

News from the CTC

Intelligence After Action Review Trends at the National Training Center

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Preparing to Win the First Fight

A common misconception about the National Training Center (NTC) is that a rotational unit's success or failure is determined by its ability to defeat the opposing force (OPFOR). Actually, the NTC should be treated like any other collective training event. Unit leaders preparing for an NTC rotation should be training to achieve proficiency in mission essential tasks, not defeating the OPFOR. The operational environment and the OPFOR at the NTC are training aids that serve to promote a realistic learning experience for rotational units. Within the fictional battlefield of Atropia, rotational units generally spend less time fighting the OPFOR and more time fighting internal processes for developing shared understanding and leveraging each warfighting function (WfF) to its greatest potential.

There are numerous forums for reflection and learning at the NTC. During a typical rotation, after action reviews (AARs) frequently occur at all echelons. Some AARs are as simple as an observer, coach/trainer (OC/T) with a greenbook. Others are more complex, like an instrumented AAR complete with video replay, similar to ones from a professional sporting event. Half-way through a rotation the NTC senior intelligence officer leads a mid-rotational AAR with the intelligence WfF leadership. The mid-rotational intelligence WfF AAR is the first time a rotational unit's intelligence leaders have a chance to reflect and discuss challenges and opportunities as a collective WfF since entering the box. In football terminology, it is the half-time adjustment.

The mid-rotational intelligence WfF AAR comments are illuminating for intelligence leaders across the force. They are the first true self-critique

a rotational unit has of its preparation for the NTC and its internal processes after fighting a replicated near-peer competitor.

This document is not a checklist or guide to successful preparation for an NTC rotation. Instead, it is an unaltered, non-attributional list of trends and recommendations for improvement based on the mid-rotational intelligence WfF AAR comments gathered during six rotations. The majority of the AAR comments can be grouped into three distinct categories: communication, transitions, and information collection.

It is important to consider the scarcity of time during a typical NTC rotation. Beyond specific AAR comments, and across all echelons in a rotational unit, leaders frequently note that they made certain decisions or took specific actions because they ran out of time. There is no easy solution for creating additional time, but time management is paramount to success in implementing the changes necessary to address the following AAR trends.

Communication: Beyond the Architecture

The operational environment at the NTC replicates a contested communications environment, similar to what a near-peer competitor could create. It should be no surprise that communication issues are a frequent AAR comment amongst most units during a NTC rotation. However, many units do not struggle because of the contested communications environment, but rather they struggle with what to communicate, by who, and how often. Within the intelligence WfF, sharing information is the bedrock of what professionals must do. No matter how great information is, it is worthless unless it is timely and shared with the right people.

- *“I was not sure anything we were producing was getting to the battalions.”*
- *“I had no idea what the primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency (PACE) plan was at brigade.”*
- *“Occasionally, we were able to get on the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNET) and pull down something.”*
- *“I finally gave up and drove over to the brigade tactical operations center (TOC), so at least I had something.”*
- *“We found that the Joint Battle Command Platform (JBCP) worked for pushing out updates, but the battalion S-2s were frequently changing role names so I had no idea if they were getting anything we sent them.”*
- *“After that first engagement, we were tracking that we had destroyed one (enemy) battalion... but later we confirmed that it was only a company-sized element.”*
- *“The commander made the decision to conduct rearward passage of lines (RPOL) early because we thought there were two (enemy) brigades to our front.”*

