



Staff Sgt. David Ennis, team lead observer-coach-trainer NCO in operations group X at the MCTP, works on a practical exercise scenario as part of the Mission Command Digital Master Gunner Course at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. “I’ve been on the line for nine years, so I’m learning a part of my job that I had no idea existed,” Ennis said. “Now that I’m in this class, you really see how much goes into the planning and preparation of a battlefield.” (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

NCOs gain knowledge, experience at Mission Command Training Program

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester — NCO Journal

When Sgt. 1st Class Fredrick Behnke received word, while he was in Afghanistan, that his next assignment would be at the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., he was perplexed and concerned.

Behnke said his first thought was, “Hey, I’m a combat arms guy. What the heck am I going to Fort Leavenworth for?” The idea of getting involved with mission command certainly didn’t ease his mind, and when he asked other NCOs about the MCTP, no one seemed to know what it was.

He might not have known what he was getting into, but now, Behnke says, his assignment to the MCTP has made him a better, more complete noncommissioned officer. He is ready to serve in many more ways than before.

“MCTP can be a daunting endeavor when you first get on ground,” Behnke said. “Like for myself, I did not have any real staff time. I came straight from the operational Army, and I get here, and they are throwing stuff at me like ‘mission command.’ I’m like, ‘What’s mission command?’ Because we don’t talk

about it as an NCO corps. Which we should, because mission command is an Army concept. They start throwing things at you like the military decision making process (MDMP), and I’m, like, ‘Troop-leading procedures, right?’

“So, it’s a daunting task for an NCO when you get here, but you grow exponentially in the value you can take when you leave here,” Behnke said. “The officers and NCOs do a great job of bringing you in, and you learn it pretty quickly.”

MCTP’s MISSION

Warfighter exercise simulate realistic, complex scenarios for Army units to operate in. They combine forces from the active duty, reserve, National Guard and allied units, said Command Sgt. Maj. Timothy Edwards, the command sergeant major of the MCTP.

“Warfighters are collective training events for commanders and their staffs, at the corps, division and brigade levels,” Edwards said. “MCTP personnel, both NCOs and officers, observe, coach and train the commanders and their staffs on using the Army’s doctrine

in a computer-simulated combat environment. We focus on mission command and unified land operations.”

Behnke, an observer-coach-trainer (OCT) NCO of operations group C of the MCTP, said when he goes out to help train a unit in mission command, his primary focus is to “integrate with the brigade sergeant major and operations sergeant major and try to find out what their goals and objectives are for their staff and their NCOs as far as integrating into mission command.”

“A big thing across most staffs is they want their NCOs to, No. 1, have a better understanding of what mission command is,” Behnke said. “We, as NCOs, really don’t understand what mission command is, and we don’t understand how we integrate into mission command. We don’t understand what MDMP is because we use troop-leading procedures at the platoon level. So, they really want their NCOs to know what it is, know how they contribute, how they integrate, and then they want to make sure they are feeling empowered to integrate into the process.”

When he visits units that are training with the MCTP, Behnke works on breaking down barriers to build strong teams.

“One of the biggest tenets of mission command is building a cohesive team through mutual trust,” Behnke said. “If your staff is not functioning as one team, then it’s not going to do anything for the commander. So we

show that united front right off the bat to the training audience. It shows officers that there’s value in what NCOs bring to the table, and it shows NCOs that they can approach officers and work with them.

“For instance, for our mission here at MCTP, we go out and train brigade-, division- and corps-level staffs on mission command,” Behnke said. “I see our mission a little differently. I think when we go out and we integrate with a staff, we’re helping unify that staff. We’re showing them ways of how they can work together better, through cross-leveling information, developing a shared understanding, how they interact. I look at it as we’re helping to unify the staff. NCOs really bring that to the table. Building teams is what we do our whole careers.”

