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Regimental Effects Operations Center

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Enhancing situational awareness and achieving unity of effort in nonkinetics

The Commanding Officer (CO), Regimental Combat Team 1 (RCT-1), enters his combat operations center (COC) at Camp Dwyer, Afghanistan, to get an update on conditions in the battlespace. He immediately receives realtime reports of gunfire overheard at the bazaar in Marjah by a partnered U.S. Marine Corps-Afghan National Army (ANA) patrol. The senior watch officer informs him of the caliber of weapon fired, number of rounds expended, 10 -digit grid location of the incident, and the response of the Marines and ANA soldiers. He then hears an urgent medevac being requested for the victim of the gunfire. There is an initial report that the victim is a member of the newly elected Marjah District Community Council (DCC). Based on his experiences in Iraq, the CO recognizes the situation for what it is - another act of murder and intimidation against the Afghan Government intended to destabilize the fragile security bubble that surrounds Marjah. The CO has many questions. What village and block does the DCC member represent? What tribe is he from? How powerful and respected is he? Does he have past Taliban connections? Has civil affairs implemented reconstruction and development (R&D) projects in his village? How is the security situation there? Are the local atmospherics favorable? What will the information operations (IO) | psychological operations (PsyOps) response be, and how quickly should it be implemented? Can the local radio -in- a- box be leveraged to message the populace, or should some other means be utilized? Should the event even be acknowledged publically? The answers to the CO's pressing questions are not immediately available in his COC.

Defining the Need

The regimental COC is a high-tech command and control nexus that provides the RCT CO with instant situational awareness (SA) of events in the battlespace. In a matter of minutes the CO can very accurately know who shot whom, the caliber of the weapon and number of rounds expended, where and when it occurred, and what is being done

about it by coalition and Afghan forces. This is very detailed information, but it also can be very narrow information, focused only along the security line of operation (LOO). The other LOOs pursued in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM counterinsurgency (COIN) R&D, governance/rule of law, Afghan National Security Force development, and IO are generally outside the purview of the COC. The kinetic fight is what Marines gravitate to; therefore, it is no surprise that it is what we "get right" in terms of command and control. What is lacking is a similar way to provide SA to the CO along the other LOOs via "one-stop shopping" in a similar facility. Recognition of this shortcoming is what led leaders in RCT-7 and RCT-1 to mandate the creation of an effects operations center (EOC) in the RCT headquarters. "Effects" in this case refers to those desired battlespace outcomes that result from effective employment of the nonkinetic enablers that reside in the RCT and subordinate battalions.

Building the EOC Team

The first step in creating an EOC was to build an organization to inhabit it. Many disparate nonkinetic enablers are either on the RCT table of organization, attached, or in direct support. These enablers are essential to prosecuting the COIN fight but needed to be integrated into an effective team for the RCT. Under this mandate, civil affairs, IO, PsyOps, public affairs, combat camera, female engagement team (FET), and the human terrain team were organized under the umbrella of the "effects cell." The information-related disciplines (PsyOps, public affairs, combat camera) were rolled up under the IO officer (a major), in addition to FET. Figure 1 depicts this organization. Putting the officers in charge (OICs) of these enabling teams under one organization and physically within earshot of each other was intentionally implemented to foster open communications, collaboration, and unity of effort. Additionally, "LOO managers" were designated in a coordinating capacity throughout the regiment to provide oversight of each LOO.

The EOC Architecture

In designing the EOC, the COC was used as a blueprint. Figure 2 depicts this arrangement. A large open space in the RCT headquarters was utilized where every enabler OIC could work and interact in a collégial but operational atmosphere. Full connectivity, to include secret Internet protocol router network, nonsecure Internet protocol router network, combined enterprise regional information exchange system, and video teleconference was available to all. The focal point of the room, much like the COC, was multiple plasma screens displaying command post of future (CPOF) depictions of the battlespace.

The walls of the EOC were covered with area of operations-relevant information, much like the COC. Each battalion area of operations, with the latest unit boundaries, was displayed and constantly updated. Intelligence products with key white cell personalities were displayed for each district, the province, and the surrounding region. Commander's significant notification events (CSNEs), both kinetic and nonkinetic, were displayed prominently. A "world clock" displayed time in every major zone.

In order to track every LOO realtime in the battlespace, reporting requirements for the battalions had to be expanded and improved. This was a challenge because, as mentioned before, Marines tend to gravitate toward kinetics, and this is especially true of significant events and WALTÁ-L (who, activity/ event, location, time-date time group, friendly actions taken, LOO) reporting. A frag order was generated that defined nonkinetic CSNEs as well as other reporting occasions for every LOO and enabler in the battlespace. An EOC journal was displayed on a plasma screen, much the same as in the COC, for the CO to review the WALTÁ-Ls from the last 96 hours. The events were then displayed graphically on CPOF to show the geographic location of each significant event. MAGTF planners, trained in CPOF, doubled as common operational picture managers for the EOC. Operations chain reporting of these nonkinetic events served another important purpose as well. Since they were transmitted up the operations chain to Task Force Leatherneck, "feeding the beast" of higher headquarters with information was much easier.

