

Expeditionary Mission Command: Lessons Learned From a Sustainment Brigade's Warfighter Exercise

The 3rd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade's path to expeditionary mission command was driven by clear guidance and a practical application of mission command as a philosophy.

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In October 2016, the 3rd Infantry Division (ID) Sustainment Brigade (SB) conducted expeditionary mission command and sustainment operations during Warfighter Exercise (WFX) 17-01, a decisive action training environment (DATE) exercise at Fort Stewart, Georgia. The brigade provided direct support for the 3rd ID and provided general support on an area basis to other units.

During the exercise, the 3rd ID SB's mission command element experimented with a tactical configuration that the brigade headquarters used in an expeditionary field environment. The brigade headquarters also used this configuration while jumping the tactical operations center (TOC) several times, as directed by the Forces Command, while continuing mission command both in reality and within the DATE scenario.

Throughout the 3rd ID SB's training progression, the brigade's challenge was to create and design a highly mobile expeditionary TOC that could provide mission command for sustainment operations while being able to disperse immediately or to engage decisively while under threat from enemy forces.

Because the Army has shifted its focus to decisive action fights against near-peer enemies, both the division and brigade aimed to replicate the first 10 days of major combat operations.

An Expeditionary Vision

During previous division-level exercises and mission rehearsal exercises, the brigade headquarters employed modular tent systems, deployable rapid assembly shelters (DRASHs), and other excessive amenities to establish large footprints, sometimes referred to as "TOC-mahals" or "tent cities." But the practice of setting up an elaborate TOC headquarters is entirely too cumbersome in a decisive action fight.

For example, during the brigade's first postdeployment field training exercise, setting up the TOC to full operational capability required three full days. Almost six hours were required just to unpack and install the flooring.

Observations and lessons learned from the Russia-Ukraine conflict indicated that units involved in that conflict had to displace every 48 to 72 hours during the first 14 days of major combat operations. To replicate that, the 3rd ID SB commander wanted a brigade headquarters that could provide mission command for sustainment operations on the move and under dynamic conditions while being mindful of tactical dispersion and protection in both daylight and limited visibility.

Across the formation, the shared vision was to be able to operate at night with night vision devices, conduct sustainment, and defend in fighting positions to standard with

18 inches of overhead cover. Consequently, the 3rd ID SB's training objectives leading up to WFX 17-01 focused on improving both mission command capabilities and tactical operations.

The ultimate goal was to establish a lean, mobile, and rapidly deployable mission command node that maximized mission command capabilities without the robust footprint of other SB headquarters.

Staff Integration and Planning

The primary staff, specifically the brigade S-3 and the deputy commanding officer, focused on molding the brigade headquarters into the expeditionary command node that the brigade commander envisioned. To complement and support these efforts, the brigade command sergeant major focused on training and developing individual skills to ensure that staff members could effectively perform tactical-level operations when necessary.

Leaders incorporated communication, camouflage, and concertina wire, known as the "three Cs," into the 3rd ID SB's TOC setup. Significant time was spent at the tactical level to develop the skills required to fight and survive against a near-peer enemy. These skills included fighting and survivability positions, range cards, and tactical dispersion techniques.

During the 3rd ID's command post

exercise (CPX) in July 2016, the staff had trouble disseminating information, creating a shared understanding, and coordinating efforts. These issues were compounded by the implementation of a new TOC setup that used M1087 expansible vans as the platform for the command node.

It was apparent that more integration and training were needed. Despite these hindrances, the S-3 and members of other warfighting functions were able to produce necessary products, including a tactical standard operating procedure, the communication contingency plan, and jump TOC battle drills.

The staff sections improved the expansible van setup by updating internal layouts, codifying packing lists, and identifying maintenance issues. The staff refused to let the physical barriers of the vans preclude its ability to communicate, integrate, and

synchronize, and it continued its march to develop digital integration.

In August 2016, the brigade conducted a nine-day field exercise with the goal of refining the jump TOC battle drills, contingency plans, and staff processes. Simultaneously, the brigade sent individuals to the 135th Expeditionary Sustainment Command, Alabama Army National Guard, in Montgomery, Alabama, to participate in its military decision-making process (MDMP) for WFX 17-01.

Following these exercises, the 3rd ID SB sent the brigade S-2, S-3, and support operations officer (SPO) to conduct a parallel MDMP with the 3rd ID for 14 days to identify tactical- and operational-level sustainment problems and mitigation options.

These events allowed the brigade headquarters personnel to develop

their course of action and concept of support briefings. More importantly, the events allowed them to publish the operation order. With a cohesive operation order, the headquarters could actively participate in several higher echelon rehearsals prior to WFX 17-01.