BROADENING ASSIGNMENT

Edwards has a message for those NCOs looking for broadening assignments to help their careers: You can’t get much more broadening than an assignment that throws you into the depths of doctrine and mission command as you work with a diverse group of officers, noncommissioned officers, Department of the Army civilians and contractors at the MCTP.

NCOs can find the MCTP difficult at first, Edwards said, but leaders make sure new arrivals get up to speed quickly, and they leave with skills that are hard to find elsewhere.



Command Sgt. Maj. Jeremiah Raemhild, 52nd Ordnance Group (EOD), Headquarters and Headquarters Company, conducts a mock interview on the morale, training and operations of his Soldiers with members of the Mission Command Training Program media cell, Global Network News, during Warfighter 15-2 at Fort Hood, Texas. (Photo by Ed Sudowski)

“We ask the noncommissioned officers to think about how talented they will be when they leave here,” Edwards said. “When you leave here, you can go operate in any environment. You can operate in the operational realm. You can operate in the institutional realm. You can do multiple things once you leave this organization.

“As you move up through the ranks, instead of going to your organization and saying, ‘Hey, I can do this one thing,’ you can now do several things as a noncommissioned officer,” Edwards said. “You can bring four different skill sets to the organization instead of just one skill set.”

Being at Fort Leavenworth and learning more about doctrine really improves an NCO, said Sgt. Maj. Mark Clark sergeant major for operations group S of MCTP.

“When you’re out there in the field, one thing you notice is that most people just really don’t read doctrine,” Clark said. “But when you come here, you get a chance to take the operational experience you’ve had in the field and come back and look at how it’s actually designed by doctrine. You get a better understanding of how the TTPs, the techniques, tactics and prodecures, that you use in your organization were designed and why they were changed. The experience that you can get by being here at the MCTP will make you a better asset to your organization as you go back out into the field.”

The MCTP is a “hidden gem” at Fort Leavenworth, Behnke said, and the experience can’t be surpassed.

“I’ve been a drill sergeant, I’ve been a squad leader up through a platoon sergeant. From talking to counterparts, talking to battle buddies, this job is probably one of the best jobs across the Army to really, truly prepare an NCO, in the rank of E7, maybe even E8, to go out into the brigade and above-level Army and succeed and bring value to that organization,” Behnke said. “It’s not just what you learn here by going through the workshops and readings, but you get to go out and touch so many units in the Army, from National Guard to active duty. You see what works, what doesn’t work. You’re constantly filling that mental rucksack of yours.

“You leave here prepared to go out and truly help the Army so much more than if you never touch this job, if you walk into a brigade never knowing what mission command and MDMP is,” Behnke said. “This is definitely a growth assignment, and it’s definitely a hidden thing, too.”

NCOs’ ROLE

The words “mission command” can make many NCOs turn away, thinking it isn’t their business. But in today’s Army, mission command is leader business, and that makes it NCO business, Behnke and Edwards emphasized.



Staff Sgt. Antonio Delafuente uses a workstation to manage logistical information during Warfighter 15-02, which MCTP’s operations group B was part of. “We track and ensure that supplies and equipment are ordered and sent to units,” Delafuente said. (Photo by Spc. Armando Gonzalez.)

“The word ‘command’ does usually allow us to pass that off to the commander,” Behnke said. “It says ‘command,’ so that’s the commander’s responsibility. But the commander has certain tasks, and, as a staff, we accomplish those tasks. That staff is not just officers, or just NCOs. On a staff, there is not ‘officer stuff’ and ‘NCO stuff.’ It’s ‘leaders’ business’ on a staff, because everything we do as a staff affects troops on the ground.”

“The key thing I tell our noncommissioned officers is that mission command is a leader function, and as non-commissioned officers, you are leaders,” Edwards said. “Mission command is designed to benefit Soldiers on the ground. Noncommissioned officers bring that real-world experience from being in the operational force, and we see things based on our experience. We can benefit Soldiers on the ground by bringing that insight to a command staff.”

