

MAGTF Warfighting Trends

Planning and assessment

by the Staff, MSTP

After fifteen-plus years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, MAGTF staffs have reoriented their efforts toward the deliberate planning and execution of conventional combat operations. Through various MEF- and MEB-level exercises, warfighting staffs are being reintroduced to the challenges of fighting near-peer enemies with 21st century capabilities, many of which rival or exceed our own. The MSTP (MAGTF Staff Training Program) is charged with leading this effort by designing and implementing these exercises to enhance the skills of the Marine Corps' warfighting MAGTFs. This includes a two-week planning evolution where the MAGTF command element methodically proceeds through each step of the MCPP (Marine Corps Planning Process) with the goal of developing an OPOD (operations order) that will serve as the basis for action for MAGTF operations that follow. This article presents some of the most common planning trends observed by MSTP during MAGTF warfighting training.

Enduring Planning Actions

Problem Framing. The first step of the MCPP, problem framing, contains several actions that need to be revisited, updated, and leveraged throughout the entire planning process. Design, center of gravity analysis (both friendly and enemy), and IPB (intelligence preparation of the battlespace) are three of these actions. They provide planners—and commanders—with a clear understanding of the operating environment. Unfortunately, in practice, these three activities are usually only performed at the introduction of the planning



Successful planning is commander-centric and requires attention to situational changes.
(Photo by PFC Erick Galera.)

process and then ultimately discarded, depriving them of their enduring value. Often treated as intellectual exercises, staffs rarely revisit these actions during the remainder of planning or during execution. As information about the environment changes, these products must be updated, as they are an essential foundation for understanding effective COA (course of action) development and wargaming, orders development, and execution. Staffs that do not thread these efforts through the planning and execution continuum usually lack sufficient understanding of the set of problems facing them and, consequently, have less integrated and coordinated staff actions and less effective COAs.

COA Wargaming. For most MAGTF staffs, COA wargaming is the most difficult step of the MCPP. The most

significant challenge is identifying the required level of detail during COA development in order for wargaming to be as successful as possible. Avoid using the COA wargaming step to actually develop an incomplete COA; instead, focus on using the step to improve the most complete COA possible. A best practice observed by MSTP is to develop as complete a COA as possible during COA development so that wargaming can easily highlight the remaining issues—paving the way for COA improvement. Staffs should, therefore, enter COA wargaming with complete COA graphics and narratives, adversary COAs, a developing synchronization matrix, estimates of supportability, staff estimates, and other important products generated as a result of staff actions.

Regarding detail, for instance, staffs can generally validate logistical support requirements prior to COA wargaming. During wargaming, logisticians should be focused on refining those calculations and preparing for unforeseen changes. Aviation sortie capacities can also be estimated during COA development and then refined during wargaming. Additionally, initial relative combat power assessments at each decisive point in the operation can be calculated during COA development with an understanding that unforeseen enemy reactions during wargaming may result in a requirement for modifications. Other examples apply.

A key output from COA wargaming is a summary of casualty and battle damage that will take place during different stages of the COA. These summaries allow the staff to understand the consequences of actions in the battlespace; they feed requirements for additional support or resources, and they help to determine the feasibility of certain planned actions. Staffs often fail to execute this critical action within wargaming, resulting in a vague set of conclusions as to how friendly forces withstood the enemy's actions. Even in cases where the estimates of battle damage and casualties are calculated precisely, staffs often neglect consideration of combat replacement capabilities on both the friendly and enemy sides and incorrectly assume that forces do not reconstitute losses. For example, it may be determined that an enemy unit took 300 casualties during a given engagement within a war game. It would be incorrect to assume that none of these casualties would be replaced from a garrison pool of manpower or returned to duty after medical treatment.

Orders Development. Another trend commonly noted by MSTP is that MAGTF staffs often do not effectively reconcile or crosswalk their OPORD before being published. The reconciliation and crosswalk efforts are tedious and challenging tasks; however, when not done, or not done properly, havoc can ensue. An order's crosswalk ensures that the OPORD is nested within its higher OPORD and pur-

poses are aligned, and it verifies that the MAGTF's subordinate unit OPORDs are nested within the MAGTF command element's OPORD. The nesting of an OPORD mainly ensures that every specified task from higher headquarters is addressed within the OPORD. Additionally, a given OPORD should not denote times, locations, or schemes of maneuver that do not agree with the higher headquarters OPORD.

