

Rethinking Large-Scale Combat Operations Training

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Since its establishment in 1981, the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, has consistently served as the premier training ground for the U.S. Army in land and air warfare. Its effectiveness was notably demonstrated during the First Gulf War in 1991 by showcasing its ability to adapt to the evolving needs of commanders in preparing their formations for various operational scenarios. However, the evolution of warfare demands a comprehensive and adaptable approach to training that goes beyond traditional paradigms. For the Army to enhance readiness, leaders should focus on creating training programs that simulate the diverse and complex environments Soldiers will face in the future. A greater emphasis should be placed on the integration of armored and light formations in joint training exercises at all combat training centers (CTCs), such as those at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Johnson, LA; more availability of simulator training; larger formation home-station training; and sea and air deployment readiness exercises (SEADREs/AIRDREs). Additionally, enhancing the planning and execution of logistical operations through sustained military oversight of deployment strategies will enable forces to efficiently build their combat capability. By embracing innovative training methods and exposing troops to diverse operational environments, the Army can

better equip its forces for the complex and dynamic nature of future conflict scenarios.

As the Army looks ahead to future large-scale combat operations (LSCO) conducted within restrictive terrain (which forces would encounter in United States Indo-Pacific Command [INDOPACOM] or United States European Command [EUCOM] areas of responsibility), the training requirements necessary to prepare the force for those conflicts, and the subsequent necessity to build combat power within an immature theater, it is imperative to reassess how armor brigades train for combined arms maneuver.

The current approach of sending armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) to conduct rotations at NTC may not adequately prepare troops for the complexities of LSCO or future warfare, particularly in environments characterized by restrictive terrain and urban settings. The focus on traditional open-desert scenarios, while valuable in certain contexts, may not align with the anticipated challenges of the next conflict. It is essential for military leaders to acknowledge the need for diversified training experiences that encompass an expanded range of operational environments and scenarios.

*Soldiers assigned to 1st Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, support 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division during Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 23-10.
(Photo by SPC Hannah Stewart)*



One proposed solution is to incorporate armor teams (three-to-four armor or mechanized platoons with a logistical support package) into every rotation at JRTC, where troops can engage in maneuvers and combat simulations that better reflect the challenges expected in regions like eastern EUCOM. This is not intended to piecemeal out the armor or mechanized formation but reinforce the need for combined arms maneuver. The 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division (ID), operating with the 82nd Airborne Division, conducted two JRTC rotations (23-10 in September 2023 and 24-05 in March 2024) with 1st Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment and 3rd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, respectively. By integrating armor platoons and mechanized infantry platoons within light infantry formations, light commanders were able to enhance their understanding of how to effectively leverage combined arms capabilities and address logistical considerations in a realistic training setting. The Raider Brigade took advantage of this training opportunity by conducting three different battalion training events during the two deployments to JRTC. During both these rotations, in support of the 82nd's 2nd Brigade Combat Team "Falcon" and 1st Brigade Combat Team "Devil," respectively, 3rd ID airlanded three to four M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs) on the field landing strip (FLS) of JRTC's Geronimo Drop Zone.

Focusing on smaller force packages at the company/troop and battalion/squadron levels allows formations to expand and enhance sustained readiness through the execution of multiple rotations at JRTC or the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Hohenfels, Germany. Rather than an ABCT conducting a CTC rotation every other year, providing each JRTC/JMRC rotation with an attached armor package will result in more lessons learned and increased training opportunities across more of the armor community. At the same time, light formations should incorporate with specific ABCT NTC rotations, whether at the battalion or company level. The Army would need to ensure that these formations come with the capability to extend the light formation's operational reach to maintain momentum with either air assault or airborne platforms or infantry squad vehicles (ISVs).

To ensure the success of our future missions in both EUCOM and INDOPACOM, it is crucial that units engage in rigorous training within units' deployment planning and training periods by conducting SEADREs and AIRDREs. These exercises are pivotal in preparing our forces for rapid deployment and mission success. SEADREs and AIRDREs provide a crucial opportunity for training. They ensure that ABCT forces are prepared to rapidly deploy combat power through different means and prevent atrophy within the utilizations of aerial ports of embarkation (APOE) and seaports



Soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Division and U.S. Air Force airmen work together to secure gear on a C-17A Globemaster III aircraft during an emergency deployment readiness exercise at Hunter Army Airfield, GA, on 11 July 2024. (Photo by PFC Camron Hicks)

of embarkation (SPOE) operations across a specific combatant command (COCOM). Conducting AIRDREs is also extremely important to ensure that our Air Force partners are familiar with loading/securing/unloading M1/M2/M88s within the C-5 and C-17 airframes. The exercises will also benefit our crews as they work through the intricacies of the process and gain experience in working jointly with the Air Force.

