well-defined training progression where our officers and noncommissioned officers are repeatedly exposed and trained to employ modern weapon systems. Not unlike any professional athlete, the professional soldier must receive repetitive training on the fundamentals before transitioning to more complex schemes. Our teams must first learn the science of employing fires platforms and then develop the more complex art of synchronizing those fires with maneuver. Brigade combat team leaders should be comfortable with employing all available fires and integrating all available platforms under pressure. If we expect our leaders to confidently control and employ indirect and direct fires in combat then we must routinely construct stressful training scenarios that develop this critical warfighting skill at home station.

For more than 12 years, we have fought a different kind of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, one that demanded extraordinary maturity and insight into the human dimension of conflict. As a military, we now find ourselves asked to prepare for a very different threat. The more conventional threats associated with high-intensity combat have now joined the more familiar asymmetric threats associated with counterinsurgency operations. What we face now is a hybrid threat environment. Our challenge is to prepare ourselves for decisive action while sustaining the skills hard earned from a dozen years of war. The fundamentals of training that were such a clear focus through the 1990s are now unknown skills for those below the sergeant major and battalion commander levels.

It is no longer a given that young company commanders and first sergeants have the practical experience to train and prepare for high-intensity

conflict. As a result, the more seasoned senior leaders within BCTs have to teach them how to train and prepare. Cycles have developed in many corners of the Army where collective training events are of questionable quality—the emphasis is often on simply just getting soldiers through the training. Developing the individual skills crucial to collective training proficiency is too often a missing building block in our training progression. A holdover approach from the Army force generation era exists that includes an unrealistic six month program to reach company-level training proficiency. Yet, we are no longer tied to the stringent time constraints placed on us between Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom deployments.

The impact of this holdover effect is that time is too rarely carved out for a disciplined adherence to the eight-step training model (see figure below). Although leaders are quick to identify areas for retraining during a live fire “hot wash” (a debrief conducted immediately after an exercise with the participants), rarely are these identified weaknesses addressed with dedicated retraining time. The standard Friday retraining and recovery approach is no more than a hand wave. In speaking with our young sergeants, they lament the constant thrusting of their teams into one collective training event

Eight-Step Training Model

1. Plan the Training
2. Train and Certify Leaders
3. Select the Training Site
4. Issue a Complete Order for Training
5. Rehearse
6. Execute
7. After-Action Review (AAR)
8. Retrain

after another without the opportunity to retrain to standard at the individual and small unit level. They want the time to build proficiency from the bottom up so that their soldiers have a strong foundation of the basic skills, but too often they are not given the chance.

Our companies rarely have enough time scheduled to retrain identified areas of weakness. The failure to retrain to standard has emerged as a bad habit because, in the brief training experience of young commanders and first sergeants preparing for combat, there was never enough time to do so. They were always under incredible pressure to move on to the next stage of construction. We began an effort to change this approach in our BCT with a professional discussion on the fundamentals of training with our battalion commanders following a BCT training meeting. Our BCT was moving down the training path too fast. We all agreed that there must be a few days dedicated to talking about training at an off-site location where there was symbolically no rush and sufficient time to work carefully through a discussion of our long-range training path, the direction we should move, and at what pace the training should progress. Only after these discussions with battalion command teams would we publish the brigade's training guidance.

The guiding principle for mission command in the U.S. Army is trust, and the intent of our training symposium was directly related to solidifying that trust before embarking upon a training path. The outcome was remarkable. We achieved a comprehensive treatment of issues that had been burning in the minds of our leaders, and we not only synchronized the planned training events but also achieved buy-in from the senior leaders across the BCT. We all agreed that the graduate work of integrating fires into training and instilling a combined arms maneuver approach in the training progression began with our own organic fires battalion.

Moving in the Right Direction

We resolved from the start of our training path that the role of the fires battalion commander would graduate at some point to that of brigade fire support coordinator (FSCOORD). This would occur after his individual sections and batteries trained and certified to standard. In an effort to see the end

state of training from the beginning, he was asked to develop a comprehensive fire support exercise designed to train every company-size unit in the BCT. As the FSCOORD, he required the latitude, time, and access to BCT and division level resources to develop a method to take the entire BCT where we needed to go. Put another way, his task was to improve our "team play" on the training field.

