

Gaining Connectivity: The Decisive Point for FBCB2

Dear Sir:

Force XXI Battle Command, Brigade and Below (FBCB2) is a command and control system used by units at the tactical level to aid commanders to visualize, describe, and direct combat operations. It is an integral part of the transformation to the Objective Force. However, its full potential remains unrealized. There are many ways skeptics can explain the challenges of FBCB2, but I believe in only two. Some are simply resistant to change. Others believe FBCB2 is unreliable. I have spent countless hours training soldiers in the use of FBCB2 and gaining connectivity over the past 2 years. The bottom line is that FBCB2 works.

My opinions are based on my experience as a company commander from January 2000 to May 2001. During those months, I commanded the first company to field the M2A3. I participated in the Initial Operational Testing and Evaluation (IOT&E) of the M2A3 during which the M2A3 with integrated FBCB2 was tested. Additionally, I took the company to the Division Capstone Exercise (DCX) at the National Training Center from 1 March 2001 to 1 May 2001. I have completed new equipment training and FBCB2 training. I have spent an inordinate amount of time gaining connectivity and employing FBCB2 in training.

First, the commander must realize the purpose of FBCB2. FBCB2 is a battle command system. It is a tool for commanders to visualize, describe, and direct the battle. I realized its full potential during a night mechanized infantry attack. If you have never been on such an attack, let me paint you a picture. Imagine yourself on top of a loud vehicle, with a CVC and NODs strapped to your head, moving toward your objective. You navigate using a map and small flashlight. Radios blare in your head. You barely know where you are, much less where your three platoons and associated infantry squads are located. FBCB2 mitigates those conditions. With FBCB2, I could "see" the locations of all three platoons represented by their icons on my digital map. These icons were real time position updates being transmitted via radios (SINGARs and EPLRS). When we made contact, the platoons sent SPOT reports that posted as icons directly on my map. This aided me in confirming my read of the enemy. The lit map provided a clear picture of the terrain. Line-of-sight analysis allowed me to determine the intervisibility lines and where we would likely make contact with the enemy.

Although FBCB2 provides numerous tools for crews, sections, and platoons to use, its primary function is to help the commander make decisions. The more connected your systems are, the more you can visualize and describe yourself, the enemy, and the terrain. The better you do that, the better

direction you can provide for your subordinates.

The user must accept FBCB2. Younger soldiers accept FBCB2 faster than older soldiers. My younger soldiers — junior NCOs, enlisted, and lieutenants — displayed an aptitude for computers and understanding the connectivity between FBCB2 and the communications hardware. Older soldiers (higher-ranking NCOs) were quicker to surrender. If the system was not immediately combat ready, they would denounce technology. Without acceptance, digitized units will negate one of the tools available to them to win on the battlefield.

Commanders must correctly train soldiers to use the system. Our training facilities at Fort Hood, Texas, spend a significant effort training digital skills. We use emulators, desktop trainers, or the actual equipment, but in a pristine, classroom environment. Unfortunately, digital skills are not what we needed. We needed connectivity training. To be successful in a digitized unit, commanders must make their communications operators experts in what I refer to as the communications trinity: EPLRS, SINGARs, and precision lightweight GPS receiver (PLGR). These three systems are the major organs that supply the FBCB2 with what it needs to communicate. All three are required to be correctly operating before connectivity can occur.

Commanders must provide the same level of maintenance to their communications systems as applied to their vehicles and weapons. User maintenance of the communications system is even more critical to a digitized unit. Even though we typically could get voice communication, connectivity did not always occur. Dust, condensation, and damaged and loose components can prevent connectivity. Analysis of the trends led me to the conclusion that my operators were not conducting maintenance on their entire communications systems.

Commanders must prepare for increased sustainment of communications components. Due to the increased usage of the components and U.S. Army operating conditions, commanders need to consider maintaining a larger bench-stock of communications peripheral components.

Additionally, we implemented a float system. When a major component (radio, VAA, hard drive, or FBCB2 computer) was non-mission capable, we could hand receipt a temporary item from the signal platoon to keep our command and control systems fully functional.

Finally, commanders need to encourage thorough troubleshooting before calling for help. Troubleshooting the connectivity and the FBCB2 is not magic. The battalion signal personnel are not specially trained to conduct troubleshooting. They simply use a systematic approach to determine which component is the cause. There are two types of troubleshooting: software and hard-

ware. Ninety-five percent of my reliability issues were crew-induced errors caused by lack of expertise on the communications trinity.

Although I don't like to admit it, crew error typically caused many reliability problems. FBCB2 was finicky, but certain negative trends developed over time can be reversed. Additionally, system developers are developing ways of making FBCB2 more reliable. FBCB2 still has significant challenges, but I'm convinced that if someone can track every aircraft in the air as we saw during CNN footage of the 11 September attack, we will be able to track every vehicle with ease.

CPT MICHAEL D. ACORD
Fort Benning, GA

Armor Badge Status

Dear Sir:

I've been out of the loop while assigned to ROTC command. I still receive *ARMOR* magazine and try to stay up on the latest issues concerning the armor force. I am, however, troubled by the status of the Armor Badge.

Not long ago, it seemed to be a topic of debate and discussion on whether it should be considered for adoption by the Army. With a possible war with Iraq looming once more and the high probability of U.S. armor and cavalry units being involved, I feel it's time to raise the issue again.

