The Adventures of a Liaison Officer at the NTC

by Captain Clinton D. Alexander

FM 71-2 describes the duties of a liaison officer as follows,

Liaison officers (LO or LNO) are commissioned and noncommissioned officers who represent their commander at other headquarters. Through personal contact, they promote cooperation and coordination, and facilitate the exchange of information. LOs are tasked with general coordination instructions in the task force SOP and with specific coordination instructions each time they are dispatched to another headquarters. Their role as task force commander representative requires LOs to know all task force plans and dispositions. LOs ensure that critical information is passed between the task force headquarters and the headquarters to which they are dispatched. When operating in the main CP, LOs are supervised by the shift OIC.

This was the guidance I received in May of 1999. I had recently finished a stint as a company executive officer in Charlie Company (Cobras) 1-64 Armor at Fort Stewart, Georgia, and was told I would finish my time in the unit in the S3 shop before leaving for the Captain's Career Course. The S3 was deployed, and his assistant (CPT Dan Peck) told me I was going to be the LNO, and that there was not a lot of information on what an LNO does, but that I could look in *FM 71-2* for some guidance. After reading the above guidance, the crusty master gunner said, "the LNO is a Lieutenant with Nothing to Offer."

Non-deterred, I searched for more information. In *FM 100-5*, I found my answer, "The Army provides specialized training (for example, language) to liaison officers." Now I was getting excited; after all, I was going to language school. A year and a half later, as I sat in the three shop with the Ironhorse Brigade in the 1st Cav, I realized that I should have written down everything I learned as an LNO, and captured it for future LNOs. That way, the next time I am at NTC executing my duties in the brigade CP, the LNOs for the battalions will have some TTPs to work with.

The first question you need to discuss prior to an NTC rotation is, who should be your LNO? Some might say the LNO should be a newly assigned captain; but for several reasons, I believe that a senior first lieutenant would be preferable. A senior first lieutenant — one who's been an XO or on staff for a while — knows just about everyone in the brigade. He knows who he can trust, who he can't, and who the "go-to" guys in the units are. While the newly assigned captain might have more book knowledge, he probably won't have the contacts that the senior lieutenant has developed. Instead, let the new captain wow the staff with his OPORD skills, battle captain prowess, and CAS3isms.

Just as with any task in the Army, you cannot just show up at the NTC and expect to be a great LNO. The skills you will learn during your train-up will serve you well. During this train-up, you will quickly learn what equipment you will need. I could probably write an entire article on what equipment you will need as the LNO; the next couple of paragraphs are just a synopsis.

Wheels – The first thing you've got to have as the LNO is a set of wheels — your own set of wheels. One thing you will quickly learn is that the LNO is not an MTOE position that comes with driver, vehicle, weapon, etc. You have to scrounge. During our NTC train-up, I shared a HMMWV with the OPS SGM. This worked out great until the OPS SGM went to get chow. While he was gone, the brigade called saying there was a FRAGO to pick up. Since the 1/3-2/3 rule requires you to get information to and from higher in a timely manner, you'll need a set of wheels! If that means you commandeer the OPS SGM's HMMWV, leaving the HHC 1SG to deliver chow to the TOC, then so be it. In my case, I failed to learn this rule. I let the master gunner take back LOGPAC the second night in the box, but he got lost, the OPS SGM's HMMWV broke down, and a FRAGO, which drastically changed the mission, was not picked up. From about 1700 'til 2300, the FRAGO sat in the TOC, waiting for someone to get it.

Field grades, for some reason, don't like to loan lieutenants their wheels, but it doesn't hurt to ask. The bottom-line is, keep your own wheels. At NTC, you can request to draw an extra HMMWV; just work it out with your S4 ahead of time.

Equipment – As LNO, you will need a pack full of good staff officer equipment. You will need: acetate, pens, computer disks, folders, zip-lock bags for waterproofing orders, and 100 mph tape, to name a few. Twice, the diazo machine broke during our rotation, once at brigade and once at battalion. When this happens at brigade, you can either wait until someone makes you a copy of the graphics, or spring into action, copy your own (neatly), and run it back to your unit. The brigade will normally put in the timeline when subunit graphics are due, so that the brigade can produce consolidated graphics. If your diazo breaks, take out the markers and start copying. Here's another TTP: if your diazo breaks, and you are in good with the copy boys at brigade, run a copy up there and use their machine for your battalion. You will be a hero. You'll also need a compass (the TOC only had one GPS), map, weapon, etc.

Commo – Along with some wheels, you need some way to talk. At home station, it may be difficult to find an extra radio, but at NTC you can draw one. This is important, so you can relay information to the TOC. Also, get on the SIGO, and make sure the DNVT or MSRT (I don't know the difference, it's a phone) in the TOC works. The one at brigade will work, trust me. This is a quick way to relay information back and forth, without actually driving all the way back to your TOC, to simply pass on the timeline or an answer to an RFI (Request for Information). If you can scrounge an OE 254, and a couple of poles, you can also quickly throw that up, to help improve your range, which can be a challenge at NTC given some of the distances.

