

Techniques to Shorten The Decision-Making Process At the Task Force Level

by Lieutenant Colonel Rich Rees and Major Steve Sorrell

"If planning time is short, the commander may abbreviate the decision-making process only in the amount of time required for each step [of the deliberate decision-making process]. All steps should be completed, in the proper order, as outlined."

FM 71-123

Introduction. Observations at the National Training Center consistently show that task forces have difficulty planning operations. One of the contributing factors is that task forces often attempt to conduct a Deliberate Decision-Making Process (DDMP) when there is insufficient time to conduct the process. When time is short, our doctrine tells us that we may abbreviate the DDMP. Unfortunately, our doctrine provides little guidance on how to achieve an Abbreviated Decision-Making Process (ADMP) or when it should be used. The purpose of this article is to provide *a technique* on how the DDMP may be abbreviated and applied at the task force level. The final product of either the deliberate or an abbreviated process remains the same: a simple, flexible plan.

There are no set rules or timelines on when to use an abbreviated planning process. The task force should not take longer than one third of the planning time. If one third of the time available will let your staff conduct a DDMP, conduct the deliberate process. It is still the best process to use when the time is available. If not, then you must abbreviate the process. The techniques presented in this article are based on task force observations and lessons learned at the NTC and generally follow the Troop-Leading Procedure planning process used in FM 7-20 and FM 71-123.

General. Before we discuss the techniques for abbreviating the decision-making process, there are several important issues. They are the role of the commander, the role of brigade, parallel planning, and the role of the task force LNO.

Probably the most significant change between the DDMP and the ADMP is the role of the commander. The commander is the key component in abbreviating the decision-making process. The DDMP tends to be a staff-based process. The staff conducts its estimate and concludes with a recommended COA presented to the commander. The commander conducts a parallel but separate process when he does his commander's estimate. When time is short, the commander must take a much more active role with the staff in the planning process. He must know his capabilities and limitations, and the capabilities of his unit, his staff, and company commanders. He must develop and clearly articulate his vision of the battle to his staff and subordinates. The commander is the best trained, most experienced leader in the task force; success in the ADMP is proportionate to his personal involvement.

Before members of the task force can begin planning, they have to receive information from brigade. The more information the brigade provides prior to the brigade order, the more planning the task force is capable of conducting. There are a couple of techniques available to get information faster from brigade to the task force. They all require the brigade staff to help. The first is the parallel planning process. Brigades (and task forces) should provide a series of warning orders to their subordinate units. This enables the task force

to begin planning prior to the brigade order.

Parallel planning is a process of providing information to subordinate units in order to push information as it becomes available. By making a unit wait until the order is issued wastes a lot of planning time that should have been available to a subordinate unit. Brigades should provide a series of three warning orders (WO) to their subordinate units. The first should be immediately after the brigade becomes aware of a change in mission or the receipt of a new mission. This WO should provide the area of operations, the division mission and type of operation, and the time of the operation. The information provided should allow the task forces to begin their IPB process and to begin gathering facts. The second WO should follow the brigade's mission analysis brief. This WO should now be able to contain the area of operations, enemy situation (with SITEMP or enemy COA sketch), restated mission, and a brigade timeline. The task force can now begin developing its SITEMP, analyzing the terrain in the area of operations, developing its list of facts and assumptions, and developing a timeline. The third WO will follow the brigade commander's decision on a COA. This WO can now provide task organization, a concept sketch, the brigade commander's decisive point, and subordinate unit missions (task and purpose). The task force can now begin developing COA(s). The bottom line is that the more information the task force can get from brigade, the more the task force can do prior to the task force commander going to the brigade OPORD.

The second technique is for the brigade to issue two copies of the brigade



PHOTO: GREG STEWART

OPORD to each task force. This enables the commander to refer to one during the brigade OPORD and the LNO to take the other copy back to the task force so that the “second team,” led by the task force XO, can begin the planning process while the commander is still receiving the brigade OPORD briefing and conducting his briefback.

