Value of the POP Method in Training

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Training is essential in order for Army units to accomplish their missions—especially in times of erratic or infrequent deployments. A lack of deployments does not mean that the world is safe. Threats from around the globe are as hot and dangerous as ever.[1] Training serves to test systems, maintain unit proficiency, and simulate scenarios in order to prepare units to deploy and win our Nation's wars.

Most units are on a combat training center rotation or on standby as a quick-reaction force or they are training for general readiness. Units have limited time to prepare for these missions; and often, certain aspects of readiness—such as movements, communications systems, and deployment systems—are overlooked. Using the patrol, objective, patrol (POP) method can alleviate many of these issues.

Introduced and utilized by the 326th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the POP method embodies a mission-based mindset used to maximize the objectives and completed tasks for a singular training event. With the POP method, the typical administrative pieces of the operation are replaced with realistic training scenarios. A unit patrols to the objective (possibly a range, training area, or repel tower), conducts the training event at the objective, and then patrols back to the starting point or company area. All components of the planning/preparation process, movements, and recovery are considered training opportunities. The POP method creates a more realistic training environment, provides additional checks on systems, and increases training value.

Application of the POP method allows units to realistically train the tactical skills needed in conflict without administrative movement or pauses in the tactical scenario. Leaders should strive to make each training exercise mimic a real combat mission in which the enemy is present and danger is posed. They should use warning, operations, and fragmentary orders to supply information. Movements to and from the training event should be tactical, and movement control reports and communications windows should be enforced. The Army method for planning and executing training is captured in the eight-step training model (see Figure 1, page 28)[2]; the POP method is implemented in each of the eight steps of the model, from planning to retraining. Leaders should continually enforce realism and minimize unrealistic pauses.

An emergency deployment readiness exercise (EDRE) is an excellent example of a situation where the POP method is applied in training. An EDRE is an exercise in which units, without warning, are notified of a notional military deployment. They are completely scenario-based—all the way from unit notification to the end of the exercise and after-action review. One of the 326th Brigade Engineer Battalion sapper companies recently conducted an EDRE. The company was tasked with an air assault into a breach. The platoons competed the tasks necessary for a deployment (an aircraft load, hot and cold loads on helicopters); leaders planned and briefed orders; and Soldiers conducted rehearsals. The company was then flown into the theatre via a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter and a C5 Galaxy. From there, each platoon conducted its missions. The platoons could have easily reserved a demolition range and trained on breaches on their own; however, the incorporation of required skills into a realistic scenario added significant value. It allowed the Soldiers to practice these skills in a contested environment, stressing the endurance necessary to perform breaching tasks after completing the realistic tasks involved in arriving at the objective. Engineer leaders could see that the Soldiers were more motivated than usual and had a mission-based mindset from the beginning to the end of training.

POP-based training also tests standard operating procedures (SOPs) and systems. During training, some of the smaller, yet extremely important SOPs sometimes get overlooked or skipped. Oftentimes, it is not difficult to acquire the necessary skills but regular practice is needed in order to maintain proficiency. For example, SOPs involving preparing a platoon for a patrol include precombat checks and precombat inspections. Other SOPs cover communications during patrols. The POP method creates more opportunities to practice these SOPs during a training event by including the patrolling aspect. It also adds checks on equipment and maintenance. As an example, a route clearance platoon had been conducting route reconnaissance (patrol) on the way to a demolition range (objective) when one of its vehicles suffered a Class II coolant leak and the engine started to overheat. The vehicle had been recently checked by the motor pool operators; however, using equipment for actual missions always provides a better assessment of its functionality. The problem was identified, and mechanics were able to fix the vehicle before the gunnery, which was slated for a few weeks later. Adding the additional equipment