The Battle Rhythm

To provide a framework for operations, an effects cell battle rhythm was organized, also loosely based on the COC battle rhythm. A daily meeting, lasting 15 to 20 minutes, was implemented and included speaking roles for every member of the effects cell, plus representatives from current operations, the Department of State, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. Agency for International Development. In addition, weekly working groups to address all LOOs (plus other important subjects like counterimprovised explosive devices, targeting, and combat engineering) were conducted.

These working groups were chaired by their respective LOO managers. A LOO synchronization working group, chaired by the effects cell OIC, culminated the battle rhythm at the end of the week. Out briefs from each working group were presented at the LOO synchronization group for the staff to synchronize operations and stimulate staff interaction. The deliverables to the CO each week were priorities by LOO and district as well as upcoming decision points.

During day-to-day operations and effects cell meetings, the EOC itself played a vital role. The plasma screens provided a convenient way to display the standardized daily briefing format as well as any specific Microsoft PowerPoint

products for the day. As recent WALTA-Ls were briefed, the CPOF plasmas could display and highlight each one graphically. Kinetic significant events from the COC were overlaid in realtime. The CO could come to the EOC to reference this information any time he wished and had quick access to the latest nonkinetic events in the battlespace.

Tracking Effects

In addition to nonkinetic significant event reporting, other metrics significant to the COIN fight were tracked in the EOC. Again, CPOF was the primary mechanism for this. Examples of items tracked included ongoing or complete road improvements, bridge building and repair, canal cleaning and repair, bazaar improvements, school projects, DCC member locations, local defense force locations, key religious leaders, and mosques, etc. It required considerable effort to keep this data up to date, but it gave the CO a visual representation of where his resources were being allocated as well as other key information relevant to COIN. When overlaid with other information like kinetics, interrelationships could be drawn. For instance, a direct relationship could easily be seen between the expenditure of commander's emergency response program funds on the battlefield and increases in security.

Assessment of Success

The logical question is, how well did it all work? The goal of promoting communications, collaboration, and unity of effort was achieved without a doubt. Spirited debates and fruitful exchanges were occurring constantly in the open air environment of the EOC. Just as an example, having IO and PsyOps in the same room as other enablers allowed them to intertwine and fully exploit effects in the battlespace created by civil affairs projects, female engagements with the populace, governance gains, etc.

The implementation of expanded reporting requirements in the other LÖOs was slow to take hold with the subordinate units at first. But with prodding, the battalions began to generate WALTA-Ls for every significant event that was relevant in the COIN fight. For instance, every time a major R&D project was started, completed, or delayed, a WALTA-L report was generated. If the Afghan Government made a significant step toward good governance and autonomy or regressed, it was reported as well. The overall SA of the RCT staff and its CO along all LOOs was enhanced as a result.

The weekly RCT working group battle rhythm, managed via the effects cell, was effective as well. It created robust communications and interaction between the staff, especially during the LOO synchronization meeting. Every staff member had full SA of the priorities and challenges that his peers were facing in their respective areas of responsibility, thus they were able to synchronize and integrate their efforts to develop common solutions. The net effect of this approach to the battle rhythm was that every tool available to the CO was brought to bear in the battlespace in a coherent and synergistic manner.

Way Ahead

As effective as the effects cell and EOC concepts turned out to be, there was certainly room for improvement. The processes utilized in the EOC and the working groups needed to become even more "effects based," especially as the COIN fight moved from the clear and hold phases into the build and transfer phases. More emphasis on measures of performance, measures of effectiveness, and desired end states would have paid dividends. One means to do this would be implementation of the concept of district stability framework operations, which was just starting to be mandated by higher headquarters at the RCT's transfer of authority. One other area for improvement was in the usage of CPOF. Although a significant database was constructed in the software, and general trends could be discerned across the battlespace, it was not being utilized to its full potential for analysis purposes. Given time and effort, COIN overlays could be created to reveal causal relationships between security and nonkinetic metrics. Lastly, the analysis and influence of white cell personalities became integral to the work done in the EOC. A permanently assigned intelligence Marine or one with targeting experience would have paid dividends.

Gradual improvement of the effects cell and EOC concepts over the course of a year resulted in a usable organization and facility for the oncoming RCT to fall in on. There is no doubt that it was value added for RCT-1 during its time in Helmand Province. With additional refinement and implementation of lessons learned, the EOC can be taken to the next level of effectiveness.

Conclusion

The RCT-1 CO departs the COC and enters the EOC where he finds the effects cell staff already formulating courses of action in response to the Marjah murder and intimidation event. A WALTA-L has been generated by the battalion and is displayed on the EOC journal with the essential facts of the event. The location of the incident and the DCC member's village is highlighted on the CPOF display along with his tribe, the local elders, R&D projects underway in the area, and recent security-related events. A white cell "baseball card" is displayed with the DCC member's background and status as a positive or negative influencer in the battlespace. The human terrain team OIC produces a recent study on perceptions of security and governance in the area. The IO officer provides courses of action and

recommended messaging on the event while the PsyOps officer confirms that the village is in range of the local radioin-a-box station. The FET OIC produces details regarding the DCC member's family situation via a recent engagement by a FET team with his mother, wives, and children. By the time the DCC member has left surgery at the Dwyer Combat Surgical Hospital, the RCT CO has all of his requests for information answered and an effective response formulated. He proceeds to visit the Afghan official at the hospital, confident that the situation is well in hand.

There is always room for improvement. (Photo by Cpi James Clark.)

Operations chain reporting of these nonkinetic events served another important purpose as well.

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