

Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail: When CONOPs Replace OPORDs

by **Thomas Doherty**

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Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail: When CONOPs Replace OPORDs

Thomas Doherty - With contributions from Mr. Welton Chang

Introduction

Anyone who has deployed has encountered the CONOP, which is the concept of the operation portion of a operations order (OPORD). The CONOP has replaced the traditional five paragraph OPORD; however, unlike the OPORD, the CONOP does not have a standardized format, nor agreed upon content and varies from unit to unit. Thus, every CONOP is different. Though it was originally developed to streamline and expedite the orders process, it has done the opposite, forcing leaders to expend time, effort and energy to push the CONOP through the approval process from the lowest to the highest levels; time that should be spent on mission planning.

Providing only the concept of the operation paragraph does not provide sufficient information to a conduct a mission. Therefore, commanders have added additional requirements when submitting CONOPs and these requirements differ depending on what level of CONOP submitted. These requirements are necessary for CONOP approval; thus, CONOPs are often written in a way that will secure higher headquarters (HQs) approval, even if the information is not completely accurate. And, because approval is the ultimate goal, planning and mission analysis receives minimal attention as a leaders time is spent developing the CONOP product. As a result, we have reduced well thought out orders to a process that goes against the tenets of counter insurgency doctrine, which emphasizes the importance of mission command.

What follows is a critical look at the CONOP process. The criticisms in this essay are based on my experience as a Special Forces Non-Commissioned Officer and Infantry Officer during tours in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Additionally, from my observations as an Observer Controller Trainer (OC/T) at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC); a survey conducted of 61 graduates from the Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC); and a comparative survey of CONOPs submitted by combat arms units during JRTC rotations. Unless otherwise cited the data and analysis presented in this article is derived from these two surveys.

How Does a CONOP differ from an OPORD?

The Army develops a twenty one page OPORD with annexes (4th BCT, 82nd ABN DIV, "OPORD 11-19 4th BCT OPERATION CLEAN SWEEP," 29 Mar. 2011) when conducting Operation Clean Sweep, which is a yearly event to clean up trash and move pine cones further away from the roads at Fort Bragg. Conversely, the capture of a terrorist cell leader in Afghanistan is conducted with a far less detailed ad hoc CONOP, which will likely be unsuccessful due to the lack of planning. This, however, does not mean an OPORD will guarantee mission success; **so true was this for Operation Rock Move in Afghanistan, which ultimately resulted in an operational-level defeat of U.S. forces.** Thus, the order type does not guarantee mission success; however, the level of planning that occurs can tip the scales. As GEN Eisenhower said, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable."

A generally held belief exists that a CONOP and OPORD cover the same details. This, however, is not the case and there are, in fact, huge differences. One issue with the CONOP is the lack of doctrinal format, which is dependent on the unit's SOPs. FM 5-0 states that the, "*Prerequisites for effective mission command are the use of mission orders, full familiarity with the commander's intent throughout the force, and mutual trust and understanding between commanders and subordinates.*" A CONOP is not a mission order; it is a subparagraph of an OPORD. According to FM 5-0, "There are three types of orders: Operation order (OPORD), Fragmentary order (FRAGO), Warning order (WARNO)." The most descriptive and thought out is the OPORD; however, the OPORD has been relegated to executing mundane administrative tasks.

Comparing Apples to Crab Apples

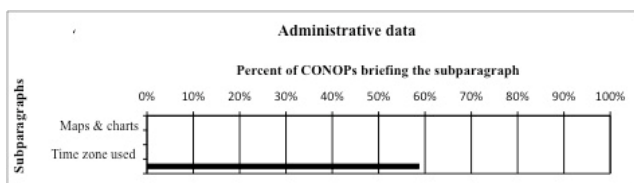
In this section I will conduct a line-by-line comparison of an OPORD layout derived from FM 5-0 Appendix E to CONOPs executed at JRTC. FM 5-0 was used instead of more detailed formats like that in FM 3-55.93 as it is applicable to most unit types. I compared the information given in five battalion and 12 company/troop CONOPs to what was supposed to be given in the FM 5-0 OPORD format.

At first I applied an MCCC standard. If the sub paragraph was briefed by a student at the MCCC, would it receive a marginal or better grade? This standard proved to be too high. In fact only 11.5 percent of captains polled stated their higher HQ's orders would have passed MCCC standards. The standard was then lowered to a rather unscientific but illustrative level; a level called, 'giving it the old college try.' In this way the numbers were elevated to a measureable level.