The 3rd ID SB led the division's sustainment rehearsals. This allowed the brigade to be more creative in its approach to provide direct support for the 3rd ID and further integrate strategic partners such as the Army Field Support Battalion—Stewart and a contingency contracting battalion.

The brigade commander and command sergeant major emphasized the importance of developing the brigade staff's noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in their roles at the brigade headquarters. Throughout the 3rd ID SB's training exercises, junior NCOs were empowered with more responsibility as battle NCOs, convoy commanders, and operation planners.

The results of integrating NCOs into the staff were monumental. Staff officers had more time to focus on future operations across multiple lines of effort. This provided the brigade commander with a better assessment of the operation.

Liaison Officers

Integration was important, not only within the brigade staff but also among various command nodes. The brigade commander sought to develop liaison officers (LNOs) within the staff. These individuals served as representatives from the 3rd ID SB to other organizations and ensured better cohesion among tactical to strategic lines of effort.

Prior to WFX 17-01, the 3rd ID SB established an LNO academy that prepared staff members to serve as LNOs to other elements. The brigade commander intended his LNOs to serve as his eyes and ears and provide the brigade with the most recent information.

For WFX 17-01, the brigade sent LNOs to the 158th Maneuver En-



Soldiers assigned to the 24th Ordnance Company, 87th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division Sustainment Brigade, attach a package to the bottom of a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter during an exercise at Fort Stewart, Ga., on April 5, 2016. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Ben K. Navratil)

hancement Brigade, the 3rd ID, and other sustainment commands. Conversely, the brigade commander sought LNOs from the 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary), the 82nd Airborne Division SB, the 1st Armored Division SB, the 330th Transportation Battalion (Movement Control), and the Canadian army.

Integrating with logisticians from different backgrounds gave the 3rd ID SB staff a deeper knowledge of sustainment planning and support operations. Establishing this network of personnel throughout the battlefield allowed the commander to provide effective mission command over the brigade.

Mission Command Nodes

The 3rd ID SB began using three different nodes to provide the brigade with an expeditionary mission command element. These nodes incorporated the brigade commander's three Cs.

The primary mission command node was the newly configured TOC, which consisted of six expansible vans. These vehicles were designated as the command group, the administrative logistics operations center, the future operations center, the current operations center (CUOPS), the network and communications facility, and the liaison office.

The second mission command node housed the SPO staff and acted as an alternate command post that was geographically displaced from the TOC. This node's five expansible vans were designated as ammunition, mobility, the distribution integration branch, the maintenance and equipment readiness division, and general support operations.

These vehicles were configured in a wagon wheel formation and were connected with the TOC through digital communication systems including the Command Post of the Future (CPOF) and the Joint Battle Command-Platform (JBC-P). If the primary node came under attack

or stopped functioning, the commander would have the flexibility to use the secondary node.

The last command node was the 3rd ID SB tactical command post (TAC), which used a collapsible maintenance shelter. The TAC was commanded by the deputy commanding officer and served as a forward command post while the TOC jumped to another location.

Designed to be an autonomous element with representatives from each of the warfighting functions, the TAC could be deployed quickly by ground or air. Throughout the exercise, the TAC was transported by a palletized load system and was accompanied by a Joint Network Node team for communications. During the operation, the TAC deployed forward before any TOC jump and maintained mission command of subordinate elements until the TOC was fully mission capable.

The 3rd ID SB wanted to establish a fully functional TOC with the three Cs within a six-hour period. The brigade staff's initial attempts to meet this criteria were unsuccessful, but standardizing the priorities of work significantly improved the staff's processes. Along with the priorities of work, the staff codified the layout of each of the expansible vans to ensure that workstations were fully mission capable.

The priorities of work were then annotated in the tactical standard operating procedure, validated during the division CPX and the jump TOC exercise, and disseminated to all the staff sections for WFX 17-01. Rehearsals at all levels were imperative to success. Previous driver's training, set-up drills, and night vision device training paid off.

Overcoming Problems

The staff members had to shift their mindset from occupying a robust footprint in a mature theater of operations to arriving with minimal equipment in an immature theater. Through trial and error, the staff realized which supplies were essential

and which could be disregarded.

Another major problem was a lack of communication between the SPO and the CUOPS. When the TOC was housed in the larger DRASH tents, the SPO and CUOPS were co-located in a current operations integration cell (COIC). Because of the shared physical space, coordination between the two sections occurred naturally.

However, with the 3rd ID SB's new configuration, the physical separation between the SPO and CUOPS grew as the vans moved farther apart to achieve greater dispersion and increased survivability.

