

# Lessons Learned by the 123rd Brigade Support Battalion at the National Training Center

■ By Lt. Col. Charles L. Montgomery

The Department of Defense's investment into the National Training Center (NTC) continues to provide armored brigade combat teams a premier training environment aimed to increase lethality. The 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 1st Armored Division, from Fort Bliss, Texas, completed rotation 18-08 at Fort Irwin, California, in June 2018. During the rotation, I served as the 123rd Brigade Support Battalion (BSB) commander.

One of the more complicated questions the BSB faced was how to approach garrison and tactical battle rhythms—specifically, the transition between the two. Fundamentally, why are these two battle rhythms vastly different?

I propose leaders develop a battle rhythm that transcends both garrison and tactical environments to ease friction as the organization transitions into tactical operations.

The Army's number one priority is readiness, specifically readiness to conduct war (offense, defense, and stability operations) in support of our nation. Currently, tactical battle rhythms are secondary to garrison battle rhythms in time and space. This approach abstractly establishes an improper mindset when units transition to tactical operations.

Conceptually, inculcating the tactical-operational mindset must start early to develop the proper approach required to dominate the enemy. Gaining initial momentum places the enemy at a disadvantage; however, the way in which units execute battle rhythm transitions does not place sustainment

units in an advantageous position.

The 123rd BSB learned valuable lessons in the following five areas during our NTC rotation: Raven operations, base defense operations center (BDOC) placement and execution, operational synchronization, forward support company (FSC) commanders' roles and responsibilities, and the execution of role II medical facility operations. This article provides insight and lessons learned from a decisive action rotation that can be applied to future BSB operations.

## Raven Operations

Raven unmanned aerial vehicles provide commanders with an additional sensor to better understand the enemy situation. In a sustainment formation, using Ravens provides the BSB commander, BSB S-2, BSB S-3, and the brigade staff an opportunity to conduct in-depth analysis on potential enemy courses of action designed to disrupt sustainment lines of communication.

Most importantly, the data from Raven operations affords the BSB staff an opportunity to develop a plan with the brigade S-3 that enables logistics survivability and sustained logistics support. Ravens are especially vital to sustainment formations, which have fewer protection and sensor collection platforms than maneuver units have.

Sustainment formations must take advantage of every available brigade and battalion asset to gain and maintain a position of advantage. When combined with the One System Remote Video Terminal, the Raven

provides the distinct capability to display real-time aerial reconnaissance, which enables the development of a viable common operational picture. This capability encourages collaborative approaches that produce actionable intelligence to alert logistics convoy commanders of potential dangers along main and alternate supply routes.

First, the BSB commander must establish who owns the responsibility for Raven operations. In the 123rd BSB, the responsibility is assigned to the S-2. The foundational logic is to combine intelligence collection with intelligence analysis in an effort to produce quality data designed to enable the decision-making process.

Second, the staff must fully understand the Raven operational zone submission process. The brigade aviation officer serves as the conduit for Raven operations approval within the 3rd ABCT. The BSB must truly understand submission requirements to ensure airspace deconfliction occurs at the brigade level.

Lastly, the BSB must anticipate requirements and submit pre-Raven operational zone requests (based on known operations and emergency requests) to increase Raven availability. Raven operations bring a unique and vital capability to sustainment formations. When implemented correctly, the asset will ultimately improve survivability, which supports prolonged tactical endurance for the ABCT.

## The BDOC

BDOC placement and responsibilities add another layer of complex-

ity to tactical sustainment operations. The BDOC provides perimeter defense and actions upon enemy contact external to the battalion S-3 section. However, everything that is external to the BSB's modified table of organization and equipment detracts from its ability to provide sustainment support to the brigade combat team in some capacity.

During the 123rd BSB's NTC rotation, the battalion S-3 section proved more effective than an external BDOC in the following areas: maintaining communications with company tactical operations centers, reallocating assets to defeat threats, and developing a real-time common operational picture to enable key decisions at the battalion level.

In order to make the BDOC successful, the right officer must lead the formation. The headquarters and headquarters company commander may not be the right officer based on personality, experience, or ability to make judicious decisions under stress. Once the organization selects the BDOC officer-in-charge and noncommissioned officer-in-charge, there must be a deliberate effort to integrate the battalion S-3 staff and BDOC teams early to establish reporting procedures, tasking authorities, and decision-making processes.

BDOC and S-3 integration will ensure the battalion is operating in unison to defeat the enemy. The key is to clearly identify roles and responsibilities the BSB desires the BDOC to perform. The alternative to establishing a BDOC is using the battalion S-3 section to facilitate perimeter defense actions upon enemy contact. This method eliminates a layer in the communication process. The enemy will attack, but the most important aspect is how the organization responds, not necessarily who owns the response process within the organization.