The final technique involves the use of the task force LNO, who is an important but underutilized asset in the task force planning process. The LNO is usually a young lieutenant who does not know what to do and thinks he’s successful if he can just stay out of the way. Most task forces do not adequately use the task force LNO. He normally spends most of his time at the task force, versus brigade, TOC. An experienced, trained LNO, who knows the task force and brigade, can pay dividends to the task force. Brigade needs to allow the LNO to watch the planning process and be able to pass updates back to the task force on what the brigade is planning for the task force. The LNO can provide hard copies of the brigade WOs to the task force or, if the brigade is not producing WOs, he can provide the same information by watching what the brigade staff is planning. As a minimum, the LNO should be able to provide the brigade SITEMP, brigade COA (concept sketch), the brigade commander’s decisive point, task organization, brigade timeline, and the subordinate units’ tasks and purposes. Just knowing what the brigade is thinking about can save time later. Having covered these important topics, we are now ready to discuss a technique for abbreviating the DDMP using the Troop Leading Procedure format in FM 7-20.

1. Receive the Mission. The task force can receive the mission in the form of a warning order, OPORD, or FRAGO. The XO should develop a hasty timeline for the task force that includes the time available to conduct the planning process. The XO should not plan for the task force to take more than one third of the time available to conduct its planning process, briefbacks, and rehearsals. Time available will lead the commander or XO to determine whether to use the DDMP or the ADMP. The commander, S3, S2, FSO, and LNO receive the brigade order. The LNO brings the written order to the planners, either in a jump CP or the main CP. While the commander and portions of the staff are receiving the brigade OPORD, the task force XO assembles the mission analysis team (consisting of the BICC, S3 Air, FSE NCO, engineer company XO, ADAO, and NBCO) and a representative of the CSS staff (most likely the S4 or the S1) and prepares to conduct the mission analysis. The S3 Air will issue a warning order alerting subordinate units to an imminent change in mission.

2. Issue a Warning Order. The S3 air issues the first WO to the company/teams. The task force follows the same parallel planning process that the brigade follows and issues three warning orders. The first WO should alert the company/teams that there is a new mission, the area of operations, the time of the operation, and general situation, if known.

3. Make a Tentative Plan.

a. Mission Analysis. The purpose of the mission analysis is to allow the commander to get an understanding of the mission. It is the means by which

he begins to visualize the battlefield by seeing the terrain, the enemy, and ourselves. While the commander is still at the OPORD, the XO organizes the second team to conduct mission analysis. The goal is for the second team to have completed the mission analysis and be prepared to brief the commander when he returns from the OPORD. There are a couple of techniques to shorten the mission analysis and the brief to the commander.

The S2 can shorten the amount of time to conduct IPB by conducting pre-deployment preparation. The S2 section can do some of the first two steps of the IPB and all of step three, evaluate the threat, prior to deployment. The S2 should develop a data base for the possible deployment area of operations. He should already know enemy order of battle, weapons capabilities, general terrain characteristics, and weather patterns. By completing evaluation of the threat prior to deployment, the S2 can focus his limited time on determining threat COAs. The product that takes the longest to produce during mission analysis is the SITEMP. Starting this product based on a brigade WO, or receiving a copy of the brigade SITEMP from the LNO prior to the commander receiving the brigade OPORD, will save time during this step. The S2 section should also be developing the EVENTEMP and matrix and should have a draft of these products available before the wargame begins.

The task force staff should develop an SOP for developing the mission analysis. The same products are required for either a deliberate or abbreviated process. A technique to conduct the mission analysis is for each staff member to have a butcher board-size “hard chart”

to record the results of the mission analysis and then to use this chart to conduct the briefing. The key is to visualize the information for the commander and the staff. The charts should contain the information the commander needs to see the terrain, the enemy, and the task force and should focus on the information the commander needs to make decisions. For example, the S2 should have a couple of blank charts to draw enemy COAs, and a separate chart that has the enemy task and purpose, weather and terrain effects, and proposed PIR; the S3 should have a couple of charts to record the specified and implied tasks for himself and the rest of the BOS (there is a new term here now), a chart for the restated mission, and one for the timeline; the engineer, FSO, NBCO, ADAO all need an additional chart apiece to record assets and capabilities; and the S4 should have a chart for the status of classes of supply (focus on class III, IV, and V), and one for combat power down to platoon level; and the S1 needs a chart for personnel status.

