



The National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., has a unique painted-rock monument that stands tribute to all the units that have completed a rotation in the 1,200-square-mile installation. For the past 13 years that training has focused on the counterinsurgency threat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, training is centered on decisive action, the ability for units to make informed decisions against any threat. (Photo by Pablo Villa)

National Training Center Leans On NCOs in Shift to Create High-Caliber Decisive Action Training Environment

By Pablo Villa — NCO Journal

The National Training Center has seemingly always been held in high regard. The 1,200-square-mile installation at Fort Irwin, Calif., is the Army's premier combat training center. That's because it is the only training ground in the country where brigade-sized units can engage in full-scale force-on-force and live-fire training. The ability to exercise all of a unit's capabilities in a realistic environment has fueled scores of successful deployments.

The NCOs of the NTC's Operations Group have long been a large part of that success as they are the focal point of the post's observer-coach-trainer, or OCT, contingent. This group has quietly guided thousands of visiting Soldiers through the arduous tempo of a rotation in "The Box," the sobriquet applied to the 642,000 acres

of arid, gritty training area. The Box was borne of the establishment of the Mojave Anti-Aircraft Range in 1940 and rooted in the 1844 founding of a camp near the site by famed Army Capt. John C. Fremont.

For the past 13 years, units cycling through the NTC have focused on the war on terror waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. But with an ongoing drawdown of U.S. forces in those regions, the focus of training at the NTC is shifting. The post is poised for its next objective in the Army's history, one that Soldiers and NCOs will need to know about regardless of whether they take a turn in The Box.

"There's probably not an NCO in the Army who hasn't heard of the National Training Center," said Command Sgt. Maj. Stephen Travers, the command sergeant major

of the National Training Center and Fort Irwin. “But there are probably a lot of NCOs who don’t know what we do and how we are intertwined with leader development. That’s such a critical thing these days as we transition from a counter-insurgency-focused Army.”

A New Objective

Travers said the NTC hasn’t trained a unit for the specific purpose of going to Iraq and Afghanistan in more than a year. He added that the last units to do so were trained to be security force advisory and assistance teams, or SFAATs, groups designed to build the security capacity of forces in the Mideast and facilitate the U.S. military withdrawal. So the NTC has shifted its attention to a more pertinent objective.

“Now, we are training brigade combat teams for what we call decisive action,” Travers said. “We have created an environment that’s very ambiguous, very complex. There’s not just a bunch of tanks with colored stars on them driving east, and we drive west and shoot at each other. There’s a very broad scenario, and it’s really designed to train any brigade.”

The concept of decisive action has been in practice at the NTC since 2012. It is derived from analysis of Army combat engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, which identified ability and skill gaps as well as expanded roles for leaders at all levels. These lessons have been blended with the Army’s broader precepts of warfighting to create a common training scenario that can be applied to any unit. This scenario features a hybrid threat reflective of the complexities of potential adversaries, be they guerrilla, insurgent, criminal or near-peer conventional forces.

With that in mind, the NTC has worked to provide a live, virtual and constructive training environment — with an eye pitched toward mission command — that produces adaptive leaders and agile forces responsive to any contingency that arises on the battlefield. Under the mission command concept, senior leaders establish intent and objectives allowing Soldiers the freedom to dictate the speed and initiative to carry out those objectives under their defined constraints. The Box provides a real-life environment to train on those very tasks.

“Right now, the Army has regionally aligned itself so we are training our forces, but we don’t necessarily have an exact mission,” Travers said. “We’re training our forces here to execute their core tasks, but most importantly, to develop the leaders. We put them under stress, under duress. We put them in this complex environment where there are few ‘check-the-block’ answers. They have the terrain, the weather and the distance to deal with. What ends up happening is a bunch of young leaders, and sometimes old leaders, are being developed in these situations to execute mission command. So, we help train the senior leaders, on how to really provide clear intent so that the junior leaders can execute that. That’s what we call mission command.”

A Familiar Approach

Decisive action is not unfamiliar ground for the NTC.

Before the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army was in a state of continual readiness for conflicts and situations that arose throughout the world. The methods employed at the NTC then were much like those employed today. But with more than a decade of technological advances and with scores of younger Soldiers, many of whom were never in an Army that wasn’t focused on counter-insurgency, the need to get back to that state of continual readiness is a high priority.

That’s where the NTC’s Operations Group comes in.

“We have refocused on what the (Army) chief of staff’s priorities were,” said Command Sgt. Maj. Noe Salinas, the command sergeant major of the Operations Group at the NTC. “Whatever element you want as a senior trainer, we can do that here. And right now, the flavor is decisive action, which is what we used to do. And there are a lot of good things we used to do back in the day. There are also some things that we don’t need to go back to doing.