**...the responsibilities
for drafting an OPORD
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Orders reconciliation further ensures that the OPORD is in agreement with itself; that is, the base order is in agreement with its associated annexes and appendices. In practice, the responsibilities for drafting an OPORD are often divided among an overworked staff in a time-compressed environment. Action officers within staff sections craft annexes related to their functional areas, ultimately submitting them to the G-3 section for consolidation. Time and personnel shortfalls often prevent the officer within the G-3 who is responsible for assembling the OPORD to hold working groups for reconciliation. The typical result is a disjointed OPORD that does not agree on times, locations, or concepts of support. Disjointed orders create an inordinate amount of confusion within the force. The only way to prevent this massive confusion over a simple inconsistency is by allocating the time and resources to reconcile the OPORD prior to its release.

Planning Responsibilities. Each MAGTF's planning capabilities are jointly owned by a Plans section, a FOPS (future operations section), and a COPS (current operations section). With this division of labor, MAGTF staffs tend to orient actions according to planning horizons. For instance, COPS sections usually plan actions that are within 24 hours of execution,

FOPS sections usually produce plans that are within 96 hours of execution, and Plans sections develop remaining, long-term planning efforts. In practice, most plans begin in the Plans section and get handed to FOPS and COPS for refinement as execution gets closer.

MAGTF staffs, however, do not consistently delineate planning responsibilities between these three sections. Instead, a loose understanding of expectations is accepted. This often leads to planning tasks being overlooked or addressed during execution, where timelines are compressed and friction becomes overwhelming. Branch plans usually become the first casualty. These plans are real multipliers, enhancing agility and flexibility for commanders when they reach predetermined decision points during execution. Decision points are usually identified during COA wargaming, and subsequent branch plans should be developed in planning—in conjunction with the OPORD by the Plans section or the FOPS section. Instead, it is often incorrectly assumed that the COPS section will develop these branch plans, leading to an incomplete OPORD and, often, less flexibility in execution.

Other plans that are routinely overlooked are the details of complex actions that require coordinated efforts of two or more elements of the MAGTF. Actions like bridge crossings, significant infrastructure development, or large combined arms events require detailed planning at the MAGTF level to coordinate and synchronize actions. The responsibility for crafting these details cannot be abrogated to subordinate units to work out on their own. Instead, this type of planning should be conducted by the MAGTF Plans section or FOPS section prior to execution. In practice, however, it is periodically assumed that the COPS section will specify this coordination with the subordinate units as execution proceeds. As a result, the FOPS or COPS sections are often charged with developing emergency planning teams to address these complex efforts during execution, leading to inevitable shortcomings.

Tenets of Planning

Single Battle. The single battle concept is a tenet of Marine Corps planning asserting that all actions in the battlespace interact and affect each other in some way. In other words, a given action in one portion of the battlespace can have, and should be expected to have, an effect on some other portion of the battlespace. Commanders and planners should use this tenet to frame their efforts in both planning and execution, always ensuring the battlespace is treated as an indivisible entity.

The rear area, mainly dedicated to sustainment and protecting the force, is a section of the battlespace that is habitually not planned for with the same level of attention as the deep and close areas, signaling a less-than-full embrace of the single battle concept. In a linear battlespace where deep, close, and rear areas line up neatly, identifying the rear area is straightforward. However, in complex environments with noncontiguous areas of operations, the rear area can be more difficult to define. It is often forgotten because planners assume it is some type of “green zone” requiring little protection and that it can be managed through a cooperative relationship between its occupants. Or the rear area becomes complicated because important decisions related to its control are not made or prove difficult. Like the deep and close areas, the rear area is susceptible to enemy activity. Commanders’ conscious decisions to ensure that rear area activities can function properly are imperative to success and a sustained regard for the MAGTF single battle.

In particular, planning for rear area operations often omits requirements for adequate fires capabilities and sufficient force sizes to combat enemy threats. Additionally, planners often fail to realize that the battlespace changes as an operation proceeds. A rear area is most likely to exhibit differences in shape, size, and character, over time, as a MAGTF proceeds through phases and stages of an operation.

A commander with a refined sense of the MAGTF single battle will focus on the command and control arrangement for the rear area. Several options

exist. First, the MAGTF commander can retain control of the rear area and use his staff to manage it. Second, the MAGTF commander can retain control but appoint a rear area coordinator to manage it. The coordinator is responsible for facilitating agreements between occupants but does not have the authority to compel an agreement between them. The third option is to delegate some or all functions of the rear area to a rear area commander. In most cases, this includes a capability to integrate ground and aviation fires. Though this option appears to be the most robust, it requires significant investments in manpower, training, and equipment. Only after detailed analysis and wargaming do MAGTF staffs realize this option is often not available to a MAGTF commander because of competing requirements. One of these options should be chosen during COA development and analyzed during COA wargaming.

