COMBAT AVIATION BRIGADES IN THE DIRT AT THE COMBAT TRAINING CENTERS

The FURY Brigade enters "the Box" at the NTC, Fort Irwin, California. U.S. Army photo by SPC David Nye.

## By COL John A. Morris, III

n January 2024, the 1st Armored Division Combat Aviation Brigade (1AD CAB) had the opportunity to participate in a division-(DIV) level combat training center (CTC) rotation at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California. To our knowledge, this is the first time a rotation of this scale has been conducted since the years prior to WWII. With this experience behind us and the possibility of similar rotations in the future, this article will discuss the focus areas used by 1AD CAB to get ready for the NTC rotation and highlight a few gaps that will drive training across the CAB in the future.

**Preparation:** Based on our experience and the assessed starting proficiency of our battalions (BNs), we recommend a minimum of a 6-month dedicated preparation window to get ready for a CTC. Depending on the desired level of execution and the status of some programs across the CAB, a 12-18 month window may be required. The 1AD CAB's preparation started 18 months prior to the actual event. This process consisted of revamping major portions of the maintenance and safety programs before beginning a gated training strategy<sup>1</sup> focused on validation by echelon from the platoon to company level. A series of external evaluations (EXEVALS) validated the gated strategy progression.

**Maintenance:** First, to operate at the brigade (BDE) level during a CTC (flying two or more companies per night), the CAB must have tailored, well-organized,

and lead maintenance teams. Initially, our focus started with building proficient phase teams capable of completing phases in a predicable manner that also met or surpassed the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM)-stated goals. This gave us not only a solid post-phase aircraft, but it also gave us confidence that we could provide the desired number of aircraft for the rotation without affecting the ability to maintain our bank goal or disrupting the phase program. Next, we focused on detailed maintenance management and troubleshooting at the BN/squadron (SQDN)-level to ensure unscheduled issues were addressed quickly without triggering A U.S. Army UH-60M unnecessary com-Black Hawk takes off during ponent replacement NTC 24-03. U.S. Army photo or wasting maintenance by SPC David Poleski hours. A solid maintenance program must be the foundation of a BDE. Without appropriate leadership focus for that program early on, you will fail to achieve the desired echelon of training and will default to no higher than platoon- (4 ship) level missions. You also may be required to run BDE-level pools of aircraft to accomplish BN-level missions (more than

**Safety:** Mission briefing philosophy and control measure implementation that <u>actually mitigate risk</u> is the second

two companies).

preparation area in which the 1AD CAB placed a large amount of energy. We revamped the mission briefing program after identifying issues with the process used to select briefing officers. The CAB pulled the assessment and assigning of mission briefing officers (MBOs) to the CAB commander level to standardize the selection process. This allowed the BDE leadership to enforce the idea that the MBO population was not anchored on perceived requirements, but that the

MBOs were an <u>elite group</u> of <u>very senior aviation leaders</u> from across the CAB. This group of leaders assist the commanders in the management of mission risk levels. These leaders were briefed on their responsibilities by the CAB commander and the CAB standardization pilot. They were mandated to elevate risk as appropriate above the risk-common

operating procedure (RCOP)-listed risk levels, based on their experience and the nature of the mission requirements. The flight risk was not the only area covered in this revamping. A ground RCOP was developed and required no lower than a company commander to sign and review every ground movement risk assessment. This quickly put a high focus on ground movements and ensured there was little to no "hidden risk" baked into convoy operations (OPS) while at home station, as well as "in the Box" at the NTC.

<sup>1</sup> "Gated training strategy is a model that logically outlines training progression within the U.S. Army. It ensures that soldiers and crews meet specific standards before advancing to the next level of training" (Abrams, 2016).