There are a couple of techniques to shorten the mission analysis brief. The first is to focus the brief only on the essential information the commander needs but does not yet have. The same mission analysis briefing SOP and products should be followed, but the discussion should focus on the changes to the existing situation. For example, if the commander already knows the task force's combat power there is no reason to waste time briefing it again. Finally, the number of briefers should be reduced. The entire brief can be conducted by the S2 (or BICC) and the XO.

If the S2 is capable of returning to the CP, receiving a quick update from the BICC, and briefing his portion of the mission analysis, he should conduct the briefing. He was at the brigade OPORD, knows what the commander heard in the brigade briefing, and is then able to abbreviate his briefing so that he is not repeating information. If he is not able to quickly assimilate the information the BICC has, then let the BICC conduct the briefing. The XO and S2 are capable of providing all the information required, and by limiting the number of briefers you will reduce the time it takes to conduct the briefing. The rest of the staff is present at the briefing and is prepared to answer

questions should the commander have any.

b. Commander's Guidance. After the mission analysis brief, the commander provides his guidance. The commander can shorten the planning time by providing specific guidance. He should focus the staff on a single COA and include his guidance on how he wants to use his combat multipliers. He needs to clearly define his decisive point. He should specify the enemy COA(s) that he wants to focus his planning on, and specify a reconnaissance and surveillance concept. Finally he should clearly articulate his Commander's Critical Information Requirements (CCIR). Once the commander has finished his guidance, the S3 should issue the second WO to the company/teams. This WO should only be a page or two and should include the restated mission, enemy COA sketch, and the task force initial timeline. If the commander directed a COA during his guidance, a COA sketch with task and purpose should be provided as well. This provides company commanders enough information to begin planning.

c. Course of Action Development. Although the commander provided his COA concept during commander's guidance, this concept must still be transformed into a set of maneuver graphics and a task and purpose for each company. This can be done by the commander, the S3, or the S3 Air. We recommend that the S3 refine the concept, leaving the commander free to work other issues. This step will still take some time to complete. The S3 needs to apply the COA concept to the terrain and the enemy by drawing the COA on a 1:50,000 map with a SITEMP overlay. The final product remains a COA maneuver graphic and a COA statement that includes subordinate unit task and purpose. If the task force does not have these two products they will lose time trying to develop graphics or task and purpose during the wargame. The more specific (or focused) the commander can be, the more time he can save in this step.

If the commander has sufficient time available, he has the option to develop more than one COA. Rarely will the commander have time to develop more than two COAs in the abbreviated process. If he knows what he wants to do, he should not waste time having the staff develop a separate COA. If he

does decide to develop two COAs, one technique is to have the commander develop a COA and have his S3 develop a second COA. Should the commander decide to develop more than one COA, he will need to use a method to decide on a COA. In the ADMP, he will not have time to wargame two COAs. A technique is to have the staff conduct a "box" analysis of the COA. The intent is to focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the COA, not to synchronize the COA. The S2 and S3 conduct the box analysis of the COA using the action/reaction/counteraction methodology, focusing on actions at the decisive point. The staff then quickly discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the COA as the S2 and S3 move through the COA. One of the staff officers records the list of advantages and disadvantages. This box analysis should take no longer than 15-20 minutes per COA. Again, the commander should be part of this process and, based on the discussion, choose a COA. If the commander does not participate, the staff will have to present a decision briefing and more time is needed.

d. Synchronizing the COA. Once the commander has chosen a COA, the staff needs to conduct a wargame in order to synchronize the COA. Again the commander should be involved in this process. His participation will shorten this time-consuming but important step. His role should be one of an active observer. He needs to let his staff conduct the wargame, but he serves to keep them focused by clarifying his guidance and helping the staff move through tough spots when they bog down. Additionally, his presence at the wargame eliminates the requirement to brief him on its results. He needs to walk a fine line as a participant in the wargame. If he becomes too involved in the process, the staff tends to stand back, and he does not get their valuable expertise. The commander's participation does not alleviate the XO from his responsibility of running the wargame.