Integrated Planning. Like the single battle, integrated planning is one of three key tenets of Marine Corps planning, but it often receives incomplete consideration among MAGTF staffs during planning exercises. Integrated planning includes coordinated planning efforts with higher, adjacent, and subordinate units. It also includes functional integration among the MAGTF staff sections as well as between MAGTF staff sections and those of higher and adjacent headquarters. MSTP’s observation is that true integration can only be achieved through realtime interaction, either physically or virtually, among all relevant players.

MAGTF staffs usually embrace the importance of planning with subordinates, and it is common to see representatives of subordinate elements at the MAGTF command element during planning evolutions. However, it is uncommon to see adequate integration with higher or adjacent units. In many cases, MAGTF staffs are not fully aware of the support they can provide to the MAGTF. More importantly, higher and adjacent forces may also desire support from the MAGTF. A routine example is the sole use of MAGTF aviation to shape the battlespace without the con-

sideration of joint aviation assets. Another example may include an adjacent unit’s dependency on certain actions of the MAGTF to be synchronized for success. This lack of shared situational awareness and coordinated action beyond the MAGTF generally leads to an insufficient understanding of the larger purpose of the operation and incoherent tactical actions.

Top-Down Planning. Top-down planning is the third tenet of Marine Corps planning, and it implies the direct involvement of the commander early in—and throughout—the planning process. It specifies that the commander leads planning (and design) and through this, achieves unity of command and unity of effort. The commander must have personal involvement in the process for it to be successful.

The commander provides top-down influence on planning, both conceptual and detailed, with the assistance of his principal staff. This group of senior officers should be the most knowledgeable experts in the command with respect to their functional areas. The commander relies upon this base of knowledge and advice to drive planning and make decisions. Therefore, the presence and involvement of the principal staff throughout the planning process is essential. Planning can never be subcontracted to an operational planning team without frequent supervision and back briefs by those officers who know the most.

That said, many planning shortfalls are simply because of inadequate supervision by the principal staff. Competing real-world priorities often pull the principal staff away from planning. Action officers who represent functional staff sections within a planning team at higher headquarters are usually captains and majors with limited planning and execution experience. They generally do not have the seasoned, tempered judgment necessary to see errors in planning before they occur. For this reason, it is imperative that principal staff members are involved in the planning process, closely supervising the operational planning team leader, operational planning team members, and other action officers in order to ensure the commander’s

planning guidance is followed and intent is realized.

Operation Assessment

Operation assessment is a process that informs a commander whether a series of actions adhere to a given plan and whether the plan is achieving its desired conditions, effects, and objectives. In particular, quality operation assessment with a MAGTF encompasses information from a variety of functional areas and provides the commander with a clear, concise, aggregated analysis. This makes operation assessment a team sport. A good assessment process is developed during the planning stages of an operation, specifically during the problem framing step of the MCPP. Assessment can never be an afterthought.

Operation assessment should be tied to design. Design helps leaders to properly identify a set of problems and articulate ways to address them. Outputs from design include a problem set and an operational approach. These outputs directly fuel an assessment's methodology because they clarify the purpose of the military operation that is being planned.

In practice, operation assessment in earnest is not usually addressed early in planning, and the assessment approach is not often fully developed and understood until execution begins. In these cases, the assessment team was likely not organized during planning, insufficiently guided, and thus not versed in the discussions that took place during design. As a result, the staff creates a fragmented assessment approach that is not connected to the underlying problem set determined at the outset of planning. Worse still, the assessment effort does not meet the specific needs of the commander, the individual charged with making decisions based on the assessment results.

Operation assessment should be conducted by a team of staff members and led by an appointed assessments officer armed with guidance from senior leaders, if not the commander. This team should be knowledgeable and experienced enough to provide meaningful information to the combined assessment. Junior officers and inexperienced

NCOs are usually not the correct people for these teams. Instead, field-grade officers and senior enlisted Marines are more appropriate. Additionally, the team should represent interests in all warfighting functions from across the staff. For various reasons, MAGTF staffs often place a low priority on forming assessments teams, resulting in an inability of the commander to accurately understand the outcome of actions during execution as they relate to planning. This inability to understand directly and negatively impacts corresponding decisions intended to produce desired results.

