Bringing Rehearsals into the Modern Age

A Digital Transformation for Divisions

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Coach Nick Saban observes a University of Alabama football scrimmage 17 April 2010 in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Legendary Alabama football coach Nick Saban, widely considered to be one of the greatest football coaches of all time, notably described his incremental approach to training his football team at fall training camp: "Couple days in helmets, couple days in shells, and then you put pads on … we want them to develop the kind of habits that are going to allow them to play winning football on a consistent basis."[1] What Saban described was his incremental build up for his team to practice, repeat, and learn their play well. This training philosophy of practicing and building speed into fundamental plays is useful not just on the football field—it can be a simple and effective training philosophy for military operations as well.

Over the last year, 3rd Infantry Division (3rd ID) used Saban's philosophy as a critical component in the division's methodology to conduct its series of division-level rehearsals. Using an entirely digital terrain model, to continue the analogy, the division first executed "without pads, wearing shorts and a helmet." Then, after the division proficiently demonstrated that play at a crawl, the division would "put on helmets and shoulder pads" and run through it again faster. And when the division could demonstrate the play with a tactical and temporal grasp of sequence and shared understanding across echelons, the division would put on full pads and execute at combat speed.

Most recently, 3rd ID deployed to the European theater in August 2024. Headquartered in Bolesławiec, Poland, the division supported U.S. European Command's Operation Assure, Deter, and Reinforce as a deterrent to continued Russian aggression within the region. As the regionally aligned force for nine months, 3rd ID also participated in U.S. Army Europe and Africa's (USAREUR-AF) Austere Challenge 24 Warfighter exercise series. In preparation of Austere Challenge 24, the division trained through one corps-level and one divisional-level command post exercise that built readiness and sharpened all warfighting functions' familiarity with their fighting products and digital systems. Each command post exercise allowed 3rd ID and its five or more brigades to execute a series of rehearsals to include division information collection (IC), IC/fires, sustainment, and a combined arms rehearsal (CAR).

Improving the Combined Arms Rehearsal: Repetitions at Speed

While many units focus on the physical terrain model for shared understanding, 3rd ID executed their rehearsals digitally utilizing the Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE) mission command system on the USAREUR-AF Mission Partner Environment (MPE) classified enclave.[2] A benefit of executing these rehearsals digitally was it allowed the greatest participation of subordinate units and command nodes that were distributed across Europe and the continental United States. The division G-2 uploaded refined high-resolution imagery to support terrain visualization, and the division knowledge managers created specifically for our rehearsals a "dirty" CPCE layer consisting of all the operational graphics, control measures, and unit icons to allow for subordinate units and outstations to manipulate in real-time. Compared with conducting the rehearsals on a physical terrain map, the digital CPCE method with manipulable layers enabled greater understanding and more innovation in a completely interactive environment.

An interactive CPCE series of rehearsals allowed the commander to validate the team's understanding of not just the "play" as it exists in a playbook (e.g., a wet-gap crossing or air assault) but confirmed that subordinate units and the staff understand what to do when the mission went off plan. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower iterated in 1957, "plans are worthless, but planning is everything."[3] With each warfighting functions' fighting products on-hand such as the division synchronization matrix, decision support matrix, IC synchronization matrix, high-payoff target list (HPTL) and other supporting fires planning products, among others, when friction in the mission appeared, leaders merely fought off these fighting products instead of a script. Moreover, discarding lengthy scripts (and relying on a digital terrain model) enabled the division to substantially reduce rehearsal preparation time. The "dirty" CPCE layer of operational graphics, control measures, and unit icons (red, blue, and green) were fully movable by anyone with a connection to an MPE computer anywhere in the world. More importantly, fully digitized, fully distributed mission command replicated how subordinate commanders will fight in large-scale combat operations where they will likely be separated by geography to increase dispersion for protection.

To start each turn in the rehearsal, units would be oriented to the time of the turn, their starting locations, weather conditions, and higher and adjacent units' missions, and the division G-2 (intelligence officer) would orient the division to the enemy activity. Units would then organically, under their own initiative,

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start executing movement or activity in accordance with the division plan and synchronization matrix. During this first iteration, as part of the "without pads" repetition, friendly forces would execute the play as planned and without significant enemy contact or interference.

After a critical event was conducted, the unit icons were then "rewound" and placed back in their original starting positions. The play was then rehearsed again—this time under the concept of "with helmets." In this iteration, the G-2 might remove the preferred course of action from friendly forces by destroying a bridge and forcing an alternate route, or enemy action would create casualties and contingencies that friendly units would have to react to.