We agreed that combined arms maneuver training for us would replicate the contemporary operational environment and encompass more than the old "walk and shoot" where fire support systems were limited to artillery and mortars. "Walk and shoot" live fire exercises served as a demonstration and maneuver confidence builder. The centrally planned, controlled, and executed exercises and scenarios included only rudimentary leader decision-making challenges. We felt more opportunities were needed to prepare young leaders for conventional combat operations. The deliberate training and certification of our leaders was the first and most important requirement if we were to progress beyond the rudimentary. We invested the most time and energy in developing leaders and their confidence to make good decisions under pressure. Integrating mortars and artillery into our plan was fundamental. In addition, close air support, close combat aviation, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms were included with the "enterprise managers" we depend upon on the battlefield (joint tactical air controllers, brigade aviation officer, and BCT collection manager). These enterprise managers were involved in every stage of the planning and education process leading up to this training event in order to ensure the integration of available combat power. We focused on presenting a three-dimensional view of combined arms maneuver to our junior leaders.

We charged all leaders in the brigade with mastering the science of applying and employing every modern weapons platform available to them. This was to occur first in the classroom with a foundational review of the technical aspects followed by the virtual employment of these same platforms. The difficulty of the scenarios was gradually increased. We charged the battalions with integrating their tactical assault command posts and tactical operations centers at the appropriate time in the training progression. Because company commanders would never have direct access to and approval



Battery A, 1-319 Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, delivers lethal 105mm cannon artillery fires in support of the scheme of maneuver during the day offensive FSCX iteration. (U.S. Army)

for air and artillery weapons platforms without a discussion with their higher headquarters, we also included assault command posts and tactical operations centers. Our focus was on developing training scenarios that moved gradually closer to a combat environment. This mission command centric approach to training began with a twofold objective: to train leaders on the art of synchronizing fires with maneuver and to simultaneously exercise multi-echeloned mission command challenges through our command posts. We developed this “complex scheme” to prepare us for our game day.

Integrating and Sustaining Division Norms for Training and Warfighting

When small units made contact with the enemy in Iraq or Afghanistan, operational and strategic level intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets and additional combat power were quickly brought on station and pushed down to the tactical level to support the on-scene commander. Many times a young platoon leader involved in a “troops in contact” situation quickly found himself maneuvering his platoon under fire against a determined enemy

and simultaneously coordinating for support. The leader was required to call for indirect fires, control air weapons teams, and “talk on” close air support. All of these platforms, of course, reside outside the BCT’s immediate organic control. These troops-in-contact events were too often the first opportunities young leaders had the chance to control these assets.

The 82nd Airborne Division’s fires and maneuver community espouses a combined arms approach to training that allows first-time execution to occur at home station as opposed to having it become on-the-job-training when under fire for the first time. The 82nd Airborne Division infantry BCTs depend upon the 18th Fires Brigade in our own division formation to provide that training experience. With respect to command oversight in preparation for the fire support coordination exercise (FSCX), the fires brigade commander, in concert with the infantry BCT commander, provide dual-key approval of all combined arms live fire exercises. This close relationship between brigades facilitates a head start toward integrating and validating the future of joint fires in support of combined arms maneuver. The development of our FSCX is a collaborative division-wide effort.

It is safe to assert that artillery units consistently apply standards of precision to live fire training. When it comes to delivering indirect fires accurately and safely, there is no margin for human error. The 82nd Airborne Division's standard operating procedures and crew drills are widely understood, enforced, and followed. The 18th Fires Brigade maintains proponency of the 82nd Airborne Division's written standard operating procedures for fires, otherwise known as the "Red Book." The document contains a compilation of standardization memorandums that provide fire support tactics, techniques, and procedures for all paratroopers assigned to the division.

The first step to the BCT's planning process for the FSCX is a thorough review of the Red Book with specific focus on the stipulated approach to planning, coordinating, resourcing, and executing an FSCX. The next step is concept-development using the Red Book as our guide and the 8-step training model as a handrail for our planning. The division's standard operating procedure for fires keeps us on a training azimuth for all individual, leader, and collective training and certification requirements. With programmatic issues under control, it was a challenge for the BCT staff to find sufficient time and resources to accomplish the published objective of training every company in the brigade. The method chosen was a month-long intensive training cycle.