3rd ID established an immediate response package (IRP) as part of its contingency support for the XVIII Airborne Corps. This force is a tailorable package, but at the core it is equipped with five M2 Bradley IFVs with a comprehensive logistics package, which includes a fueller, Load Handling System (LHS), M88 recovery vehicle, and a contact truck. The package, designed for efficient transport, is capable of being accommodated on 8-10 C-17 aircraft. To bring this concept to life, 3rd ID assigned the 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment the responsibility of developing and executing the IRP's operational plans. This included conducting two emergency deployment readiness exercises (EDREs). The first exercise involved transporting equipment from Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF) in Savannah, GA, to an Air Force base in Charleston, SC. The second exercise featured multiple C-17 sorties performing airland operations into NTC's Bicycle Lake area for the Raider's 24-09 rotation.

Both exercises successfully demonstrated their value by training armored formations at the company and troop levels on critical deployment tasks, such as loading and unloading vehicles and securing them for air transport. This initiative underscores the 3rd ID's commitment to readiness and operational effectiveness in rapid deployment scenarios.

To effectively project combat power within the INDOPACOM theater, it is essential for our Army formations and joint partners to be thoroughly trained and prepared for

amphibious operations, particularly when navigating critical sea lines of communication (LOC) to sustain multiple units. Logistic planners must develop a more complete understanding of how to manage logistics across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, which will lead to ensuring the efficient movement of significant quantities of supplies, especially Class III B (petroleum, oils, and lubricants), Class V (ammunition), Class VII (major end items), and Class IX (repair parts). Additionally, integrating wet-wing refueling operations is crucial for enhancing operational efficiency. This method allows vehicles to refuel from the internal tanks of the aircraft, enabling the Air Force to refuel while simultaneously transporting Class V ammunitions. This capability reduces the number of aircraft grounded at any given time, ensuring that crucial supplies reach their end users promptly.

To achieve these objectives, Army units should incorporate seaport of embarkation/debarkation (SPOE/D) operations into large-scale training events with emphasis on collaborating with joint and multinational formations. This training approach ensures that Soldiers are well-prepared for deployment operations — transitioning efficiently from “fort to port” and subsequently from port to forward operating sites. By leveraging these capabilities, we can enhance our infrastructure investment, enabling the United States to deploy forces rapidly while strengthening partnerships with regional allies.

If you have participated in a rotation at NTC in recent years, you may be familiar with the enhanced reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (ERSOI) process at Logistics Support Area (LSA) Santa Fe. However, the current implementation of ERSOI does not effectively replicate the process of deploying to an immature theater. Instead, it often distracts the rotational training unit (RTU) from the essential training objectives of the rotation by consuming valuable organizational resources on tasks that ideally should fall under the purview of the service component command and the theater support command (TSC). Opening a theater of operations should not be the responsibility of an ABCT that is focused on building combat power. The purpose of RSOI is to facilitate the integration of forces, not to manage theater-opening requirements.

A viable solution would be for the Army to assign elements of a TSC to assist a brigade's RSOI operations at a CTC. This collaboration would serve dual purposes: It would train the TSC formation while also helping the ABCT to clearly understand its roles and responsibilities in building combat power. By aligning these efforts, we can enhance the overall effectiveness of our training rotations and better prepare our forces for real-world deployments.

RSOI and regeneration (REGEN) wastes organizational calories by making staff members plan within a vacuum. Details known by specific

individuals at NTC are not clearly communicated to RTUs, which results in constant change and confusion. NTC should provide RTUs with a pre-planned deployment operations order (DEPOD) for how RSOI/REGEN should be executed. Some examples of what could be included in the DEPOD are the requirements for Yermo train detail, Manix Trail, Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) install, etc. All those requirements rest solely on the RTU, as they should; however, they never change from one rotation to rotation. Why not codify these in a running order provided to the RTU by NTC's Operations Group that allows the unit to make refinements? Further, requiring units to resource every rotation with specific contracts, rather than providing long-term existing contracts through NTC, wastes resources, money, and time for every RTU. It distracts from training. NTC should focus on a more stringent time standard that requires RTUs to rapidly build combat power and conduct movement to their line of departure (LD) as soon as possible rather than encumbering them with administrative tasks that could already have been coordinated through a TSC element.

While NTC offers the space to maneuver an armor brigade, it is important that units have the capacity and capability to conduct brigade-level maneuver at home station. In preparation for Raider Brigade's NTC 24-09 rotation, it executed a brigade-level field training exercise at Fort Stewart, GA, called “Marne Focus.” The model for the eight-day exercise consisted of:

- Period 1 - Deploying to the field, planning for the battle;
- Period 2 - Force on force, planning for the battle;
- Period 3 - Force on force, planning for the battle, and finally, deployment to garrison to start after operations maintenance (AOM).