After the units practiced this series of the critical events, each was again brought back to the start point and run at "full speed with pads." The G-2 fought the enemy and environment to introduce full friction, often with the enemy most dangerous course of action considerations. This process was repeated for subsequent critical events in the division scheme of maneuver. Adjacent units, supporting fires, aviation, and other warfighting functions all reacted to contact, slowly at first, then faster with each turn—but most critically, were required to react and respond to the declared actions of adjacent brigades during the rehearsal. This sequence ultimately built upon Coach Saban's methodology to learn to work collaboratively as a team, which reinforces habits to consistently win. It is our collective assessment that this methodology is far more effective and intuitive than the traditional methodology units use of units sequencing actions on a terrain model governed by a prepared script.

Bringing Back the Division Intelligence Rehearsal

In addition to improving how the division conducted their division CAR, 3rd ID also worked to improve how they rehearse intelligence operations. From the authors' collective experiences as a commander of Operations Group at the National Training Center and serving as observer/controllers at dozens of combat training centers rotations, it is our opinion that the majority of tactical units at all echelons have gotten into bad habits of relying on a combined IC/fires rehearsal as their only intelligence-focused rehearsal. Relying on

a single IC/fires rehearsal creates risk as units fail to fully rehearse or synchronize elements of their IC plan that is not in direct support of targeting efforts.

During a traditional combined IC/fires rehearsal, the fires and intelligence warfighting functions validate their processes and plans organized around the targeting cycle of decide, detect, deliver, and assess, or D3A, against critical enemy capabilities on the HPTL.[4] Destruction or degradation of these HPTL systems sets conditions in the division's deep area to enable the success of subordinate brigades in their fights in the division close areas.[5] But critical and often overlooked in executing the D3A process are the subprocesses inherent in the "detect" function, which are typically described

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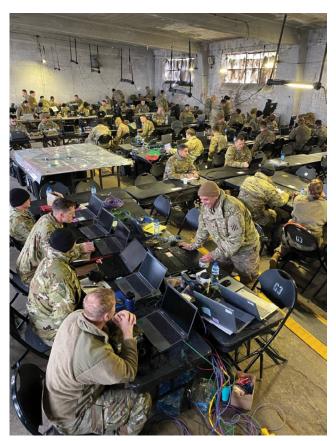
as the processing, exploitation, dissemination (PED) process.

Moreover, elements of the IC plan focused on answering priority information requirements (PIR) to support commander decision points and providing situational understanding are often not rehearsed if it is not tied to the HPTL as part of the targeting plan. To mitigate this risk, the 3rd ID G-2 executed a digital IC-only rehearsal with subordinate units prior to and in support of the division's combined IC/fires rehearsal. The G-2's goal was to synchronize, rehearse, and demonstrate technical proficiency in the linkages between information collection assets and the G-2 analysts to illustrate to them how collection informs assessments and decisions and drives operations, and how that information is communicated and disseminated both laterally and vertically through multiple paths in the division intelligence architecture.

The division IC rehearsal, executed prior to the IC/fires rehearsal, confirms every soldier within the intelligence enterprise along the PED chain understands their individual part of the play. It gives G-2 soldiers a chance to fight through their intelligence specialty and see how their portion of the play serves the entire enterprise and informs operations. With today's Army structural changes that have shifted much of the intelligence PED capabilities in divisions and brigades into intelligence and electronic warfare battalions and general support military intelligence companies, it is even more paramount to practice through rehearsals the synchronization and execution of these processes for soldiers that may not be embedded with the unit throughout the planning processes and training.

For 3rd ID, the division IC rehearsal was chaired by the division chief of staff and the G-2 and run by the division collection manager—all digitally and distributed on CPCE via MPE. In addition to the division G-2 section, joint air ground integration center team, and other members of the division staff, key participants included the division's intelligence and electronic warfare battalion, which provided much of the intelligence manpower to the division "strike cell" comprising multi-intelligence PED (geospatial intelligence and signals intelligence); intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) mission managers; and ISR technical controllers. Additionally, subordinate units participated which included brigade S-2s, brigade

The 3rd Infantry Division (3rd ID) main command post conducts operations inside an unused maintenance bay in January 2024 during a command post exercise in Żagań, Poland. (Photo courtesy of the 3rd ID Public Affairs Office)

military intelligence companies, the division cavalry squadron, the division Gray Eagle (unmanned aircraft) company, as well as other single-intelligence sensor teams across the battlespace. The division focused on two critical events during the IC rehearsal that also supported critical events later used during the division CAR: a wet-gap crossing and an airfield seizure, and the first probable line of contact with the enemy in the first forty-eight hours of operations. The rehearsal methodology was the same as outlined previously for the division CAR—critical event plays would be "rewound" several times with increased pace and complexity and utilizing only division fighting products like the IC synchronization matrix.

