

# Chasing the Mythical Commander's Week

by Captain Chris L. Connolly

"What are you guys doing for your Commander's Week?" one company commander asks a group of other COs.

"Yeah, right," comes the cynical response from another seasoned commander. "You know how it is around here. Something always comes up at the last minute that will tube your training." Four heads all nod in agreement.

"I hear you," agrees the first commander. "I've planned a commander's week three times in the last year and have yet to actually execute one."

One of the more common complaints from a tank company commander, past or present, is the lack of control over the training calendar. With so many events dictated from higher that require support from the company, the plate becomes too heavy for a company commander to plan and resource his own training event.

In addition, training dollars are tied to OPTEMPO miles and too often it is easier to just let the tanks sit and wait for a battalion- or brigade-level event before anything rolls. When you add in tank services and red cycle support (and here on Fort Hood that can sometimes wipe out two to three *consecutive* months), many company commanders, myself included, throw up our hands in frustration at our inability to plan and resource training the way we were taught in the advanced course.

The FORSCOM commander's direction that all company commanders be afforded the opportunity to conduct a week's worth of training each fiscal quarter merely exacerbates the problem, creating a dilemma for brigade and battalion S3s.

As it is, tank companies in the armor community struggle to accomplish this directive. The primary reason is that current doctrine for training the force, *FM 25-100*, "does not compute" in today's training calendars. Instead of selecting a task to train from the METL, cross-walking it, and then trying to squeeze it into the calendar, company commanders must now start with what days are even available for

training and plug in "pre-packaged" crew-level training events that capture what is important for a tank crewman or crew to know.

To combat this, two changes need to be made:

- Higher headquarters needs to understand the limitations and constraints at company level
- Company commanders have to break the conventional wisdom of using *FM 25-100* as the basis for planning training

How can this be accomplished? Well, as stated, some of the help must come from higher headquarters. When every division- and brigade-level commander and staff must have his Warfighter Exercise, the inevitable new equipment test (like FBCB2, TUAUV, or BCIS), the obligatory CTC rotation, and the myriad of organizational days, training holidays, and taboo weekend training, what is left on the calendar is often slim pickings for the company commander's own training. Factor in gunneries, tank services, and block leave, and there is little wonder that our NCOs are frustrated about their own lack of input on the training schedule! Even a company commander can count on fewer than 14 white days ANNUALLY (come look at my 2000-2001 calendar)! Therefore, division and brigade planners must be careful of what is placed on the calendar and the far-reaching implications that it will have as far down as the company level.

A typical 5-day work week is not as it seems. Monday is command maintenance, a battalion event. Thursday is supposed to be Sergeant's Time and Family Time (go home at 1500). Friday at 1200 everyone starts to clean up the motor pool. In a perfect world, this leaves you Tuesday, Wednesday, and a partial Friday for company-directed training; and some of that should be spent preparing for Sergeant's Time. When one starts applying red cycle support, barracks maintenance, tank parts that need to be installed, the many meetings and "voluntary lunches" that find their way into the week, it is no

wonder that 18 company commanders in one room all laughed at the FORSCOM IG when he asked if we were conducting Commander's Week Training and Sergeant's Time. We need help from higher at policing the calendar, and we haven't been getting it.

To be fair, the other half of the solution is up to the company commander. Granted, opportunity is limited, but we must re-look how we plan our training. Conventional wisdom (*FM 25-100*) has training being planned based on a T, P, U assessment of a unit's METL. Commanders then select the task(s) to focus their training on. The selected METL task is then cross-walked down to the individual level and forms the basis for company-directed training.

In reality, today's unit training calendars rarely support this method at the company level. Too often, the only way to train platoon tasks or evaluate crew collective tasks are within battalion training events, such as gunnery or platoon lanes. National Training Center OCs stress that their environment is really an opportunity for commanders to assess what needs to be trained at home station and how to do it better. Unfortunately, the "hows" often do not take into consideration the training calendars handed down from division through battalion. Besides, right or wrong, most units approach an NTC rotation as an *end state*, not as a step within a continuous cycle of sustainment training. Once the rotation is over, frequently within three months, units turn over almost 50 percent, commanders change out, and the organization starts all over towards preparing for DRB or the next rotation 18-24 months away.