Before the staff starts the wargame, it's important to ensure that the staff understands the COA and has had some time to develop how they can support the COA based on the commander's guidance. This will save time later. The XO or S3 should identify the critical events that the staff needs to wargame and prioritize the critical

events. He should then pick the technique to use during the wargame. The box method is the best technique when time is short.

Most staffs have difficulty wargaming the most critical event, actions on the objective, first. The easiest way to wargame the critical events is to proceed in chronological order. The XO needs to allocate the amount of time for the wargame and then, based on the importance of the critical event, allocate time for each event. For instance, the XO has allocated 2 hours on the timeline for wargaming. He then allocates 30 minutes for the reconnaissance effort, 15 minutes for crossing the LD, 15 minutes for destroying the CSOP, and 60 minutes for the breach and actions on the objective. Once the XO sets the timeline, he must be ruthless in enforcing it. It's easy to become distracted by minor events during the wargame. The staff then conducts the wargame using the action/reaction/counteraction methodology, using a synchronization matrix to record its results. The task force needs to develop a synchronization matrix applicable to the task force level. The division level matrix, with the BOS along the left side, does not work at the task force level. The task force needs a matrix that has its assets separated along the side (Figure 1). The staff needs to wargame its selected COA against the enemy's most likely COA (MLCOA). If time permits, they can then wargame the COA against the enemy most dangerous COA (MDCOA) in order to develop branch plans. As the staff moves through the wargame, the staff must stay focused and only talk if they have something important to add to the process.

4. Initiate movement. This step can occur any time during the troop-leading procedures. The goal is to ensure the most efficient use of time. As far as the planning process is concerned, the task force is unable to effectively conduct any planning process if the CP is moving. If the task force must move to a new location, the commander must decide if he will move his CP to the new location and begin planning, or begin planning and move the CP when the process is complete. There are no correct answers. This is a METT-T decision based on the situation and time available.

5. Conduct Reconnaissance. Commander's and staff's reconnaissance is

difficult to do within the constraints of an abbreviated process. Normally the best they will be able to do in an offensive operation is a map recon. In a defensive operation, the commander can usually get out in the EA to conduct reconnaissance. A technique is to place the CP near the EA or battle positions during the planning process. This allows the commander and staff to do some reconnaissance, places the CP near the company/team battle positions, and decreases travel time for the task force and company commanders.

6. Complete the Plan. There are several different options for developing a plan. They range from an oral order to a written order with written annexes. Even though it takes more time to write a five-paragraph field order, it is still the best method for communicating your plan to your subordinates. Matrix orders take less time, but are normally harder to understand and hinder synchronization between company/teams. Whenever possible, use the written format. During the writing

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of the plan, the task force should develop an SOP on who does what. Try to limit the number of annexes, which tend to repeat information and usually are confusing because different annexes often contradict each other. Additionally, by shortening the length of the product, you will save time in reproducing copies. Use of sketches and cartoons in the OPORD will help in the understanding of the plan. Focus the products on what the company commanders need. The staff should produce an acetate copy of the operations graphics for the company commanders. A technique to shorten the time needed in graphics reproduction is to have the S3 section place the brigade graphics shell on an acetate overlay after the brigade OPORD and make acetate overlay copies for each of the commanders. Only the brigade boundaries and phase lines are done initially. As the task force develops its graphics, the graphics are added to the commanders' cop-

ies. Diazos work fine for the rest of the orders group.

