

The Operations Officer in the BSB

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At the National Training Center, almost every brigade support battalion (BSB) struggles with the specifics of its tactical operations center, including its roles and responsibilities, manning, and common operational picture (COP). Why? Mainly because there are two operations officers: the S-3 and the support operations officer (SPO).

The fiscal year 2013 BSB modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) changes the authorization for the battalion S-3 from a major to a captain, but the support operations officer remains a major. Although this change may mitigate some of the friction that we typically observe between the S-3 and the SPO, it does not alleviate the primary causes of this friction. Some may see the recommended changes outlined in this article as a paradigm shift; however, it is actually a way to follow the “keep it simple” principle.

The Missions of the Two Operations Officers

As the Army revamps doctrine and undergoes changes in force structure, the sustainment community has the opportunity to make changes that improve unity of effort inside the BSB, specifically within the S-3 and SPO sections.

Field Manual (FM) 4-90, Brigade Support Battalion, states that the S-3 officer—

- Is the operations, security, and training officer.
- Monitors tactical operations, publishes orders, and supervises plans and orders.
- Develops task organization in coordination with the BSB SPO.
- Analyzes operational data and reports for compliance with directives and commander’s intent.

The same manual states that the SPO—

- Is the principal staff officer for coordinating support for all units assigned to the brigade.
- Provides planning, preparation, and mission command of the execution of all BSB sustainment operations.
- Provides centralized, integrated, and automated command, control, planning, preparation, and execution of all support operations within the brigade.

The BSB S-3 section is made up of eight Soldiers and traditionally runs current operations from within the tactical operations center, but it requires augmentation to do so. Radio and telephone operators and battle captains are not authorized and their duties are

typically performed by personnel from subordinate companies or other staff sections.

The SPO section, on the other hand, is made up of 17 Soldiers and operates in a separate area off of the main tactical operations center. It is involved in both future and current operations.

Areas of Friction

The first area of friction experienced between the S-3 and the SPO is the fact that they maintain two separate COPs. At the National Training Center, sustainment trainers often observe two COPs in the tactical operations center. One is maintained by the S-3 on the BSB’s internal missions and overall brigade operations. The other is maintained by the SPO on the brigade’s sustainment posture. Because the two operations officers have different roles and responsibilities, they manage their own COPs for the commander. This requires the commander to visit two different locations within the tactical operations center for a total situational understanding. Occasionally, a unit will attempt to maintain a single COP, but the S-3 and SPO sections are not organized in a way that maintains this single COP effectively.

A second area of friction concerns the 2013 MTOE for the BSB S-3 section. The outlined manning provides no guarantee that the officer assigned as the S-3 will have seniority (experience or date of rank) over the company commanders. In Army of Excellence MTOEs, the forward support battalion S-3 was a Medical Service Corps major. However, the position often was filled by a logistics captain waiting for a company command or a captain who recently came out of command and had not been in the unit very long. Under the new force structure, the S-3 (a captain) would be the rater for two other captains, while all three could potentially be in the same year group.

This awkwardness might be avoided if the current operations and plans officer slots were filled by lieutenants. Another way that this friction can be alleviated is by combining the S-3 and SPO sections and placing one major in charge of the entire section.

A One Section Solution

Given the doctrinal roles and responsibilities outlined in FM 4-90, the SPO is the primary operations officer, while the S-3 provides planning and orders production in support of the mission requirements

developed by the SPO. However, neither section is functionally organized by the new MTOE to accomplish its mission independently; they are required to work together closely.

By combining the two sections into one operations section, the commander could create a one-stop COP and achieve greater synergy in mission command. By reorganizing the BSB operations under one section with one major in charge, as depicted in the chart below, the BSB can achieve this unity of effort.

As part of this reorganization, we recommend the following changes.

Combine the roles and responsibilities. The roles and responsibilities of the S-3 and the SPO, as outlined in FM 4-90 and other related manuals, should be combined to reflect a single operations section.

Call the officer in charge of the S-3 and support operations sections the operations officer. This aligns the BSB staff organization with the rest of the battalions in a brigade combat team. By redefining the roles and responsibilities as the operations section, the friction of two distinct sections will be eliminated. Although the sustainment community has always placed greater emphasis on the title of “SPO,” the title of operations officer has an inherent understanding across all warfighting functions.

Create an operations sergeant major. Converting one of the two master sergeant positions in the MTOE would provide a newly assigned sergeant major with a career enhancing and developmental position. In addition, the sergeant major would pro-

vide additional expertise, management, and experience to the sustainment community inside a brigade combat team.

Although this article compares only the S-3 and SPO within a heavy brigade combat team, the concept can be applied to the other BSBs and combat sustainment support battalions. Combining the functions and personnel of the S-3 and the SPO sections would create an overarching COP that would provide the commander with a better understanding of his current and future operating picture.

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This chart depicts the combined brigade support battalion S-3 and support operations section recommended by the authors.