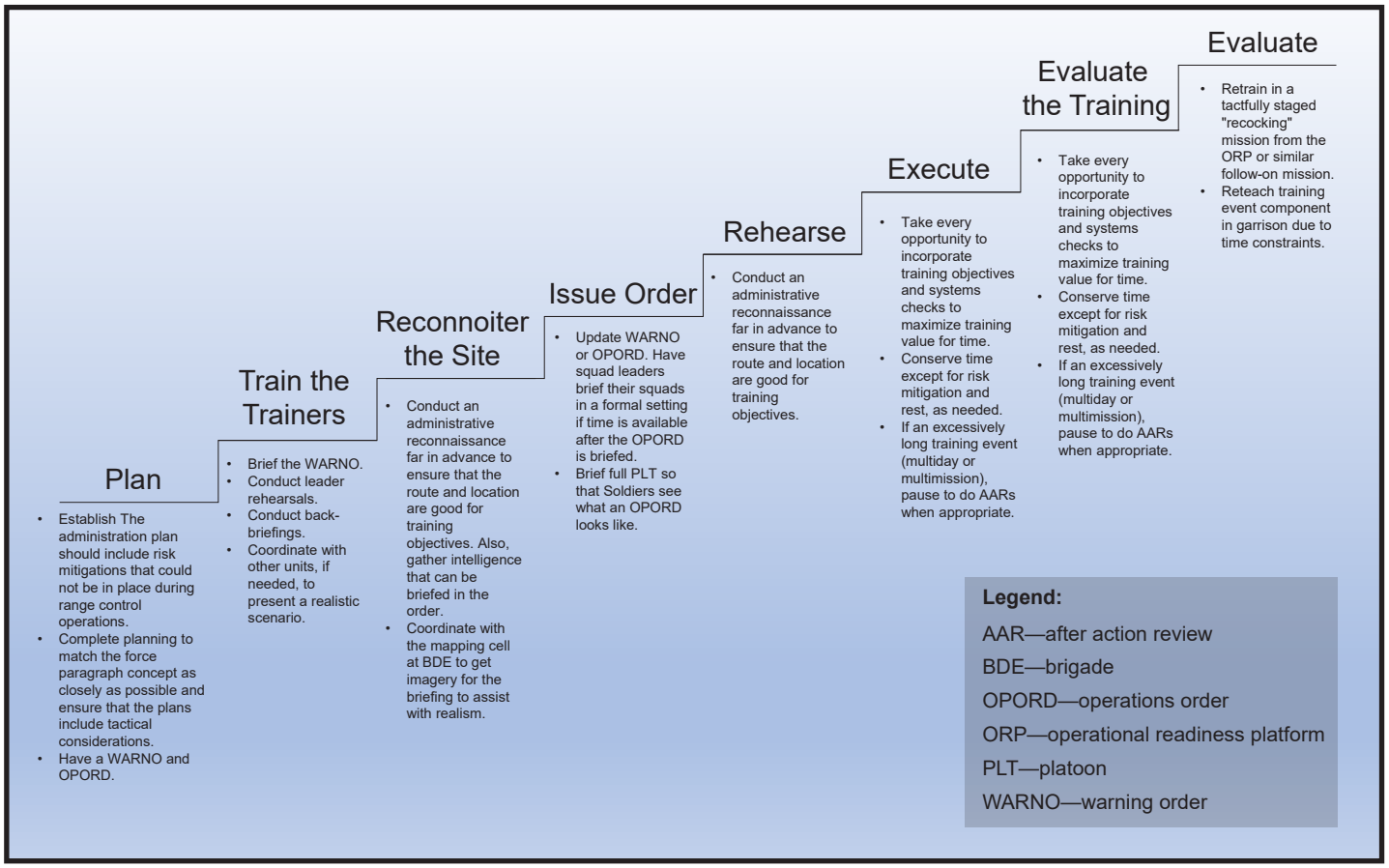

Figure 1. The eight-step training model

checks preserved that vehicle for the gunnery and increased the mission capability of the fleet. The POP method allows equipment a chance to function as it would during a mission, and this gives Soldiers an opportunity to identify and fix faults. The POP method is easily applied, usually requiring very little additional time or resources, as it is simply added to an existing event.

The most advantageous aspect of the POP method of training is the increase in opportunities to train within a single training event. This improvement in effectiveness can be assessed by using training & evaluation outlines (T&EOs), which contain the performance measures needed to complete a task to determine proficiency. Unit and Soldier T&EO performance is graded using the trained, practiced, or untrained "TPU" system. More training and evaluations will ultimately elevate units to the trained status, demonstrating better preparation for future missions.[3]

Units can become proficient in tasks included in the training at the objective as well as tasks trained during the patrols conducted before and after reaching the objective. The POP method does not need to be applied to an event as elaborate as an EDRE. An M4 rifle qualification range can serve as an example. An M4 range is traditionally used only to accomplish the task of individual weapon qualification; however, when using the POP method, the training of collective tasks is limited only by creativity and planning efforts. Figure 2 shows an example in which all of the following collective tasks are trained:

- Conducting a tactical convoy.
- Reacting (while mounted) to indirect fire.
- Establishing a dismounted objective rally point.
- Clearing and occupying an objective

This example and many others illustrate that the POP method increases the number of tasks that can be trained in a training event without any additional demand on resources, time, or equipment.