The Intensive Training Cycle: A Powerful Tool for the BCT

At our two-day training symposium we agreed that every battalion in the BCT would need 30 days of uninterrupted training time to reach our desired level of collective proficiency. This was the block of training where we would "put it all together" as a team and finally have the opportunity to achieve a degree of harmony in our team play. We protected this time on our calendar. Key to success was to eliminate all distractions and move the entire BCT to the field. Since every battalion had to rotate through an FSCX opportunity, the battalions would have to build their requirements for the remainder of the month around the capstone event. We developed a training rotation where concurrent platoon field training exercises, external company evaluations, and designated squad retraining time were

occurring when a unit was not on the FSCX lane. No one was going home at night, so we developed our field-craft as a larger force. This was a unique opportunity to hone our expeditionary skills at the BCT level.

An operations order published three months in advance of execution established the FSCX as the BCT's main effort during the intensive training cycle. The training focus enabled the fire support coordinator to build planning milestones that supported the FSCX and our gated approach to the BCT training strategy. Although the planning process was initially isolated to the fires warfighting function, battalion commanders and their staffs were soon asked for their respective refinements to the plan. The BCT afforded every battalion the latitude, autonomy, and creativity to develop scalable and realistic tactical scenarios relevant to each battalion's mission essential task list.

Every company level commander knew his unit would be in the spotlight during the event—this had the collective effect of driving our young leaders to over-prepare. No longer would cogent comments made during leader professional development discussions or the conduct of some other garrison engagement be the sole determinants of their performance evaluations.

These company commanders received a complex set of tasks associated with the FSCX and a broad set of tools to accomplish these tasks. We observed many company commanders with their platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, fire support teams, and mortar sections rehearsing and drilling the same actions they would apply at the FSCX training range. Those young commanders who did not make the same type of investment were easy to identify on the training lane. They struggled in the spotlight of the FSCX.

The plan to carry out an FSCX included some fundamental principles. The first was that every company-sized unit in the BCT would go through the training. We would have a venue for rehearsals built to facilitate walkthroughs, after-action reviews, and professional discussions when companies were not on the actual training site (this was a football field-sized terrain model that accurately depicted every component of the training site). The hot washes and after-action reviews that followed each iteration of the FSCX were disaggregated, with sufficient time to cement the lessons learned.



Request for close combat attack assets is transmitted during the FSCX. (U.S. Army)

Each company went through a day iteration (offense) and a night iteration (defense) to exercise both important muscle groups. Development of the offensive “play book” options exercised each unit’s specific mission essential tasks. For example, infantry companies executed a dismounted attack. The cavalry squadron executed a mounted screen live fire exercise where they withdrew under pressure. The brigade special troops battalion’s engineer platoon performed a deliberate breach with their military police platoon in over-watch. Every logistics company across the BCT executed a mounted combat logistics patrol with multiple react-to-contact battle drills. The offensive iterations were consistently a challenge for companies to execute given the inherent difficulty of synchronizing effects on the move and under pressure. The performance of every company improved through night defense iterations, since the lessons of the day iterations were incorporated and the static scenario was more manageable.

The Imperative of Retraining to Standard

We remained steadfast in our commitment to retraining, and yet it still proved a struggle to implement because timelines were tight: 20 company-sized units in 12 days. Consequently, the BCT fenced one day of retraining at mid cycle (day 6) and allocated another retraining day at the end of the cycle (day 12).

In the midst of the FSCX we identified two companies that required retraining with brigade oversight. One company failed to properly utilize their 60mm mortars to cover maneuver, while the other company failed to implement an officer/non-commissioned officer (NCO) partnered approach to execution. The company with 60mm mortar team challenges had a certified section and demonstrated acumen in providing indirect fires from a static position. However, they did not maneuver alongside their company in the “direct lay” mode or deliver the volume of mortar fires required to support the close fight tactical scenario they encountered. We

corrected this deficiency by walking the company commander through two additional iterations without maneuver elements and with the FSCO-ORD coaching him through the “new” concept. The mortar section sergeant and his team quickly gained an appreciation of how to position tubes with emphasis on when and where mortars should bound and displace while maintaining responsive firing capability. The other retraining issue was easy to identify, but more challenging to correct.