What a typical tank company needs is not the cumbersome METL crosswalk model. A company commander doctrinally does not train his own METL tasks or evaluate the training of his platoons; this is accomplished at battalion and brigade level. Instead, the company commander must simplify his training needs by focusing on what he is able to resource and evaluate and what will, ultimately, make him suc-

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cessful on the battlefield. So let's start at the bottom: As commanders, we often stress to our platoon sergeants and tank commanders to focus on the 20-25 individual tasks that are essential for trained individual tankers. In fact, if these 20-25 specific tasks are all captured in routine training events that typically populate a training calendar, you might have a short list like the following:

1. Weapons Qualification (M9/M4/M16)
2. Vehicle PMCS
3. TCGST
4. Driver's Training
5. Combat Lifesaver Course
6. NBC/CTT
7. Physical Fitness
8. Deployment Readiness

I think that most will agree that if PFC Smith has received training in these areas, he is an asset to the tank crew even if he receives no additional crew- or platoon-level training. Individual training must be second nature to a company. All a commander should need to do is identify the timeframe during the calendar year when he wants these accomplished. By specifying to the company that this quarter's focus is individual training, NCOs should be free to run with that guidance. Any available "white day" becomes an opportunity for a platoon to zero M4s, do driver's training, TCGST, or other individual training captured within an event.

We should also look at ammunition and range management. Companies are held virtually hostage by agencies that control ammunition. I must forecast ammunition one year out for a range that I am unable to lock down until five weeks out. NCOs should be allowed to forecast and plan individual small arms qualifications for their crews and platoons, not beg with CVC in hand for 100 rounds of 9mm to qualify three soldiers. The calendar today is far too cluttered to effectively execute company-level small arms qualification. Turn this and other individual training over to first-line NCOs.

Often, a unit is in the middle of a red cycle. Does it make this difficult? Assuredly. But remember that this is *individual training*, and one sergeant and two enlisted soldiers can accomplish M9 qualification or zero their M4s in 2-

3 hours. Too often, units look for the "AIT" set-piece approach to individual training, run by senior NCOs and officers. Hold those SGTs and SSGs accountable for individual stuff. Just afford them the time to do it, even if it is one crew at a time.

These simple building blocks, planned, resourced, and executed by first-line NCOs will assist in allowing the officers to direct their planning elsewhere... towards crew- and platoon-level events three to six months in advance.

I have thought long and hard about crew-level tasks. What I have discovered within my own company is that if a tank crew can do four to five basic things, it will be successful on the battlefield. Whatever the case may be, all a company commander should have to do is maneuver his platoons to a point on the battlefield where they can successfully maneuver their tanks to positions where the tank commander either wins or loses the crew fight. In numerous platoon and company operations, both here at Fort Hood and at the NTC, I have come to believe that, ultimately, a tank company wins or loses on the quality and skill of tank crews, not on the prowess of its platoon and company officers.

So what do your tank crews need to know to be successful on the battlefield? Perhaps it looks like this:

- Tank crew prep for combat (maintenance and equipment readiness)
- Tank crew gunnery (Tables IV-VIII, UCOFT, target acquisition)
- Tank crew maneuver (reaction drills and navigation)
- Casualty evacuation
- Alternate crew events (peacekeeping, STAB OPS, etc.)

Not only are these five "events" relatively simple to package into 3-5 day training event models such as crew STX lanes, but a quick cross-walk will show that these crew-level tasks captured in an event will support virtually any METL that a company develops. Preparation, shoot, move/communicate, and saving lives will ensure that our tank commanders and crews are better trained than the enemy's. It makes it much easier for a commander to maneuver forces knowing that his tank crews have all their (well-maintained!) equipment, can move quickly and kill

at 3000+ meters, and if necessary, reduce casualties incurred by injury. The capper is that these events can form the basis for a company's own TACSOP because they can be revisited quite often. Let's face it: the only things that belong in a TACSOP are those drills that a unit can reasonably expect to train time and again. The only time I saw a platoon attempt to "punch left" was at NTC. A complex platoon in-stride obstacle breach "play" may be out of place in a TACSOP when the platoon has only been able to run the play once in the last 18 months, one NTC rotation ago, and two platoon leaders in the past. What is "standard" about that play? Might as well carry *FM 17-15* around and save the time it took to put your own cool-looking SOP together.

And really, the company commander does not need to expend much energy with planning platoon or company training. Above crew level, the tank company is only *executing* battalion and brigade events. This is because external assessment is necessary at platoon and company level and, essentially, battalion and brigade commanders have the same philosophy regarding platoons and tank companies: Having well-trained platoons and platoon leaders means that they can maneuver companies with confidence, knowing that lethal platoons will carry the battle. Their staff plans and resources the events and provides external assessors. The company commander executes on the ground, but it is training managed at a higher level. These managed training events might boil down to these common three:

- Platoon prep for combat (PCIs, Platoon PMCS University)
- Platoon battle runs (A Table XII that is more LFX than just a gunnery table)
- Platoon maneuver (battle drills, TACSOP drills)

Platoon lanes and Table XII battle runs will always find their way onto the calendar. And for every NTC train-up, brigade runs the show, bringing it all together with company lanes and task force ARTEP-level training.