7. Issue the OPORD. The OPORD should be given overlooking the terrain if at all possible. Additionally, the more sketches used in the presentation of the OPORD, the clearer the understanding. The sketches should include the terrain, the enemy, and the friendly forces. The key is to visualize the plan for the company commanders. Company commanders should arrive early and be given a copy of the written order and graphics before the OPORD briefing. This allows them to read through the order and post their graphics before the briefing begins. In order to shorten the presentation time, limit the number of briefers. The S2, S3, and S4 should be the only briefers required. In the defense you may want to add the engineer. The order should allow the commanders to fully understand the nature of the operation, how the battle will progress, and what is expected during execution. The presentation should sequence the operation from the tactical assembly area to actions on the objective in the offense and from receipt of the enemy at the battle handover line to the destruction of the enemy in sector in the defense. As a technique, the presentation should not talk the scheme of maneuver, fires, engineers, ADA, etc. separately; the S3 should cover all areas that are essential to the concept of the operation by phase. If required, key staff members can add additional information after the S3 has finished. Remember, the briefing is for the company commanders; the task force commander knows the plan.

8. Supervise. Having completed the OPORD in one third of the time available, the commander and staff now have two thirds of the time to prepare and supervise. The troop-leading procedures do not stop once the task force issues its OPORD. Information is continuously gathered, analyzed in the CP, disseminated, and plans adjusted as necessary. The process does not finish until the mission is complete. If the staff has not had time to develop branch plans based on other enemy COAs prior to issuing the OPORD, the staff should spend some time during the preparation developing and synchronizing branch plans.

Reconnaissance and Surveillance Planning. R&S planning is difficult during an abbreviated process, and

EVENT/ PHASE				
ENEMY ACTION				
MAN				
CO/TM				
SCOUTS				
FA				
MTR				
MOB				
CMOB				
SURV				
ADA				
TOC				
RTRAN				
CTCP				
M/FAS				
UMCP				

Fig. 1. Synchronization Matrix

FIRE SUPPORT

BRIGADE CONCEPT OF FIRES:

BRIGADE SCHEME OF FIRES (HOW WE FIT):

BRIGADE SPECIFIED TARGETS:

BRIGADE FSCMS:

NUMBER OF KILLING MSN: ARTY _____ MORTAR _____

NUMBER OF SMOKE SCREENS: _____(DURATION/DIST)

NUMBER OF FASCAMS: _____(METERS/DURATION)

MINUTES OF ILLUM: _____

CAS SORTIES ALLOCATED: _____

OBSERVER STATUS:

AUTO TURRET COMMO CREW

A

B

C

D

MORTAR STATUS: _____

The FSO's Mission Analysis Chart

there are differing views on how it should be conducted. We felt we would be remiss if we did not offer a technique on how to conduct R&S planning. The R&S plan is normally a product of the war-game. The problem of waiting to do the plan during the war-game is the time it takes to get a product to the scout platoon. Developing the plan this late in the process does not give the scout platoon sufficient time to conduct its own troop-leading procedures and to gather the information the commander needs in a timely manner. A technique is to have the scout platoon leader attend the mission analysis brief to the commander. This will enable the scout platoon leader to hear the S2 discuss the terrain and the enemy COA(s). When the commander gives his guidance after the brief, he should also give his guidance for the R&S plan. Once the commander finishes his guidance, the S3 should refine the commander's maneuver concept into a COA. While the S3 is developing the maneuver plan, the commander has time to quickly gather the rest of the staff with the scout platoon leader to develop the reconnaissance plan. The commander and staff jointly develop the NAIs, OPs, routes, check points, fire support plan, communications plan, and CSS plan needed to gather the information the commander needs. The scout platoon leader now has all the information needed to begin his troop-leading procedures. The scout platoon should be positioned near the main CP. This allows the scout platoon leader to quickly move back and forth from the TOC to the platoon. Once the scout platoon leader has the information he needs, he returns to the platoon and begins his troop-

leading procedures. If he needs more information or products were not finished, he can quickly return to the TOC. Once he has finished his plan, he should return to the TOC to backbrief the commander.

Conclusion. The intent of this article was to present a *technique* that task forces can use in conducting an abbreviated planning process. The most significant difference between the deliberate and abbreviated decision-making process at the task force level is the role of the commander. In the abbreviated process, the commander must take a much more active role with his staff. As the most experienced leader in the task force, success is proportionate to his involvement. Whichever process you choose to use, the most successful way to save time is by developing SOPs and by conducting repetitive staff planning processes under realistic conditions. The endstate of either planning process remains the same... simple, flexible plans.

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