Because of the contested communications environment, there will always be problems with the communications infrastructure during an NTC rotation. This makes it even more important to discuss PACE communications planning as it pertains to the intelligence Wff. It is unlikely that maneuver battalion S-2s will have routine access to SIPRNET during large-scale combat operations. SIPRNET is arguably the best communications medium for knowledge management (KM) and for sharing larger data-rich files, like imagery. Depending on how the subordinate battalions are structured, the battalion S-2 may have to share a Command Post of the Future (CPOF) or JBCP with the S-3. Whatever PACE methods are chosen, it is important to rehearse the PACE plan to ensure it works for those subordinate maneuver battalion S-2s and that the chosen communications mediums can pass the amount of data necessary. Whoever fills the role of knowledge manager, as it pertains to passing reports to subordinate units, must have the right role names, phone numbers, or call signs for those subordinate units, and must confirm receipt once information is passed. As a method to ensure communication is occurring, it is highly recommended that the brigade S-2 schedule a periodic radio or secret voice over the internet protocol synchronization with subordinate battalion S-2s. A brigade S-2 should not go 24-hours without a direct conversation with the subordinate battalion S-2s.

Using a commonly understood language or terms of reference is equally important to communicating intelligence information. Doctrine serves as the basis for common language across the Army. If a common language is not used, two reports from two separate units about one event can result in two distinct interpretations. Many units wait until the start of a combat training center (CTC) rotation before reviewing the current OPFOR doctrine contained in the training circular (TC) 7-100 series. Waiting until it is time to begin intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to review the terms of reference for current threat tactics is too late. It is recommended that unit leadership include OPFOR doctrine as part of a leader professional development series for both leaders and Soldiers. Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) G-2 provides a mobile training team that can teach a five-day course on threat tactics. The threat tactics course is a good method to baseline unit leaders in OPFOR doctrine. The course material is not solely written to inform intelligence personnel, but also serves as a great course for all the brigade's company and below leadership.

A recurring reality for most rotational training units at NTC is the difficulty of maintaining an accurate enemy battle damage assessment (BDA). Keeping up with the BDA becomes exponentially harder if a common language is not used. As BDA reports are received and filtered for accuracy (carefully ensuring that duplicate reports do not lead to miscalculation), they are also utilized to update the unit's fighting products. A technique for avoiding misinterpretations from BDA reports is to incorporate BDA collection in information collection (IC) planning. One errant BDA report will degrade the effectiveness of an enemy situation template (SITEMP) and possibly lead commanders to make misinformed decisions. It is strongly recommended that units establish a standard for how frequently BDA reports are submitted from

subordinate battalions to the brigade, the format for BDA reporting, and what communications methods will be used.

Similar to speaking in a common language, it is important to establish key fighting products that get constantly updated and shared amongst the intelligence WfF. Common choices for fighting products are the intelligence running estimate, event template (EVENTEMP), SITEMP, and IC plan. The commander is key to the establishment and selection of intelligence WfF fighting products. How the commander wants to receive information will determine which fighting products are best. It is not only important to identify what those fighting products are, but who updates them, how version control is conducted, where they are stored, what gets updated, and when updates happen. Having a doctrine-based understanding of fighting products will assist personnel with creating seamless transitions from the TOC to the tactical command post (TAC), from day shift to night shift, and for integrating new members into the intelligence WfF team.

Transitions: Planning and Mission Command

On average, the brigade headquarters will jump TOCs every 48-hours during an NTC rotation. Many units have difficulty keeping up with the operating tempo (OPTEMPO) of the replicated operational environment. Beyond the physical requirement of packing, unpacking, and establishing a command post, units struggle with the transfer of information during transitions. Points of friction are often found in the transfer of information from plans to current operations (CUOPS,) from the TOC to the TAC, and from day shift to night shift. At each of these seams, information can be lost or misinterpreted, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) that are not rehearsed are usually discarded after the first transition.