Some examples of using the 'old college try' method are as follows: One CONOP stated the concept of the operation and listed out the titles of the phases but nothing else and did not receive credit. Another CONOP stated concept of the operation and gave only the company task (T). Even though it did not give any other information normally required, it was given credit. Graphics were given credit even if the T or purpose (P) was not doctrinal and/or did not match the symbols. If "as per SOP" or something similar was used, credit was given. This means even when you see specific items covered they were often covered at a substandard level.

Administrative Data

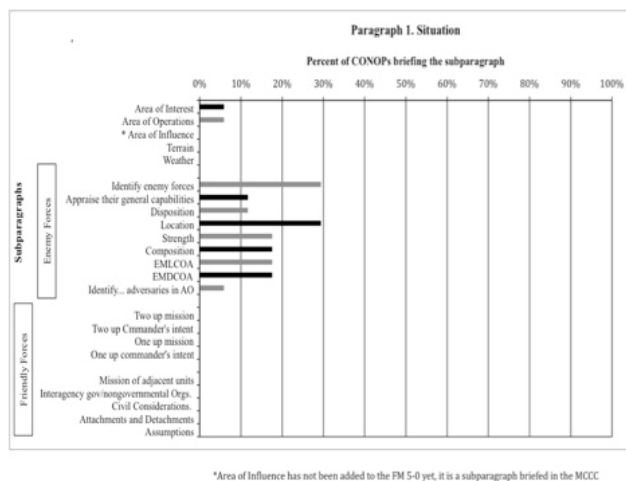
Figure 1



As seen in figure 1, the administrative data section is missing information. The ‘Clean Sweep’ OPORD had all of the administrative data. Although this information may be considered trivial, in a joint environment, time zone used is increasingly important.

Paragraph 1. Situation

Figure 2



As students of the Art of War, most of us have heard the Sun Tzu quote, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” From this quote we can discern the chances of success in a near peer fight.

Enemy Forces

The lack of terrain analysis is a noted trend at JRTC as units rarely had or referenced graphical terrain analysis or a Modified Combined Obstacle Overlay. Oftentimes CONOPs were constructed with a quick look at a map or aerial photography without deeper analysis for intervisibility lines, etc. Units that conducted a thorough terrain analysis performed better. For example, at the **Battle of Wanat** approximately two companies of enemy combatants got into their assault positions undetected. The enemy was only seen once before the fight though they were so close that some suspect they reversed the direction of emplaced claymore mines. They did this even though Coalition Forces (CF) were equipped with a high-tech optics. The enemy had clearly conducted a thorough terrain analysis prior to the attack.

The CONOPs were slightly better regarding enemy analysis. Enemy locations and identification on the objective is often the target house, which contains the High Value Individual (HVI). This is usually the strongest part of the enemy analysis portion of the CONOP. It was rare to see some form of planning aid such as a “Red Checkbook” used by commanders and staffs. It was easy enough to know if a planner was using these aids. For example, one CONOP stated the enemy composition was an HVI with 3-5 associated personnel; however, the graphics showed four fire team sized elements; thus, an obvious disconnect. With the exception of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) not one CONOP included the suspected positions for enemy crew-served weapons. In addition, subordinate elements were often given limited and conflicting information on what to expect from the enemy.

The enemy’s most likely or most dangerous courses of actions (EMLCOA/EMDCOA) were lacking as well. CONOP’s tended to give rather “canned” enemy situation statements such as “the enemy will be alerted and run” for the EMLCOA and “they will conduct a complex attack with an IED and small arms fire” for the EMDCOA. Therefore, using the EML/MDCOA analysis to determine enemy reaction was not accomplished. A lack of terrain and enemy analysis means units cannot anticipate where the enemy might run or how they will use terrain to their advantage. An objective EML/MDCOA, coupled with the other portions of paragraph one, will make units more effective at anticipating enemy actions.

Friendly Forces

Surprisingly, none of the CONOPs included higher commander’s intent, which ultimately causes a breakdown of the common operating picture (COP). Commanders cannot trust a leader two levels down if he does not know or understand your intent. Without this basic understanding, subordinate units cannot take initiative and operate effectively to support the overall mission.

In the current operating environment, coordination with the interagency, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations is vital to mission success. Thus, we must understand that our operations affect their ability to operate and vice versa. We must work together and synchronize our efforts to prevent disjointed messaging and duplicative efforts. This will prevent project and information operations (IO) fratricide.