At each critical event, the collection manager laid out the collection plan and priorities for the phase, creating shared understanding for the G-2 enterprise. Units and sensors would then naturally narrate and execute the plan as outlined on the IC synchronization matrix. As the ISR mission manager advanced Gray

Eagle unmanned aircraft icons, the G-2 analysis control element chief introduced enemy injects and friction to the plan, which resulted in a dynamic rehearsal. If an unexpected event such as the presence of enemy reconnaissance presented itself on the digital terrain, the reaction from the analysts then drove further action. These dynamic actions allowed repetitions by junior soldiers to hone their battle drills, practice their PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency) communication plan and PED plan, and understand their role in the bigger division "play." If a geospatial analyst identified a helicopter landing zone as "cherry" (presence of a predetermined quantity of enemy forces), thus creating greater risk to mission and force, the IC rehearsal demonstrated how that sensor, observing a named area of interest, carried tremendous impact for the division. For the collection management section, it validated that the IC synchronization matrix placed the right capability at the right time to answer PIRs for that phase of the operation. The IC rehearsal not only tested the IC plan (the play) but also tested each soldier charged with a PED role at combat speed. After the PED analyst decided "what" was observed, then G-2 fusion cell could compile all the data to assess the "so what" of that intelligence's impact on current operations.

There exists a gap in our current doctrine and lessons learned publications reinforcing the importance of the intelligence rehearsal. Within Army Techniques Publication 2-01, *Collection Management*, collection managers are responsible for four IC related tasks: collection management, direct information collection, execute collection, and conduct intelligence-related missions and operations.[6] Field Manual 2-0, *Intelligence*, specifies that commanders are responsible for ensuring collection is synchronized with the operation.[7] But these publications do not specify how units need to rehearse the collection plan to demonstrate tactical proficiency throughout combat operations. An IC rehearsal in preparation for a synchronized IC/fires rehearsal simulates the collection process in real time, anchored by PED, and the role of fusion in analyzing that data. It demonstrates exactly how the intelligence enterprise will support both targeting and provide situational understanding by answering the commander's PIRs. It is our objective that intelligence doctrine restores the recommendation and importance of the intelligence rehearsal as an important foundation to the rest of the unit's rehearsal series at echelon.

What's at Stake When We Don't Prepare for Combat

Dynamic and unscripted rehearsals serve as a critical forcing function to integrate the entire division. Digital tools like CPCE with the right techniques (like manipulable digital layers) can provide suitable environments to run rehearsals, especially while geographically distributed. All warfighting functions and subordinate units must synchronize the division for success. The combination of the division's IC rehearsal, IC/fires rehearsal, sustainment rehearsal, and CAR aim to validate the plan through the division's fighting products, confirm understanding by the staff and subordinate units, and identify friction points by enabling stressing and testing of environmental and enemy conditions. Rehearsing plays repeatedly allows the division to build the confidence and competence required to outpace, outmass, and outthink the enemy, which is essential to how we win. Units cannot afford to put on pads for the first time at combat speed. Repetitions and sets are needed to master the fundamentals and solidify good habits that must be demonstrated repeatedly in varying conditions. In real-life, large-scale combat operations do not measure points on a scoreboard. Failing to rehearse effectively and honestly may yield an unbearable cost in blood and treasure. In our opinion, Nick Saban's methodology holds much promise for military units, and Nick Saban doesn't lose. ■

Notes

1. Joe Gaither, "What Nick Saban Said at Alabama Coordinator Media Day," Sports Illustrated Alabama Crimson Tide, 6 August 2023, https://www.si.com/college/alabama/football/what-nick-saban-said-at-alabama-coordinator-media-day-gaither.

2. For more on the Command Post Computing Environment and the Mission Partner Environment, see Amy Walker, "Multinational Exercises Help Improve the Mission Partner Environment," Army.mil, 27 April 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/245647/

multinational_exercises_help_improve_the_mission_partner_environment.

3. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, Office of the Federal Register, 1957), 818, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=miua.4728417.1957.001&seq=858.

4. Field Manual (FM) 3-60, *Army Targeting* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2023), 2-1–2-13.

5. FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 2019), 3-29.

6. Army Techniques Publication 2-01, *Collection Management* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, August 2021), 1-4.

7. FM 2-0, *Intelligence* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, October 2023), 3-3.