Implementing Lessons Learned to Build a Better Command Post

By Captain Shawn R. Bottoms

The current war in Ukraine serves as an ongoing case study on conventional warfare, and it demonstrates how Russian forces fight in a large-scale combat operational environment. One of the critical lessons learned from Russian failures is in regard to the vulnerability of stationary tactical operation centers (TOCs) at the brigade level and how the loss of these facilities can impact command and control. As the U.S. military prepares for future large-scale combat operations, Russian experiences in Ukraine indicate that American forces need to find new ways to "slim down" their physical command-and-control infrastructure. Future command posts must be capable of rapidly deploying across the area of operations while also maintaining control of the fight and remaining undetectable by the enemy. One concept regarding this more mobile TOC has been planned, executed, and validated by Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 92d Engineer Battalion, 20th Engineer Brigade, Fort Stewart, Georgia. This concept directly ties into the readiness guidance established by the XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, commanding general and the 20th Engineer Brigade commander as they continue their initiative to eliminate tent-based TOC systems by the end of 3d quarter, Fiscal Year 2023.[1]

Russian Experience

An underlying problem with Russia's tactical battle-tracking infrastructure stems from the lack of trust that Russian officers have in the leadership abilities of their noncommissioned officers. In "The Russian Way of War," Lester Grau and Charles E. Bartles describe Russian noncommissioned officers as having minimal leadership development compared to their American counterparts.[2] This lack of development among these ranks leads to a lack of development in junior leaders and a lack of trust in company grade officers throughout the formations. The lack of trust, in turn, leads to micromanagement at higher echelons (such that senior leaders plan company level operations at battalion and brigade levels). This creates a need for large staff cells and results in the development of large, centralized TOC infrastructure. Because large infrastructure is an easy target for indirect fire, the need for small, decentralized TOC infrastructure is reaffirmed.

The Problem

A TOC is responsible for the following primary functions:

- Conducting knowledge management and information management.
- Building and maintaining situational understanding.
- Controlling operations.
- Assessing operations.
- Coordinating with internal and external organizations.
- Performing command post administration.[3]

In accordance with the traditional design for a brigade combat team maneuver battalion TOC, staff sections are spread between a current operations tent and a sustainment tent. The current operations tent holds staff members who are pushing information out to down-trace units and providing information to the commander in real time. Personnel in the sustainment tent receive data from down-trace and adjacent units and create products for shared understanding. If the TOC is functioning properly and the commander is promptly receiving information with which to make decisions, then the only problem is a lack of mobility. In the event of a precise indirect-fire attack or the employment of a nonpersistent chemical by the enemy, TOC personnel must pack up and move to another location while maintaining a clear picture of the battlefield. TOC infrastructure is static and cannot react accordingly. How can we fix this problem?

Mobility

The simplest way to impart mobility to a static object is to add wheels. In the case of TOC infrastructure, the "wheels" that could be used to increase mobility consist of two light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs) and one LMTV trailer. One LMTV would be used primarily for current operations, housing the operations cell and most of the tactical communications infrastructure (Joint Battle Command–Platform,

Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System, command post node) in the TOC and serving as a single point for the push/pull of information to/from subordinate and adjacent units. The second LMTV and the LMTV trailer would be used for the TOC sustainment cell, housing other primary and special staff leaders. These vehicles and trailers would be arranged in a triangular formation, with the rear of the vehicles facing each other. This would create a single point of information dissemination in the center of the TOC.

Generators for the TOC would be connected to the infrastructure, located 30 meters from the main systems. Life support supplies for the TOC, which would be managed by the headquarters company, would be dislocated by 50 meters to minimize the impact caused by an enemy indirect-fire attack. The headquarters company would establish security in a 360-degree, cigar-shaped formation 75 meters from the main element. If more workspace were required, an auxiliary TOC with three additional LMTVs under the headquarters and headquarters company modified table of organization and equipment would be set up 50 meters from the main element. The battalion tactical assembly area would be dispersed across a maximum of 10,000 square meters, with no element within 50 meters of another.

There would be one table with a quad-fold board (referred to as "the football") covered with camouflage netting or tarps in the center of the TOC. In the center of this football, there would be a map with multiple overlays attached. These overlays would include the enemy situational template and current and future (24-hour and 48-hour projections) locations of all relevant units. The four sides of the football would feature relevant current and projected data such as personnel and logistic statistics, friendly and enemy task organizations, important information requirements (serious incident reports, commander's critical information requirements, and priority intelligence requirements), and significant events occurring in the past 48 hours. This football would serve as a mobile analog tracking system that could be deployed and redeployed within seconds. The battle captain would be the party responsible for managing the football and presenting it to the commander upon his or her entry into the TOC.

The Result

Under the new TOC concept, the six primary TOC functions would be implemented, while overall tactical capability would be improved through the expediency of setup/teardown and dispersion of elements in the assembly area. After multiple iterations by a battalion headquarters, the average time for TOC setup was 20–30 minutes and the average time for full tactical assembly of area operational capability was 50 minutes after initial quartering party occupation. In comparison, construction of a TOC in which one air beam tent is used to house key TOC infrastructure takes more than 2 hours—and that does not include the time necessary for assembly area occupation.

When it becomes necessary to move the command post to another location, it takes 30–40 minutes to close the TOC and prepare it for deployment. This timeline includes

A mobile TOC

10 minutes to push out the quartering party, 10 minutes to tear down the TOC, and 20 minutes (at most) to consolidate all elements of the assembly area prior to deployment to another location. It would take 90 minutes to accomplish all these tasks with a tent-based TOC infrastructure.

Although mobile command posts are nothing new for units with platforms that have a built-in capability, it is necessary for leaders to transition large-scale battle-tracking systems to focus on maneuverability. This concept would make use of movement platforms that are available to most Army headquarters units and is transferrable across multiple warfighting functions. Echelon-above-brigade engineer battalions could easily integrate this concept into their formations as they await the arrival of Bradley fighting vehicles and their internal battle-tracking systems.

Conclusion

The evolution of technology depends on increased speed and ease of use. This new concept would increase the tactical capability of battalion and brigade headquarters elements through improvements in ease of deployment and speed of construction and deconstruction as well as forced adequate dispersion that could be easily adjusted based on the terrain of the assembly area location.

Endnotes:

[1]*Annual Readiness Guidance for Fiscal Year 2023*, 20th Engineer Brigade, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 1 August 2022.

[2]Lester Grau and Charles E. Bartles, "The Russian Way of War," *Mentor Military*, 1 January 2018.

[3]Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations*, 1 March 2017.

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