- *“This was the first time where we had to do transition planning.”*
- *“CUOPS gave me some map products, an outdated information collection synchronization matrix (ICSM), and then we (TAC) rolled out.”*

- *“We really did not have a process for shift change.”*

During mission command node transition planning, the brigade S-2 must plan for and anticipate how the intelligence WfF will continue the intelligence cycle throughout a transition to meet the commander’s intelligence requirements. The intelligence requirements of the TAC S-2 are functionally similar to the TOC S-2. It is important to consider and document the construct of the TAC S-2, including who will man it, what systems will they have (Distributed Common Ground System [DCGS], CPOF, JBCP, One System Remote Video Terminal [OSRVT], etc.) and what fighting products they will maintain. Frequently, the TAC S-2 will need to adjust the IC plan, and need a solid understanding of the current enemy SITEMP and scheduled intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Only the S-3 can task/retask ISR assets. Therefore, a TAC S-2 must have an established relationship with the S-3, so recommendations to dynamically shift ISR are approved. It is highly encouraged to document the S-2 TOC to TAC transition in a checklist within an SOP. Once the TOC resumes control of the fight, this checklist should be followed to transition back to the TOC S-2. Ensure that the TAC S-2 is manned for 24-hour operations with senior intelligence personnel who are comfortable engaging the TAC officer in charge on recommended priority information requirements (PIRs) changes, and can be trusted to operate autonomously while the rest of the brigade S-2 section is jumping.

Too often during an NTC rotation, the brigade TOC will begin to jump and the TAC S-2 becomes overwhelmed with the amount of information they have to manage. Until the brigade TOC resumes control, which can sometimes take eight or more hours, potential opportunities are missed because of KM failures. A way to prevent the loss of valuable information is to leverage the analytical weight and attentiveness of the enabling unit S-2s, such as the fires battalion, engineer, or aviation squadron. Most of these units move less frequently and have stable access to SIPRNET. This concept for distributed KM during a TOC to TAC S-2 transition has not been fully evaluated during an NTC rotation, but it is a possible method to prevent the TAC S-2 from being inundated by KM.

Another frequent source of lost information and lost opportunities occurs when intelligence WfF personnel do not conduct a focused shift change. When time becomes a scarce commodity, decisions to assume risk in certain areas are made to save time for others. Usually a decision due to omission, the outgoing shift is likely focused on the limited amount of time it has before its next shift to eat, sleep, and conduct personal hygiene. The oncoming shift will most likely want to get started, and may overlook the need for a detailed update from the previous shift.

Requiring an established codified process for conducting a shift change seems fairly straightforward, and most units come to the NTC with a shift change checklist already in the SOP. However, these codified processes are often an early casualty of poor time management in a replicated large-scale combat operation environment. Units tend to schedule shift changes to coincide with a conventional workday, a day shift and a night shift, with one shift change in the morning after breakfast and the other after dinner. Without fail, the enemy attacks during shift changes.

There are many ways to ensure that information is not lost in the transition between shifts. First, schedule shifts where transitions occur between periods of lower activity, i.e., shift one occurs 0001-1200, and shift two is 1201-0000. Second, acknowledge time available when drafting and rehearsing unit SOPs. OPTEMPO will quickly overcome a shift change that takes more than a few minutes. Third, having a written shift change format that can be filled in as a substitute for a lengthy shift log, or shift change brief, provides a resource for the oncoming shift. Fourth, rather than transitioning the entire section/team at the same time, stagger shift intervals by position. That way, the entire resident knowledge for events that occurred during the last shift do not leave at the same time. Finally, as a method for reinforcing and retaining the pieces of information that must be carried forward, develop a two-minute drill that can be conducted frequently during a shift to ensure everyone in the section has the latest information and priorities of effort.

Information Collection: Planning and Management

IC is difficult for most rotational units at NTC. The most common trends center around one distinct problem in the brigade's intelligence WfF: collection managers and the collection management element in a brigade are rarely prepared for the overwhelming amount of resources and data sources during an NTC rotation. The saturation of resources, each with its own unique limitations and capabilities, will only increase as the TRADOC decisive action training environment continues to evolve and facilitates training in multi-domain operations.