### **Operational Synchronization**

Effective synchronization at the battalion level is paramount to suc-

cessful operations. Downgrading the BSB S-3 position to a captain increases complexity because, in many cases, the officer will lack the experience to view brigade operations holistically.

The two key players during operational synchronization are the support operations officer (SPO) and the battalion S-3. Doctrinally, the battalion S-3 has tasking authority and the SPO must understand the proper steps to ensure operational effectiveness.

During our rotation, operations synchronization gradually shifted to the SPO section and the BSB's ability to understand and track operations degraded quickly. This lack of understanding drastically affected logistics convoy resourcing and execution.

To rectify the issue, a daily operational synchronization meeting was instituted to create a shared understanding within the battalion in regard to brigade logistics requirements. The meeting's driving force was the synchronization matrix, which is a byproduct of the SPO logistics synchronization meeting.

The operational synchronization meeting allowed the BSB S-3 to manage operations more effectively in regard to logistics convoys. This meeting also included the BDOC and key tenants of the brigade support area to ensure information-sharing designed to synchronize operations.

This meeting continues to occur at home station to enable the development of the proper culture prior to tactical operations.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

FSC commanders are the BSB commander's link to sustaining tactical operations forward of the brigade support area. FSC commanders must track all logistics within their formations and anticipate requirements in conjunction with the maneuver battalion S-4s.

During the 123rd BSB's NTC rotation, FSC commanders divorced themselves from the planning process and remained absent during execution. Often, FSC commanders did not review or provide input for

logistics status reports submitted to the SPO.

FSC commanders are an extension of the BSB commander in their respective organizations. They are the senior logisticians in their supported battalions, which demand their complete attention and proactivity to ensure operational endurance.

To improve this process, FSC commanders were encouraged to attend logistics synchronization meetings. Logistics status report submission shifted to FSC commanders, which served as a forcing function to increase their involvement in the logistics process. Holistically, this change increased communication among the maneuver battalion S-4s, FSC commanders, the BSB commander, and the SPO significantly. FSC commanders also attended brigade maintenance meetings to ensure their understanding and priorities remained focused on the 3rd ABCT's readiness.

FSC commanders must understand their roles and responsibilities before, during, and after operations to ensure sustained success. This will allow their maneuver commanders to focus on tactical operations and defeating the enemy without any logistics distractions.

### **Role II Medical Operations**

The brigade support medical company's role II medical operations, which include dental, laboratory, and X-ray capabilities, are vital to saving Soldiers' lives during tactical operations. These operations rely on the company's ability to respond rapidly to role I requirements.

The pace and tempo of an ABCT can be overwhelming, especially during tactical transitions. The brigade surgeon, in conjunction with the SPO medical section, must deliberately design approaches to medical operations that decrease time and distance from role I locations to role II care.

During our NTC rotation, the died-of-wounds rate was highest between points of injury and role I locations. Based on the 3rd ABCT's



*Soldiers assigned to Company J, 123rd Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, participate in convoy training at Camp McGregor, N.M., on March 15, 2018. The training prepared the unit for a rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. Convoy training stresses the importance of communication and develops effective strategies for future combat missions. (Photo by Pvt. Matthew J. Marcellus)*

operating tempo, role II care moved seven times in 14 days to maintain an acceptable distance from role I care in order to preserve life.

Two valuable lessons were learned from this training experience. First, there must be a consensus on who has the ability to task role II to relocate. Role II should not move without explicit approval from the BSB commander, who bears the ultimate responsibility to provide synchronized medical care to maneuver battalion's role I facilities.

However, we struggled with role II mission command, and the brigade support medical company found itself taking directions from the brigade and BSB staff sections, which desynchronized medical operations. Medical sustainment communication must include the brigade S-4, the brigade surgeon, the brigade command sergeant major, and the BSB commander in order to ensure a shared understanding during execution to avoid desynchronization.

Second, the average time to relocate role II was 3.5 hours from notification to tactical movement. To mitigate this deficit, the brigade support medical company received three palletized load systems, which afforded easier loading and downloading. This change shaved approximately two hours off the original relocation time, which decreased the brigade's died-of-wounds rate by 36 percent and preserved combat power for future operations.

NTC continues to provide a premier training environment for mechanized formations that simply cannot be replicated at home station in breadth and scope. In order to maximize the benefits of participating in an NTC rotation, units must assimilate and incorporate lessons learned into their formations to ensure lethality increases.

The 123rd BSB provides 3rd ABCT tactical commanders with operational reach, freedom of movement, and

prolonged endurance during tactical operations. The number one principle of sustainment, in my mind, is survivability. If we cannot survive initial and prolonged enemy contact, how can we provide continual sustainment support to the warfighter?

Sustainment formations must harden themselves to ensure sustained operations. Being a soft target is a decision at some level within our formations. However, focusing on increasing lethality through all available means will increase our chances to defeat and deter level one threats aimed at disrupting sustainment operations.

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