Now that the company commander has a short list of pre-planned event models that capture the essential individual and crew skills, how does he plan his training for the year? First, he has to know toward what goal he is

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training. Is it an upcoming NTC rotation, which will invariably have platoon-through-task force lanes already built into the train-up, or is it a DRB focus in which stability operations and deployment-specific skills must be exercised at the crew level at some point? Second, and most difficult, he has to know what the training calendar can support from quarter to quarter. Here is a real-world example:

1st Brigade, 4th ID (M) assumes DRB on 1 November 2001. 3-66 AR is tagged as the first DRF 1 unit. Backing up 13 months, company commanders begin to look at where higher HQ have placed events on the calendar and then plan their own training to support the short-term higher event without losing sight of the long-term goal; in this case, DRB.

For FY01, 1st QTR (Oct-Dec), the commander knows he is in a maintenance-intensive period that includes tank MWOs and tank services. His focus becomes individual training, such as weapons qualification and TCGST, with perhaps a round of CCTT for leader command and control training. This is planned, resourced, and executed at the NCO level. Available "white days" are automatically given to platoon sergeants for weapons qualification, drivers training, CLS, and TCGST. December 15 is the completion date. NCOs now exercise their planning skills to incorporate the maintenance requirements and the individual training requirements. The commander begins focus on 2nd QTR training and conducts OPDs with the officers in preparation for 2nd QTR events.

For FY01, 2nd QTR (Jan-Mar) the battalion has scheduled gunnery in February (Crew Event #2) and platoon lanes in March (Platoon Event #2). Although the battalion is Division Red for January, the company commander plans a prepackaged crew-level event in conjunction with an OPFOR tasking in order to support these upcoming battalion events; in this case, a week in the field training tank crew maneuver (Crew Event #3) and crew preparation for combat (Crew Event #1). The company was fortunate to participate in another battalion's training event, which allowed it to get out of division red cycle support.

For FY01, 3rd QTR (Apr-Jun), the brigade assumes corps red cycle for

two months and also must accomplish tank services. (Don't ask me how we got into that predicament... go ask the G3. In my opinion, armor battalions should schedule tank services before **anything else** is placed upon the calendar, including NTC and DRB. For tankers, maintenance should be king of the training calendar). After several meetings of cursing, the commanders realize that they have little choice but to focus on individual events until June, when the corps red cycle ends.

Once again, NCOs must take the lead here, planning and executing this training to allow the commander to plan 3-6 months out. This is extremely tough, so the commanders direct NCOs to support red cycle tasks first and tank services second. Incredibly, and without dropping a single red tasking, NCOs complete at least some CLS training and weapons qualification while the commander and his platoon leaders work OPD skills and begin constructing the next crew-level training events. Since the battalion has Level I gunnery (Platoon Event #3) scheduled at the end of June, the commander can plan another crew-level event at the end of this quarter, specifically, another round of prepackaged lane training in order to sustain crew proficiencies in the basic skills (Crew Events #1, 3-4).

Finally, for the 4th QTR (Jul-Sep), after recovering from Tank Table XII, the commander can shift focus to DRB specific training. A day of stability operations training conducted by station (Alternate Crew Event), some rail and pallet loading training; NBC certification — even CTT. By the end of the 4th QTR, the commander is back to sustaining individual training and finishing the maintenance requirements necessary for DRB.

Is it sexy? Not really... but since most company commanders bounce in and out of command between 12-18 months, it seems prudent to have these event models already prepared for the next guy to refine and place within the training calendar.

For a battalion, 12 months towards DRB will have included the following **platoon** events:

- Two tank crew gunnery qualifications (February/July)
- Two platoon lanes (March/August)
- One DEPEX (June)

For the company, you have trained the following **crew** events:

- Three crew STX lanes (January/June/August)

For the noncommissioned officers, you have trained the following **individual** events:

- Sergeant's Time (year-round)
- Physical fitness (year-round)
- Deployment readiness (year-round)
- Two TCGST/driver's training (December/May)
- One CTT/NBC training (August)
- Deployment specific training (August)
- Continuous small-arms qualification, CLS, PMCS (year-round)

Further, the individual training is planned, resourced, and executed by the NCOs within the company, the crew events are planned and resourced by the company officers and executed by the NCOs, and the platoon events are planned and resourced by battalion and executed by the commander and his platoon leaders.

Is this a solution for every tank company? Perhaps not. But the principles behind putting it together remain surprisingly the same. All units must train to get somewhere, be it DRB, CTC, or something else... even in 4th ID, where "something else" had been the norm for too long! Instead of constructing an event from the METL and then trying to squeeze it into the calendar, commanders must start at the calendar first and then choose from a kit bag of "prepackaged" training events that can be supported by the cluttered calendar of today's over-tasked army.

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