“But I think part of the chief’s message is, ‘I know that this is the best Army in the world. I know that. The thing is, we can always get better and we need to get back to our expeditionary focus.’ So, what we’re doing is we’re reinforcing what I think the chief is trying to get us to do — get us into that expeditionary mind-frame again where we’re going into austere locations, we’re setting up our base of operations and continuing to move forward. The problem is there are a lot of people who haven’t done that stuff because for the past 13 years you have been on a conveyor belt where you show up somewhere at a unit and say, ‘I’m a brand-new private. Dress me, train me and deploy me.’”

To that end, the Operations Group’s OCTs work to train units to a demanding standard. The group uses realistic scenarios and provides meaningful feedback to Soldiers from the platoon to brigade level. The OCTs are part of various Operations Group teams, such as Goldminers, Scorpions, Sidewinders and Tarantulas. Each team has expertise in a different facet of the Army. For example, the Goldminers are charged with training units on sustainment; Scorpions work with mechanized infantry.

A unit’s rotation, which lasts 14 days, is dotted with hundreds of after-action reviews, or AARs, as the unit navigates through The Box, facing off against a peer force replicated by the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, a Fort Irwin unit.

During those 14 days, the OCTs are charged with not only guiding units through their rotations, but also developing leaders who can adapt quickly to ever-changing situations.

“It’s the chief of staff’s No. 1 priority — leadership development,” Salinas said. “This place right here,

either you're going to be a willing participant, learn and be receptive to coaching and try to grow with the Army, or you're just going to be one of those people who follows, and eventually someone is going to say, 'Hey, thank you for your service.' We need agile, adaptive leaders who can improvise and continue to change with the Army."

Leading (And Learning) From The Front

To sharpen the skills of those leaders, it is imperative the correct individuals are chosen to be OCTs, Travers said. The group is composed largely of NCOs, though officers are part of it as well.

"An observer-coach-trainer is a noncommissioned officer who has successfully operated in the position that they're covering down on," he said. "So if it's a platoon OCT, there's a guy who has been a platoon sergeant successfully. Traditionally, for the past 10 years or so, we filled our ranks with guys who have deployed. So, if we're doing rotations focused on Iraq or Afghanistan, we had a bunch of Soldiers who had been there. What we don't have now is a bunch of Soldiers and NCOs in the Army who have successfully completed a decisive action rotation because there really isn't such a thing yet. But what we do have are Soldiers who have still completed that duty position and have been there and done that. So, we're slowly planting the seed.

"(OCTs) are experienced leaders, professionals. It's a great word because that's what they are. They're also experts at the doctrine. When they're not out there being an OCT, they're continually updating their knowledge of current doctrine. In a way, because we're doing a lot of new things, we're establishing precedence in this ambiguous environment we have. We're not just going to rewrite the (Field Manuals) of old, we have a huge role in creating new doctrine. Because lessons learned here at the National Training Center are constantly added to doctrine."

Salinas takes a hands-on approach with a rotational unit's AAR.

"For me, personally, the most important part of a unit coming to the National Training Center is the AAR," he said. "But it's not my AAR, it's that unit's AAR. What we

do as OCTs is facilitate the AAR to help the unit understand why its leadership has placed such an emphasis on certain things."

To ensure clear communication and leader engagement, Salinas gathers the unit's first sergeants and above, along with any primary staff members whom the brigade command sergeant major deems necessary, to meet with his Operations Group sergeants major and other key OCTs. But rather than pepper the rotating unit leaders with critiques, he opens up most of the two-hour time slot for the unit's leadership to work through any issues it's facing. Because the AAR occurs the day before the unit transitions from simulated training exercise, or STX, lane training to force-on-force maneuvers, the feedback is crucial for the unit to work through any issues to ensure mission success. The AAR also forces the unit's senior NCOs to rise to the occasion and develop themselves as leaders.

"You have all the senior enlisted leadership of the brigade there, and they're focused," Salinas said. "They're not just listening to their sergeant major, they're listening to the other six sergeants major, so they can see that it's not just their company or the battalion that there's a problem with. So they're being professionally developed by their own leaders. That's why I say it's not my AAR, it's their AAR. That's what we try to do at the platoon, the company, the staff and then the final AAR. We facilitate by throwing pictures up there and throwing our comments and their comments up there. We have them reflect on what went well, what went bad, what we need to fix while we're here. It's feedback going both ways."

The scope of a rotating unit's mission is immense by design. The scenarios laid out by the Operations Group are based off guidance from U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. They are meant to test the mettle of visiting units and prepare them to win the nation's wars. It will also prepare Soldiers to be prepared for whatever the 21st century brings.

"It just goes to show you how hard it is to be a Soldier, to be an NCO," Travers said. "That's why we're a profession. We are truly a profession of arms, where our mission requires expertise that we must constantly train and hone. Our NCOs are vital in doing that." ■



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