Another trend among the business of operation assessments is that they are too narrowly focused on short-term task accomplishment rather than longer-term objectives and effectiveness. This is not to say that assessing the close fight is irrelevant, as there are certainly circumstances where a commander would need an assessment on the accomplishment of near-term objectives. However, in general, MSTP espouses that MAGTF commanders should rightfully be focused on decision points that are no closer than 96 hours away and even further out if possible. This aligns with a MAGTF commander's rightful focus on future plans, not exclusively future and current operations. While the MAGTF

commander is not indifferent to current or future operations, he should be focused on the purpose and end state of the operation and not on individual tasks or daily activities of subordinate units.

Furthermore, assessment teams are notorious for providing the results of quantitative and qualitative data analysis without including recommendations for a commander's subsequent decision. It is common for assessments teams to be so focused on the challenge of gathering data and analyzing it that they often overlook the meaning of it. Consequently, commanders are forced to interpret the data and form their own conclusions without adequate input from the staff. An example of this may be simply informing a commander that an enemy unit has been reduced to 50 percent of its capability without any further context. In this case, the commander is left to guess exactly what enemy capability has been reduced (aviation, tanks, infantry, etc.), where reductions have taken place, and how the unit and its adjacent units will adjust their tactical actions.

Conclusion

MAGTF staffs must continue to refine their proficiency and understanding of the tenets of Marine Corps plan-



The staff will provide the commander a comprehensive analysis during the operation assessment phase. (Photo by LCpl Matt Myers.)

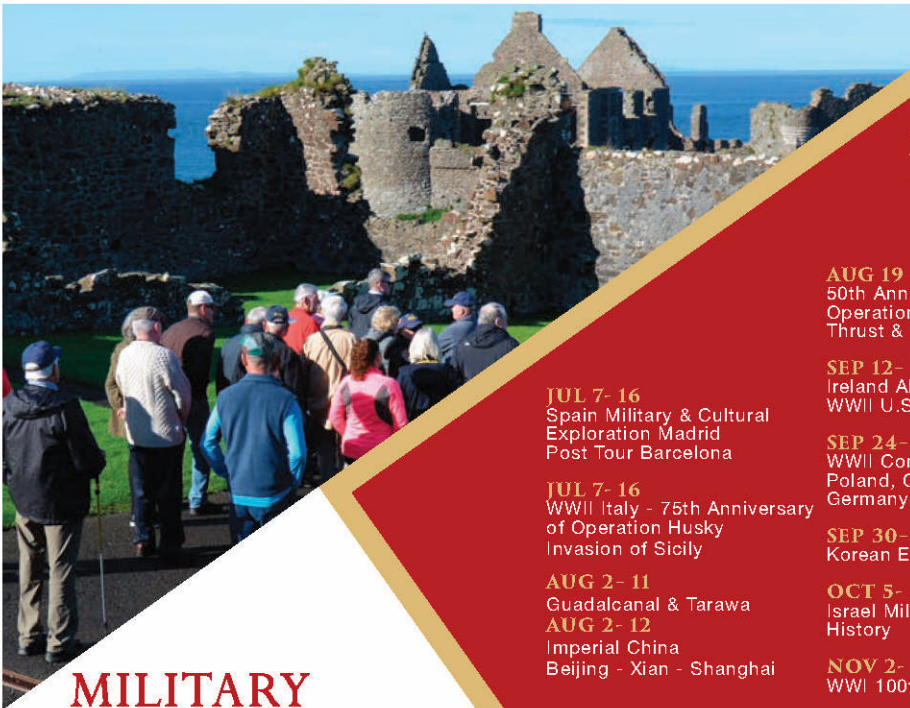


They are responsible for plan execution. (Photo by Cpl Justin Updegraff.)

ning, design, the planning process, and operation assessment. This is difficult business. A thorough understanding of the battlespace, led by the commander and integrated among all relevant stakeholders, should be the foundation of

all military planning. Operation assessment should be a concurrent effort tethered to both planning and execution, regularly feeding the commander with appropriate analysis and recommendations.

MAGTF staffs have steadily improved their planning abilities in conventional operations over the last two years plus, and MSTP is intent on continuing this positive trend. A top-down emphasis from the Commandant of the Marine Corps on the conduct of training against near-peer threats drives our every action. It is only through practice and repetition—the reps and sets—that a MAGTF staff can gain the warfighting proficiency necessary to operate and win when duty calls. We will continue to share our observations and best practices in an effort to improve the warfighting capabilities of senior commanders and their staffs, the very purpose of our mission statement and the sole reason we exist.



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