The three maneuver battalions rotated through offense, offense, and defense, with one battle period executed during hours of limited visibility. Marne Focus allowed the brigade to maneuver at the battalion level and exercise command and control (C2) nodes at both the brigade and battalion levels. Those C2 nodes are crucial in coordinating and directing



A Soldier assigned to 1st Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, scans the area for potential enemy contact during Marne Focus at Fort Stewart, GA, on 7 April 2024. (Photo by PFC Trey Woodard)

military operations and the exercise provided an excellent chance to mature those capabilities.

3rd ID is actively advancing the concept of enhancing brigade-level readiness through focused 30- and 45-day field exercises. These exercises encompass a comprehensive range of activities, including small arms marksmanship, gunnery, platoon and company live-fire exercises, and brigade force-on-force training, rather than fragmenting the training throughout the entire fiscal year. The division benefits from the support of the 188th Brigade, which provides observer-coach/trainers (OC/Ts) at Fort Stewart. Units lacking this advantage can enhance their training resources by leveraging leadership from sister brigades with available OC/Ts, thus providing a great opportunity to provide lessons learned and develop to a larger group of leaders.

By developing a framework for conducting large-scale brigade training events at home stations, the Army can rapidly build readiness while minimizing the need for extensive travel. This approach ensures that should the Army need to deploy a significant number of forces quickly, a well-defined training concept will already be in place, as not all units will have had the opportunity to train at NTC prior to deployment.

Another resource that armor formations could utilize, and the larger Army could invest in, is simulation training. Increasing the number of Bradley Conduct of Fire Trainer (COFT), M1 Advanced Gunnery Trainer System (AGTS), and Close Combat Tactical Trainer (CCTT) or like simulators would significantly enhance our training capabilities at home station. This forward-thinking investment would allow for larger maneuver practice over varied terrain, with limited impact on operational readiness rates and cost, and pave the way for more effective and efficient training. However, simulators can only go so far with placing crews in stressful environments that replicate a combat engagement.

In conjunction with simulation training, 3rd ID developed the concept of an M1/M2 stress shoot — comparable to a small arms stress shoot but with combat platforms — that places crews in a complex and unknown environment outside of a normal gunnery table. Crews are required to conduct a physical fitness assessment in full kit to raise their heart rate and then move to and mount their vehicles. Crews have less than two minutes to report Red Con 1 — a term used to indicate the highest level of combat readiness. At that point, they maneuver down a range road where they are presented with both friendly and enemy targets of armor, personnel carriers, trucks, and dismounts. Crews are not briefed before what the engagement pattern would be. This type of home-station training, which requires nothing more than what units already have allocated for their fiscal year allotment of ammunition, can easily be built into any annual training plan. It offers significant advantages over NTC rotations, with less impact on multiple weeks of preparation, deployment, and redeployment time. This approach showcases flexibility and resourcefulness, saving time and resources and providing Soldiers more time to train, recover, and spend quality time at home which further enhances their well-being and readiness. It

also ensures that across the Army, home stations can rapidly train their forces and deploy them without the limitations and constraints of training one ABCT each month at NTC.

In conclusion, while NTC has historically served as a valuable training ground for U.S. Army units, adapting to the complexities of modern warfare necessitates a reevaluation of training methodologies and environments. As we pivot towards the realities of future conflicts, particularly those expected within restrictive terrains of INDOPACOM and EUCOM, the Army must acknowledge some of NTC's limitations in preparing forces for these challenges. To enhance readiness, leaders should focus on creating training programs that simulate the diverse and complex environments Soldiers will face in the future. A greater emphasis should be placed on integrating armored and light formations in joint training exercises, such as those at JRTC and through SEADRES and AIRDRES.

Moreover, improving the planning and execution of logistical operations by maintaining military control over deployment strategies will ensure that forces can build combat power efficiently. Leveraging innovative training approaches, such as home-station stress shoots and enhanced simulation tools, can further prepare units to engage effectively in diverse combat environments. The shift from traditional NTC rotations to more versatile and realistic training scenarios will not only improve leaders' and Soldiers' understanding of their capabilities in varied landscapes but also foster an adaptive and resilient force ready to meet future operational demands.

By embracing these changes, the Army can uphold its commitment to readiness and ensure that our forces are well equipped to respond to the complexities of contemporary global threats. The path forward involves not just utilizing existing capabilities but also re-envisioning training strategies to cultivate a force that is agile, proficient, and prepared to meet the demands of tomorrow's battlespaces. In doing so, we honor the legacies of past victories while ensuring that our Army remains capable of winning in the increasingly complex and dynamic environment of modern warfare.

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