Clark said showing NCOs their role in mission command is a big part of MCTP’s mission.

“The concept of NCO business and officer business, that concept alone can derail mission command because the NCOs’ work and the officers’ work is now stovepiped, and there’s no synchronization, which is one of the big things that we try to get out of mission command,” Clark said. “We teach them how to break down the walls and barriers to integrate their sections, so that their sections can integrate with the staff and create the shared understanding the commander needs to make informed decisions.”

Once NCOs understand their role in mission command, they can have a big influence on making sure the commander has all the information needed to be successful, Clark said.

“Regardless of the makeup of an organization, you have a role and you can bring value to the table,” Clark said. “NCOs’ experience level normally trumps that of the officers who they work with. As the officers are planning and writing orders to be executed at the tactical level, the noncommissioned officer can help them to make sure that it’s understood down to its lowest level, because they are used to being on the receiving end of those orders. They have a good idea of what works and what doesn’t work, what would make sense and what would make it simple for the units to be able to execute.”

Behnke agreed that NCOs’ experience level and skill at building teams are the two biggest positives they can bring to mission command.

“NCOs, we’ve come up from that private just doing what we’re told, all the way through to becoming a platoon sergeant,” Behnke said. “We bring the expertise of doing it — the hands-on doing it — of seven to 14 years, depending on how your career is going. That’s a lot of knowledge that you bring up. NCOs aren’t just on a staff to be command post set-up guys or make sure their guys have chow. They are there to assist the staff with accomplishing the commander’s tasks.”

PREPARATION

To prepare NCOs for the mission they are about to join, the MCTP’s training helps NCOs learn about mission command and forces NCOs to look closely at doctrine.

“When you come to MCTP, there is a Warrior Prep Course,” Behnke said. “It’s a lot of online training that takes you through with a broad brush stroke of the warfighting functions, the different parts of MDMP, of mission command. Then you have a weeklong workshop-based training where you sit down in workshops to learn, and this is NCOs and officers sitting side-by-side. So, immediately from day one at MCTP, we’re building a cohesive team because we’re all getting the same training, we’re all on the same page, we’re at the same level. We’re expected to work at that level together. It’s not, ‘Hey,

NCOs go over here and do this training, and the officers are going to do this other training.”

A role at the MCTP can be a big change for NCOs. To be successful, NCOs need to be willing to learn, Edwards said. “I would tell (NCOs) to be open to ideas from everyone, and educate yourself on doctrine, because we are doctrinally based,” Edwards said. “Being at the intellectual center of the Army at Fort Leavenworth. We have to be on our doctrine and our craft,” Edwards said.

An assignment to MCTP also means NCOs will have a different, closer working relationship with officers than perhaps they have ever had, Behnke said. That takes some adaptability.

“To succeed at MCTP, an NCO has to have — tact is a bad word for it — you have to learn how to interact with officers,” Behnke said. “That sounds like, ‘Well, yeah, NCOs do that. We see an officer, salute him, tell him good morning.’ But it’s different when you’re truly working as a team. You have a different relationship with officers than you’ve ever had before. It’s not for every NCO, but I think if NCOs truly want to develop to be future leaders — if they truly want to be that well-rounded NCO — they should want to come here. The problem is this assignment isn’t well known across the Army, and the benefits of this assignment aren’t well known across the Army.”

The MCTP helps an NCO stay relevant in an Army that is changing every day, Clark said. NCOs are taking a more important role in mission command, and it’s important to keep up.

“We (the Army) have more noncommissioned officers with education and broader experiences because of the rotation of different assignments,” Clark said. “With that alone, NCOs bring more talents to the staff and are being empowered a lot more than we were in the past. That is one of the ways that we’ve achieved success in the past few years of conflict, by empowering our noncommissioned officers to do roles that aren’t traditional. It’s no longer just based on the rank on the chest, but what we as an individual really bring to the table as a leader and employing us in that manner.” ■



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