Driver – If your TOC is short on personnel, your unit may not want to give you a full-time driver. They might sim-

ply give you one as needed, and put him to work as RTO the rest of the time. This is hogwash. You need a full-time driver, who can do maintenance on his own, knows how to copy graphics, and has excellent night driving skills. My old driver was the best. SPC Hill kept everything tight, and often spent every night driving back and forth from the brigade headquarters. If he had to pull RTO all day, he would have been a safety hazard for all the night driving we did. Let him sleep, make him pull maintenance, and you will be all right.

With the basics established, I will now cover some of the duties and some of the TTPs I learned concerning mission analysis. As the LNO, your home must be the brigade or higher headquarters. This is where you will develop a rapport with the planners, and pick up tidbits of information, which will help your unit's planners. Our sister battalion used their LNO as a battle captain and TOC OIC. This worked great, until he got lost going to brigade one night. The reason he got lost was that he was so strung out from doing everything else, that he had not realized the brigade TOC had jumped. Also, by remaining at brigade, you can get what I call a "bootleg" copy of orders. The planner for the brigade would often give me copies on disk of the OPORDs, and FRAGOs before their approval, and I would run it back to our battalion planner. That way, he could begin writing our own order and save valuable time. Once the order was approved, I would then run the "real" copy down, and the battalion staff could begin the mission analysis, most of which was hastily done with the "bootleg" copy. You also should be at brigade to participate in their mission analysis and wargame, and speak on behalf of your battalion if asked for information. You must also learn to read personalities and know when to quit annoying everyone. There will be times when the planners need some quiet time to write the order, without some lieutenant bothering them.

Another thing you will need as the LNO is information. Every time you leave a TOC, write down every bit of information you might need to know. Every time I set foot in the brigade TOC, the battle captain would ask, "Hey 1-64, where are all your scouts at?" Every time I left my TOC, I had a standard list of information I would write down. These were: slant and location of all our companies, location of each scout section, our battalion timeline, copies of our latest orders and graphics, and any RFIs that our staff needed answered. You also will need a good idea of your battalion's scheme of maneuver, because you will probably be asked by the brigade 3 or commander. Not a time to start tap-dancing. Likewise, when you leave brigade, you will need to be armed with the latest orders, graphics, timeline, answers to RFIs, and any guidance that your unit will need. The first thing you will be asked upon arrival at your unit is, "What time is the rehearsal?" You must know. Sometimes your unit will ask, "What are they smoking at brigade?" This is the time for you to share the brigade's logic for the tasks they assigned your unit. You understand the brigade's logic, because you sat in on the wargame. Timely information is the most important thing you provide as an LNO.

Along with providing information, you are also the link between the slice elements and their higher headquarters. In the brigade TOC, you will find combat engineer, ADA, fire support, and other assets. These folks write orders, but often have no way of getting them to their subordinate units that are attached to maneuver battalions. Every time I left the brigade TOC, I would simply stop by each cell, and ask if they had anything for the FSO, engineer, or ADA platoon leader. They normally will have an order, or a copy of their annex to give you far in advance of the issuing of the actual brigade order. This will help your attachments out immensely. You will normally get engineer, A2C2, and fire support graphics to pass along to your attachments as well.

This works both ways, because you will need to run your attachment's orders/graphics back up to their higher HQ as well. Too many times after a battle at the NTC, I would go into the TOC and find unit orders and graphics that were never picked up. It is not only a waste of time and effort to copy these orders, but important information that could synchronize a battle could be missed and lives could be lost.

The final area I want to discuss is the personality of the LNO, what *FM 71-2* calls the "human dimension" of combat power. You have to be outgoing and capable of finding who to go to. You must be a diligent listener, and be able to tell what is important and what is not. You must have the ability to know what your commander would say, if the brigade commander asks you a question. You have to be able to scrounge parts, POL, Class I, and anything else you might need. You have to be independent. There is no wingman to follow to the BDE CP, through Indian country, at night, in the cold, as you find out that the CP jumped since the last time you were there. (Hint: use your PVS-7s, and look for all the lights. I always wondered how the OPFOR found us.)

In closing, when I was given the job of LNO, I was not thrilled. I thought I'd get some sexy job like the mortars or scouts. However, the information I learned as the LNO thoroughly prepared me for the Captain's Career Course and for my next job as a brigade assistant S3. Although I lost a lot of sleep, was miserably cold, and didn't get to fight the OPFOR like when I was a platoon leader, I learned more as the LNO and got to watch some fine senior officers at work.

On the future battlefield, orders may be passed by leveraging technology over a tactical internet. However, you will never be able to replace that "human dimension" that an LNO provides. A tactical internet will never be able to answer those questions like, "What's brigade saying about us," or "How's MAJ So-and-so holding up," or "What are they smoking at brigade?"

So do your job well, young LNO. Others are depending on the timely distribution of your information. As one old friend used to say, "Getting the battalions a 70 percent solution on time is better than giving them the 90 percent solution too late."

I'm still waiting; however, on the language school slot.

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