Gated training strategy: Jumping echelons in training progression is dangerous and that danger is very apparent during flight training. In 1AD CAB, we instituted an EXEVAL system that drove the weekly training program at the company level. The CAB developed platoon and company/troop EXEVAL windows and directed the BN/SQDN commanders to institute training glide slopes that built toward the evaluation. Battalion/ SQDN commanders owned the platoon EXEVALs, and the BDE commander owned the company EXEVALs. Once the platoon achieved proficiency, validated by the BN commander, they were moved into the company-level training window. This provided time and space for each echelon to develop tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and focused planning procedures. The progression also allows multiple turns at the staff level, producing orders that are executable at the appropriate level and allow growth over time with a junior staff. Platoon missions are structured differently than BN missions, and this progression allowed appropriate learning opportunities without triggering mission failures and a loss of confidence in the planners. It also allowed a progressive increase in complexity. Team missions were run by the companies, platoon missions were executed with BN-level resources, and company-level missions were executed with support and resources from across the CAB.

**Execution:** In execution, a DIV-level CTC rotation is much different than a home station training opportunity. Daily interaction with the DIV/CORPS has unanticipated consequences. Daily "combat" battle rhythms, unplanned mission requirements, and the air tasking order cycle will stress the CAB's staff much

more than home station training. Flexibility and structure are the keys to success. Two major items helped 1AD CAB operate in this environment successfully: (1) The integrated air planning cell, and (2) Early discussions regarding risk to mission and risk to force tradeoffs.

Integrated air planning cell: Early in the preparation phase, we discovered an issue, which was that the CAB is reliant upon the DIV to synchronize enablers to make missions into the DIV deep area successful. The G3 air cell, by structure, would have these responsibilities; however, manning and experience levels prevented the air cell from meeting the needs of the CAB. This generated the requirement to create an integration cell to co-locate with the DIV. This would cut down on refinement actions after the mission was assigned. The cell's goal was to provide a mission packet that was ready to push down to the BNs 48 hours prior to execution. To maintain the pace required by the DIV, manning constraints made this idea a necessity. The integrated air planning cell consisted of the CAB S3 (OPS and training) and 4-5 planners from across the warfighting functions. This cell integrated into the DIV planning cells to appropriately synchronize DIV- and CORPS-level enablers into the CAB's missions.

**Risk to mission/risk to force:** During a CTC, risk is constantly being assessed. Prior to the rotation, a necessary conversation about the balance between risk to mission and the risk to force should occur. Is the CAB located in "relative sanctuary," and what does that mean? Must the CAB conduct survivability jumps? Does every mission require a mid-point forward arming and refueling point (FARP)? Are the BNs separated or consolidated? Is the CAB Headquarters (HQs) located with the BNs or separated? Is the FARP package capable of being pushed out to support every mission, or must they stay out for multiple days? Every action has consequences, and those consequences should be known and discussed prior to reception, staging, onward movement, and integration. The answers to these questions will drive training structure 6 months prior to the rotation.

Two major topics that arose prior to the deployment that fell into the risk to mission/risk to force conversation were FARPs and maintenance. During the trainup, we identified that each BN had grown individualized FARP TTPs that become confusing to non-organic pilots as they approached the FARP pads. This induced unnecessary go-arounds as pilots attempted to gain situational awareness on the unfamiliar FARP. This problem was solved by standardizing FARP OPS at the BDE level. The trainup also identified that BNs were sharing lowdensity special equipment, tools, and in some cases, personnel-not only amongst themselves—but with the contract teams at home station. This triggered a conversation about the cost and benefit of geographically separating the BNs before the equipment and personnel shortages were appropriately addressed. In isolation or in a single BN rotation, none of these are issues. When multiple BNs from across the CAB deploy to the CTC, they can become compounding, output-limiting issues if not adequately addressed.

**Gaps:** As with any major training event, failure to identify gaps in preparation or during the execution will cause a unit to fail to learn and continue to make the same mistakes. The NTC 24-03 rotation





U.S. Army CPT, Colton Hudson, conducts pre-flight checks during NTC 24-03. U.S. Army photo by SPC David Poleski.

highlighted several items that will drive the 1AD CAB's training as it prepares for a future deployment.