We observed most company commanders effectively using their first sergeants and platoon sergeants during the attack. However, one company did not implement this approach. The senior NCOs were more like potted plants than actual participants in the iteration. We corrected this through a professional discussion during the hot wash and explained the importance of enforcing the partnered team approach at both the platoon and company levels. Our full expectation was for the first sergeant and platoon sergeants to understand the plan just as well as their officer counterparts. We also expected the company officers to leverage the unmatched experience levels of their senior NCOs to navigate the complexity of the dynamic tactical scenario. In retraining, it appeared that the chance to focus on the partnership seemed to unlock the organizational potential of that company. They

were exceptional during the retraining iteration.

Where some companies required retraining, other company-sized units performed remarkably well under pressure. For example, Alpha Company 2-505 conducted repeated rehearsals both off-site and on the BCT terrain model. This team was well prepared to execute their live fire iteration and effectively employ all weapon systems in their fight. The platoon leader/platoon sergeant teams understood the commander’s intent for fires, knew what assets were available, and possessed a grasp of delivery response times. Equally important, the company fire support officer, along with each platoon forward observer team, clearly articulated fire support tasks, purposes, locations, and triggers for all targets with synchronized movement times and deconflicted airspace along gun target lines. Throughout this company’s deliberate attack to secure the objective, every leader confidently requested the right asset at the right time to best support their maneuver. Because of clear reporting, their higher headquarters quickly approved all fires, and airspace was rapidly deconflicted through U.S. Air Force joint tactical air controllers. Three-dimensional battle space symmetry was achieved, enabling the simultaneous engagement of multiple targets from offset air weapons teams, close air support, artillery, and mortars. Full-motion video



A 60mm mortar team conducts a bounding displacement during the FSCX. (U.S. Army)

live feeds provided intelligence and battlefield damage assessments. During the unit's hot wash on the objective area, the company and platoon level leadership were asked what contributed to their success. This question was answered without hesitation by an infantry platoon leader, who stated, "we were confident in our abilities, we've been planning, preparing, and rehearsing for months, and we've executed this same type of scenario in simulation several times over."

Achieving Harmony on the Training Field

Achieving harmony on the training field takes considerable time, organizational patience, and careful preparation. Bringing each weapon system to bear in an FSCX scenario to appropriately support the troops on the ground with massed effects should be the culmination of a deliberately orchestrated training progression. Giving our leaders the time to work with each weapon system and train on each platform in isolation to appreciate their capabilities demands a pronounced organizational commitment. Capitalizing on the growing availability of simulations and virtual training opportunities to test that understanding under stress requires discipline in the training management realm. There will inevitably be discord where training resources disappear or the right leaders are unavailable for whatever reason. All these training distracters will make achieving that "harmony" of effects elusive in advance of a capstone training event. However, executing that capstone event with plenty of time allocated to work and retrain creates a momentum and synergy all its own. Your teams will find a way to get ready because young commanders want to do well. We have the responsibility to give them the tools and the instruction to prepare them properly so they will do well. At the BCT level there must be a similar commitment to test these newly discovered skills for all company level leaders in an environment that approximates combat.

Gen. Patton obviously had it right when he suggested that team play wins. We would only add to that poignant aphorism that you must first build your teams and walk them through the paces of a sound training progression before you are in a position to fully capitalize on the benefits of team play. There is a significant degree of focus in the 82nd Airborne Division on mastering these fundamental concepts. Our battalion command teams are seeing that the science and art of fires integration and synchronization are skills that we must teach our junior leaders or they will not be able to apply them under enemy fire. As well, the partnership of our senior NCOs with their officer counterparts during the FSCX cemented a principle that should define our fighting forces in the future—we must work together to get all important business done; there is no longer officer business and NCO business—it is all soldier business.

...there is no longer officer business and NCO business—it is all soldier business.

We have very little control over the direction of the new and more dangerous strategic environment that is emerging, but we have total control over how demanding and exceptional we make our training environment. Confident and competent leaders who are thoroughly prepared will achieve the "harmony of effects and team play" required to support combined arms maneuver. Patton would not be surprised to find that the fundamental concepts driving harmony and team play on the modern battlefield remain unchanged. **MR**