Because the expansible vans did not provide adequate space for a physical COIC, the brigade staff attempted to mitigate stovepipes by using a digital COIC with chat functions, a digital tracking system, battle rhythm refinement, and embedded support. Both the S-3 and SPO employed LNOs as fusion officers to link SPO future operations with the current operations fight.

Systems Integration

Any structural or operational changes that the brigade incorporated into its tactics, techniques, and procedures would have been pointless if the staff members had been unable to incorporate the systems that facilitate successful mission command. A comprehensive understanding of the upper tactical internet (which includes systems such as CPOF) was indispensable.

When it came to CPOF, the staff had a noticeable knowledge gap. The brigade simulations officer and several battle staff NCOs were proficient in the system, but most of the brigade staff had a severely atrophied knowledge or a complete ignorance of the system.

The staff members needed the opportunity to learn about the CPOF and its capabilities. CPOF training was held in both tactical and garrison environments and included training on other communication systems. To ingrain CPOF into the

daily operations of the brigade staff, the brigade conducted its MDMP, course of action, and concept of sustainment briefings through the upper tactical internet system.

Consistently using CPOF ensured that the brigade commander was informed of events occurring on the battlefield. Eventually, the repeated use of CPOF throughout the 3rd ID SB's multiple training exercises allowed the staff members to become knowledgeable in the upper tactical internet functions used to communicate across the battlefield.

Another problem was the integration between the JBC-P and the CPOF. The brigade commander envisioned his staff as a "swivel chair" between the tactical-level JBC-P and the operational-level CPOF, ensuring that the 3rd ID and the 135th Expeditionary Sustainment Command were constantly updated on sustainment operations.

The JBC-P was present on the 3rd ID SB's modified table of organization and equipment, but it was never fielded in the brigade. The 3rd ID SB mitigated this shortfall by coordinating with other sustainment units across the division and providing the staff with enough JBC-Ps to continue mission command and coordination throughout the battlefield.

During the planning process, the brigade staff developed a battle rhythm for WFX 17-01. As the brigade commander constantly refined the battle rhythm to adapt to the fight, a critical path was developed among warfighting functions. This critical path was an indispensable catalyst that increased the effectiveness and efficiency of the mission command process in the brigade.

Primary staff officers were required to ensure that no members of their sections caused a stovepipe of information within the warfighting functions. To mitigate stovepiped information, staff sections held meetings within their warfighting functions to ensure that everyone had a conceptual understanding of the current operational picture.

The brigade staff's solution was to consistently review the structure of the battle rhythm throughout the operation. By the midpoint review during WFX 17-01, each staff section successfully produced a current operations dashboard, warfighting function-specific running estimates, and accountability for their battle rhythm events.

Additionally, the staff tailored a commander's dashboard that incorporated near-real-time updates to CPOF efforts. The commander's dashboard, which pulled from the staff's CPOF efforts, was a tangible indicator of warfighting function integration and the commander's ability to execute mission command.

Hurricane Matthew

The exercise was paused on day 4 because of the arrival of the Category 3 Hurricane Matthew. In true expeditionary fashion, the brigade shifted its efforts from a DATE scenario to a defense support of civil authorities mission. The brigade prepared to conduct both sustainment operations in the southwest region of the United States and rescue operations at Fort Stewart.

During the storm, elements of the brigade staff, the 87th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, the brigade engineer, and the battalion support operations officer provided real-world support to Fort Stewart and Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia.

As the storm passed and all personnel were accounted for, the brigade shifted back to the DATE scenario using the tools and lessons learned during the first half of the exercise. The brigade staff's performance was better than expected, and both the TOC and the TAC were fully operational within hours.

The 3rd ID SB's preparation resulted in a phenomenal start for WFX 17-01. The brigade discovered problems with the mission command process and adapted to mitigate these issues and find solutions.

The integration of staff personnel within the brigade headquarters and among the adjacent elements created a cohesive team that could adapt to any current or future operation. The staff's use of equipment and technology provided the 3rd ID SB with a lethal and mobile mission command node that could also provide the synchronization necessary to ensure the success of all sustainment operations.

Faced with real-world and notional problems during WFX 17-01, the staff successfully established and executed expeditionary mission command, validating its ability to plan, coordinate, and provide sustainment in support of both decisive action and defense support of civil authorities operations.

The 3rd ID SB's solutions to the problems experienced throughout the training progression continue to be refined and updated. The goal is to further develop the staff to have not only a deep understanding of mission command but also the capabilities to provide it efficiently and effectively throughout an expeditionary operational environment.

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