1) The integrated air planning cell is a requirement. The synchronization and integration required at the DIV level to make large-scale combat aviation successful requires a more robust G3 air cell than our manning levels can currently provide. During NTC 24-03, we placed the BDE S3 officer-in-charge (OIC) and a 4-5 person team at the DIV. At times, that seemed to be insufficient planning horsepower. The actual composition of the team-and the amount of expertise required—depends on the complexity of the mission and the reliability of the digital connections between the DIV and the CAB, as well as the numbers of people physically available to deploy in support of the rotation. Every decision has consequences.

2) Trainups should consist of the expected structure that will deploy. From personnel to equipment, the need to train as close to the expected reality is important. During the trainup with the DIV, the CAB failed to understand "who" was physically deploying to the NTC. This caused personnel who were not deploying to cover down on capabilities they would not provide during the rotation. It also triggered process development that would not work during the rotation. Training at

the staff level had to be conducted during the rotation. This slowed down an already compressed timeline. To compound the personnel issues, the trainups relied upon fiber digital backbones that would not be available at the CTC. The digital connection instability caused major disruptions to the rehearsed timelines and forced work arounds. Although the end results were successful, "training like you plan to fight" is just as relevant at the BDE level as it is at the SQDN level. The command post (CP) exercise progression should validate personnel and equipment requirements in the integrated air planning cell, tactical CP, and the main CP to ensure all staff members understand their roles and responsibilities. Otherwise, time is unnecessarily spent during the CTC rotation in an ad-hoc manner and training battle CPs, staff planners, and liaison officers.

3) Delineation of duties between G3 air and the CAB. There are still concerns across the CAB about the requirements

across the CAB about the requirements resident at the G3 air level vs. the augmentation needed by the CAB staff. During this rotation, G3 air was consumed with current OPS but had gaps in knowledge about all CAB functions (examples: Gray Eagle, attack OPS, and aviation sustainment). This reinforces the need to not only select the right personnel to round out the DIV air cell, but to ensure they receive appropriate training. In the DIV fight, there is a large appetite for attack aircraft in the close and deep areas. Detailed knowledge of attack helicopter capabilities is a must.

4) Liaison officer (LNO) teams at the CAB level. The 1AD CAB experience at the NTC highlights the need for robust LNO teams resident in the CAB S3 shop. During this rotation, the CAB only supported the DIV deep fight, but there was a large need to liaise with host nation units and security force assistance brigade formations working in the DIV area of OPS. During future rotations, there is the possibility that the CAB will support the deep and close fight simultaneously. This would overload the current capacity of the CAB planners and force the CAB to assume risk in the LNO requirement.

This is not an ideal situation and is one that runs the risk of elevating risk levels well above the CAB commander's ability to control.

As the DIV takes its place as the unit of action across the Army, the CAB needs to review what normal looks like. Not long ago, perception anchored the primary aviation warfighter at the BN level, and the CAB functioned in a resource role. That has ended. Combat aviation brigades must be a competent warfighting HQs that are manned, equipped, and structured to integrate the BNs into the DIV fight. Planning, preparing and crossleveling lessons learned is the path to success. The 1AD CAB is hopeful that its shared lessons learned serve to lay a small path toward greater success as it continues to help DIVs and CORPS gain greater warfighting capacity.

## Biography:

COL John Morris is the 1AD CAB Commander at Fort Bliss, Texas. He has a broad range of experience across FORSCOM and U.S. European Command as a BDE S3 at 82D CAB, G3 air/ Army Aviation OIC in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Rapid Deployment Corps–Spain, Commander of 1-3 Attack BN in Katterbach, Germany, and deploying to Europe as the Regionally Aligned Forces CAB in 2022–2023.

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