

# OPERATIONALIZING THE DEPLOYMENT PROCESS

■ *By Dr. Stewart W. Bentley*

“Train as you fight, fight as you train” is an old Army truism. It is similarly true for the deployment process: “Plan your deployment, deploy your plan.” Deployment planning is a form of command and staff training that must be operationalized and not simply pushed aside as logistical or support function. In addition, deployment planning must be included as part of the military decision-making process since the process is essentially the same.

One of the more troubling deployment trends observed in

warfighter exercise (WFX) and combat training center (CTC) rotations is how little time and effort are spent on preparing units and Soldiers for mobilization and deployment. Most operational planning is focused on what happens when units cross the line of departure and begin combat operations. The issue here is that a failure to account for mobilization and deployment ignores the complexity of those functions. How did the unit get to the line of departure, and what could be learned in examining those functions?

The current WFX structure includes a series of command post exercises that culminate in the penultimate event when the unit executes large-scale combat operations (LSCO). A review of a recent WFX timeline and associated training objectives indicates that the unit focus was on the warfighting functions with no mention of the deployment process.

The CTC rotation after action reviews (AARs) for the past several years repeat the same trend. However, it bears noting that while

the WFX structure does not include large movement of equipment and Soldiers, CTC rotations do. This planning entails the scheduling and prepositioning of transportation resources and deployment enablers. The focus of the AARs is on how the units performed various combat functions once they crossed the line of departure.

A recent Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) symposium about LSCO did not address the issue of mobilization and deployment either. Instead, it focused solely on warfighting functions. Similarly, a JRTC Crucible podcast featuring the commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps had the same focus on warfighting.

Within Component 3, an Army National Guard division conducted a staffing exercise in 2023 to determine how long the mobilization and deployment of the unit would take from armory to port. The division planners estimated that from mobilization day to the ready load date on the maritime shipping conveyance (beyond rail) would take 47 to 50 days and then an additional 14 to 21 days for transshipment to theater. Note that this timeline was done in an uncontested homeland environment.

There is a certain irony here. As an institution, the Army relies on deployment planning and resourcing before any training exercise or real-world deployment. The actual process is completed before any move, whether to a local training

area or to a CTC. The issue is that it is not evaluated for effectiveness. While a unit may meet the established deployment timeline, there is no evaluation of how the unit functioned. If the Army treated deployment as an operation, that process would receive the same command priority and attention as standard plans and exercises.

A review of existing publications is revealing. While Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations, addresses deployment at length, beyond planning, it only highlights the need to conduct deployment readiness exercises at the unit level. Chapter 4 of FM 4-0, Sustainment Operations, devotes only one paragraph to deployment and then one sentence to planning: “Corps and division staffs examine all deployment possibilities and conduct parallel planning.” This brief treatment leads one to conclude that since deployment is addressed elsewhere — namely in Army Regulation 525-93, Army Deployment and Redeployment, in Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA Pam) 525-93, Army Deployment and Redeployment Processes and Procedures, and in Army Techniques Publication 3-35, Army Deployment and Redeployment — the planning process does not need to be included.

In the staff hierarchy, bringing the mobility warrant officer (MWO) and the unit movement officer (UMO) into operational planning is critical. The MWO provides the knowledge and experience to make

the process efficient. The UMO, even when not school trained, learns by experience how the planning and execution process works.

Changing the institutional mindset is a process. A useful starting point would be to add deployment to the list of warfighting functions in Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, Operations. Most would argue that deployment is a sustainment function, but this misses the point of how units conduct mobilization and begin the process of getting to the line of departure. Next, deployment concept drills should be added to unit training, from the general to the specific. This should be done in the ascending form of leader’s recon, tabletop exercises, and rehearsal-of-concept drills across the spectrum, from deployment readiness exercises, field training exercises, CTC rotations, and the WFX structure. During the latter, third-party evaluators, similar to CTC observer controllers, could observe and assess the process efficiency and provide objective feedback. The evaluation task checklists are in Appendix C of DA Pam 525-93.

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