- *"I had no idea that we had the Shadow flying for us."*
- *"We should not have put the Prophets with the retransmission site, they had good communications but were unable to collect anything."*
- *"At any given time, I had no idea what the brigade PIR were."*
- *"We had PIRs, but our specific information requirements (SIRs) and essential elements of information (EIs) were non-existent."*
- *"We were losing tanks, so the battle major pulled Grey Eagle to go look at it."*
- *"I kept sending ISR requests to brigade, but I never got a response, so I stopped asking."*
- *"We should have had a named area of interest (NAI) there, it was a big maneuver corridor and it allowed the OPFOR to go around us."*
- *"We had an OSRVT in the TOC, but no one knew how to operate it."*

When rotational units attend their academics week or leader training program before an NTC rotation, the senior intelligence trainer asks a brigade S-2 three questions. Who is the collection manager (CM), who else is in the collection management element (CME), and what kind of collective training experience do they have? Without fail, the brigade has either not decided who the CM will be, or they have a CM, but have not decided who else will man the CME. The CM and CME are the

crossroads between the maneuver and intelligence Wffs. A CM requires the experience and maturity to: develop IC plans that align with the brigade's scheme of maneuver, coherently align collection assets based on capabilities, brief the IC plan at multiple rehearsals, and recognize opportunities to adjust the IC plan in order to support emerging information requirements. It is for these reasons that having an experienced maneuver officer or noncommissioned officer assisting the CME can be beneficial to IC planning and management.

Another often noted trend is the inability of a brigade CME to effectively leverage multiple ISR assets by layering organic and echelons above brigade (EAB) ISR platforms. During a standard NTC rotation, brigade CMEs tend to gravitate towards over-reliance on EAB assets to answer PIR, while overlooking or under-using organic resources. This trend is primarily seen with full-motion video (FMV) lines, such as the Shadow tactical unmanned aircraft system. Frequently, Shadow platoon leadership are not provided a clear task and purpose, which prevents the Shadow platoon from conducting a mission orders process. During several rotations, the relationship between the brigade CME and the Shadow platoon was so disjointed that the Shadow was flying and the brigade CME did not know. The relationship and communication systems between the CME and the stake holders within the brigade for organic ISR, such as the Shadow platoon leader, operational management team (OMT) chief, and signal intelligence platoon leader, need to be practiced during successive collective training events before a CTC. The Shadow platoon leader should be an active participant in IC planning and the IC/fires rehearsal. The military intelligence company commander is best positioned to bridge the invisible rifts between the CME and the organic ISR subject matter experts (SME). When the SMEs are not able to participate in planning or rehearsals, the military intelligence company commander should be able to step in and speak to the individual systems, their capabilities, and limitations.

Another common trend rotational units encounter is an inability to forecast IC requirements beyond the current fight. Typically, a brigade IC plan improves during a rotation. At first, many brigade CMs have difficulty developing a detailed IC plan with NAIs and requests for collection that go beyond 24 to 48 hours. An inexperienced CM is sometimes part of the problem, but more often the inability to forecast IC requirements is the result of a lack of detail in the EVENTEMP and SITEMP developed during IPB that drives IC planning. The establishment of standardized fighting products for the intelligence Wff that are firmly rooted in doctrine will facilitate IC planning and foster shared understanding.

Conclusion: The Learning Organization

One of the most frequently stated forms of positive reinforcement and praise at NTC is that a rotational unit is a learning organization. A learning organization accepts critique without blaming others, learns from it, and is more successful for the experience. The mid-rotational intelligence Wff AAR comments all helped their sources learn and improve during a rotation. Most, if not all, of the AAR comments were addressed with varying degrees of success during the second half of a rotation. They were not collected and scrutinized as a form of indictment against the education and training of Army intelligence Soldiers. Instead, they were provided due to the frequency they were identified during AARs. Also, they illuminated potential seams where time and information were lost, both of which will be equally valuable in large-scale combat operations against a near-peer competitor. Hopefully, by recognizing and addressing these AAR trends, units will spend less time fighting internal processes and more time leveraging each Wff to its greatest potential, fighting and defeating the OPFOR.

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