I was a tank commander with D/3-69 Armor during Operation Desert Storm, and I remember how I saw infantrymen receive the Combat Infantry Badge because they met the requirements by being in Iraq or Kuwait — not because they fired their weapons. The same thing applies to medics who received the Combat Medical Badge — the worst thing they treated was a case of bad diarrhea. How was this justified? Hind-sight is 20/20 and what's done is done. Let's look to the future and get this issue looked at again. Thank you for your time.

Steel on Target!!

MSG CHRIS WORICK

Branch Certification or Check the Block?

Dear Sir:

With the current focus on branch certification, the Army is going back to the good ole' check-the-block era used during the Vietnam war, where leaders were rotated in and out of combat units to get "the right amount of command time and someday receive a star." For those of you who have not read *Self Destruction*, do so; it is very insightful on what went wrong with our lead-

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ership in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. I fear we are repeating history with our current branch-qualification focus.

I would like to offer some insight on the current branch qualification process, its problems, and a suggested fix.

An armor staff sergeant (SSG) is considered branch qualified after 18 months of successful tank commander time. An armor sergeant first class (SFC) is considered branch qualified after 18 months of successful tank platoon sergeant time.

Armor noncommissioned officers are counting TDA platoon sergeant time, and because of the limited number of available platoons and the three-company concept forces, this has to be standard practice.

The problem we run into is identifying the branch certification standard. For example, a SSG in my unit was a promotable sergeant tank commander for 10 months, then was promoted to SSG. Two months later, he received his annual NCOER rating him for 12 months as a SSG tank commander. Another 6 months passed and he received orders to PCS, which required a change of rater NCOER, giving him the required 18-month branch certification time, when he actually had only 8 months, but nonetheless, the two NCOERs reflect that he is branch certified as a SSG tank commander. This is a failure of the system. I have seen many cases involving SFC platoon sergeant branch certification as well. I was a SSG (P) platoon sergeant, promoted to SFC, received an NCOER, which reflected that I had 8 months rated time as a SFC platoon sergeant with 2 months time in grade. I went on to do 30 more months as a SFC platoon sergeant, but this is not always the case, as demonstrated above.

It is essential that we keep our leaders in positions so that they become proficient in branch-qualifying jobs, and branch qualification should be for specific grades, not by adding time from previous grades.

This can be fixed. I recommend that once an NCO is promoted, he receive a complete-the-record NCOER, stating he has entered the new grade. It does not have to be a formal evaluation as the soldier may have just received a rating. But a complete-

the-record NCOER would confirm exactly when the soldier started branch certification for his current grade.

SAMUEL D. CARLSON
MSG, USA
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Fort Knox, KY

American Civilian Engineers and VandenBergh's 194th Tank Battalion

Dear Sir:

I read MAJ VandenBergh's article on the actions of the 192d and 194th Tank Battalions in the Philippines during the opening days of World War II. My Dad, Ed Begole, participated in many of those movements, even though he was an American civilian.

Omitting unrelated details (which are another story), Dad was employed in Mambalao, on the east coast of Luzon, by the Marsman Mining Company as a (very) junior engineer. When war thrust itself into their lives, the Marsman Americans (including my mother and me) headed for Manila, seeking the safety of the (Japanese-ignored) Open City. Dad had been born in Moberly, Missouri, to parents of French and Scots lineage, and had graduated from University of Missouri; during his time there, he was in ROTC for two years.

When he tried to enlist in the U.S. Army in Manila, he recalled "all that military training got me designated as a captain in the Philippine Army — at no pay." Dad's assignment was to take a unit of "Philippine engineers (actually Filipino miners and powder-monkeys) and take the train north to Tarlac. Once we got there, we were to join up with the tanks and go south with them." Their duty was to precede the column of tanks — which turned out to be the 194th — and mine bridges, then blow them up after the tanks were across.

Only once was a bridge blown "prematurely" on Dad's watch, and that occurred when "some major or light colonel SOB ordered me to. It did protect the tanks that HAD got across from the very rapidly advancing Japs, but I still didn't like doing it."

He would laugh about the Bren Gun Carriers that joined the column as they moved on Lubao. Dad recalled, "The column was moving at a pretty fair clip, and those Bren Carriers would throw their tracks in a heartbeat. In fact, it happened so often their crews would throw a track, get it back on, and never lose their place in the column!" He did say they carried a "right good load of 75mm shells, though."

At some point after that, Dad received instructions to return to Manila and await further orders, where he briefly rejoined Mom and me. Around 11 January 1942, those orders came — from the Imperial Japanese army. He was ordered to report to Rizal Stadium, with enough clothing and food for 3 days, and was among the first contingent of American civilian internees at Santo Tomas Internment Camp.

My mother and I were ordered into Santo Tomas Internment Camp in April 1942, and the three of us remained there until March 1945. While the treatment of civilians by the Japs was nowhere nearly as horrendous as that doled out to military prisoners, it was no picnic; we were fortunate that the Japs had no information of Dad's connection with the Philippine Army (tenuous though it may have been).

I just thought you and MAJ VandenBergh, might be interested in some civilian involvement with the 194th.

MICHAEL C. BEGOLE
Richmond, VA

Society of the First Infantry Division

The Society of the First Infantry Division (Big Red One), which is composed of soldiers who served in World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and the Balkans during the Cold War and in peacetime, will hold its 85th Annual Reunion from 30 July to 3 August 2003 in Reno, Nevada. For information please write the society at 1933 Morris Road, Blue Bell, PA 19422; call 1-888-324-4733; fax 1-215-661-1934; or email Soc1ID@aol.com.

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