While the POP method is effective for maximizing training, there are situations where it is definitely not optimal or even realistic. In order to use the POP method to the fullest extent, a considerable amount of thorough planning and coordination is required. With a condensed training schedule or competing unit requirements, this may not be possible. In addition, unavoidable administrative actions (reception, staging, onward movement, and integration) must take place for certain training events. The POP method is also advanced; and when training new Soldiers or units on new battle drills, it is often advantageous to simply focus on the task at hand rather than implement a patrol aspect. Lastly, if the POP method is continuously executed to the

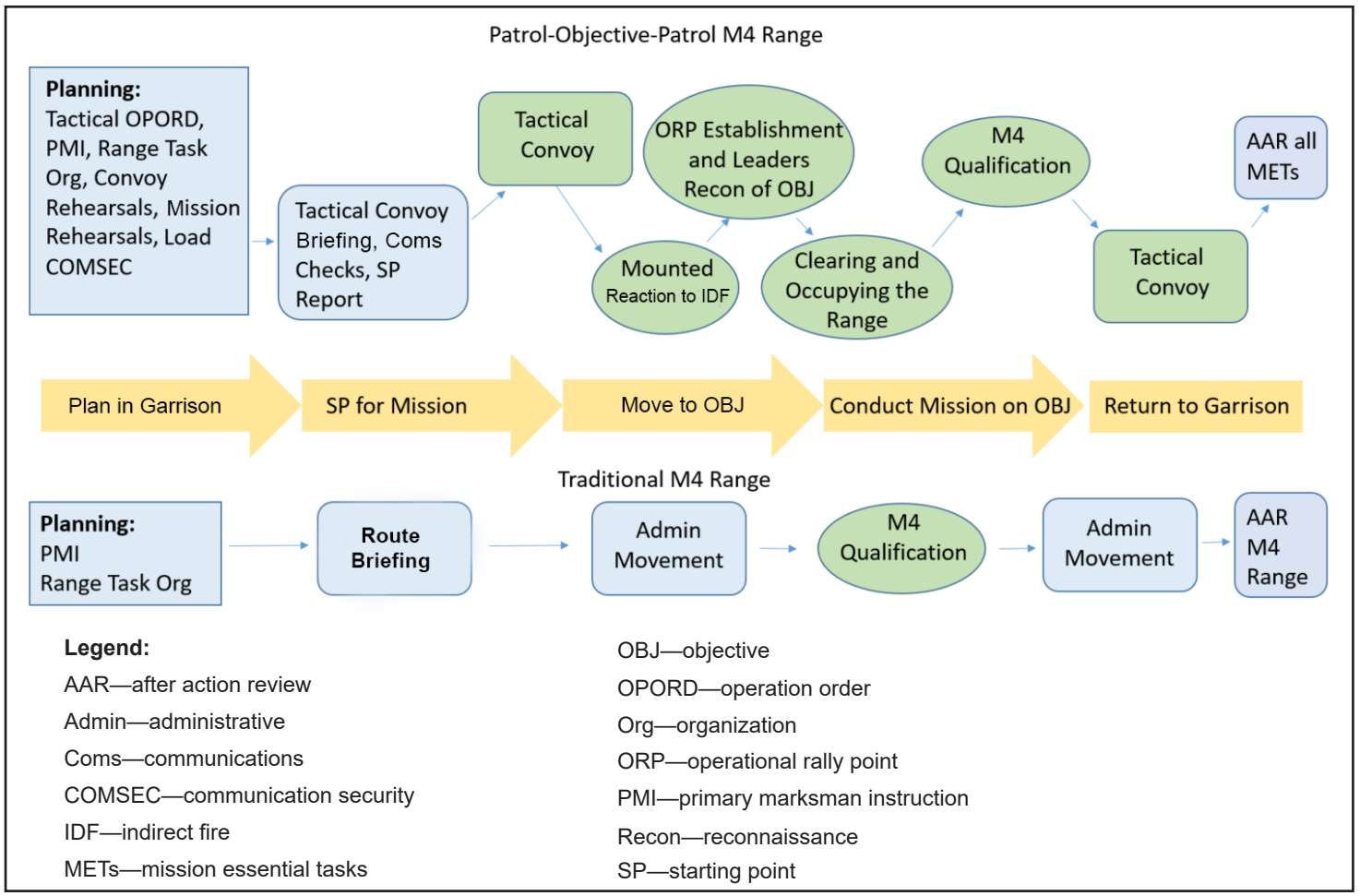

Figure 2. Example of a training event with collective tasks

fullest extent, Soldiers and leaders can become burned out. For optimal results, adequate rest and recovery opportunities must be available. Available planning time and training and recovery requirements can all halt full implementation of the POP method.

In a world that is growing ever more complex, the U.S. Army faces the challenge of determining the best way to prepare its troops. Units face condensed training schedules and multiple competing requirements. The POP method establishes a realistic training environment, adds checks on SOPs and systems, and creates opportunities for more valuable training. The POP method can rapidly increase proficiency in tasks and prepare individual Soldiers and battalions for the real fight.

Endnotes:

[1]H. R. MacMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, Harper Collins, 2020.

[2]Field Manual (FM) 7-0, *Training*, 14 June 2021.

[3]Haley S. Foo, *Training and Evaluation Outlines (T&EO): Usage and Scoring Method Preference for Tasks and Sub-Steps*, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, June 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1075577.pdf>, accessed on 10 January 2023.

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