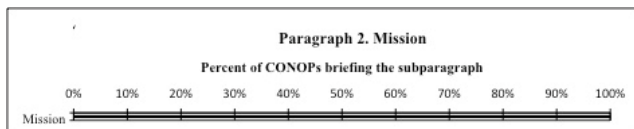
“In COIN operations, the population is vital—since whoever the populations supports has the advantage. Consequently, civil considerations are normally the most important mission variable for COIN.”- FM 3-24.2. Although all of the CONOPs analyzed were for OEF/OIF-based mission readiness exercises, none contained information on civil considerations (ASCOPE) or COIN operational variables (PMSII-PT).

Sometimes units assumed attachment/detachment information to be the same as the task organization and therefore did not provide a separate attachment/detachment list of any type. This is integral to the common operating picture when operating in a joint environment, as other organizations must know what key pieces of equipment or elements are attached/detached.

The end result is we have limited knowledge of the enemy and even less knowledge of ourselves. We have set the stage for defeat. Although we believe we have never been defeated, that statement is not accurate. For example: CF unit X is tasked to SECURE a logistics convoy against Anti-Coalition Forces unit Y. Unit Y is tasked to DISRUPT CF convoys. One exploded IED on one CF vehicle and six hours of recovery operations later-- CF has failed and the enemy has succeeded. We have lost innumerable fights and perhaps would have lost less if we had conducted the proper analysis needed to write paragraph one of a doctrinal OPORD.

Paragraph 2. Mission

Figure 3

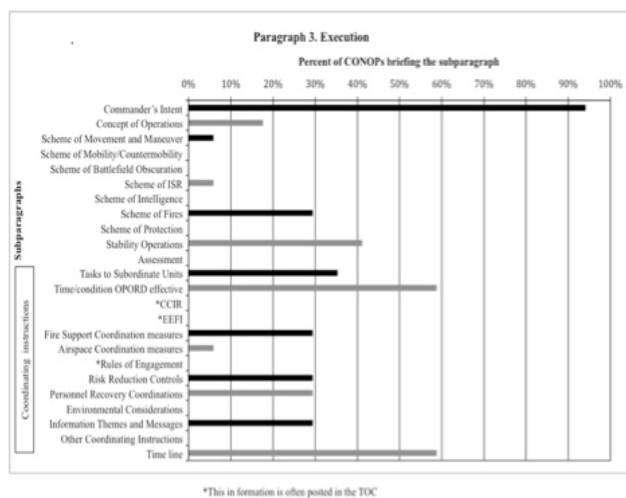


Mission statements typically did not use doctrinal terms or when used, use them correctly. There was a lack of emphasis on producing a correct mission statement, which could ultimately affect deliberately planned orders. At lower levels, within purely organic small units, this may not be an issue; however, in joint environments, using doctrinal terms and using them correctly becomes more important.

There is a common belief that key leader engagements (KLE) and joint presence patrol (JPP) are tactical tasks. When S3s were asked what these various Ts and Ps meant, they would typically give different answers or say ‘I do not know.’ Then, when you add an ambiguous purpose statement such as “...in order to GAIN time and space” you have essentially added to the fog of war. No common operating picture exists between boots on the ground and brigade battle CPT for a unit with T: JPP and P: Gain time and space.

Paragraph 3. Execution

Figure 4



There is a lack of understanding of the importance of synchronizing movement and maneuver. Having some form of commander's intent at this level demonstrated an attempt to present the immediate level commander's intent. When this was done at battalion level it gave sufficient guidance to the squad level.

If a CONOP was truly a concept of the operation, this subparagraph would be the only portion needed and all CONOPs would be one slide put together after COA approval. Due to the typical practice of using the CONOP as an OPORD means attention must be paid to explaining the concept.

The combination of limited infrastructure, terrain in the OE, and use of heavy vehicles with limited off road capabilities, canalizes our forces. Understanding the scheme of maneuver, mobility/counter mobility, and battlefield observation will increase safety and mission success. For example, F/51 (LRS) (ABN) combined this information with the information in paragraph one during the Iraq surge. As a result they were able to maneuver throughout the Diyala province for four months without striking any IEDs.

Subparagraphs

Considering that “intel drives ops” the intelligence subparagraphs should be emphasized more. Oftentimes unmanned aerial surveillance receives more attention than the soldier. The soldier is the most prolific organic intelligence asset to the unit and should be used as such.

All CONOPS examined belonged to units that had some form of organic fire support. Units that briefed fires were given credit under both scheme of fires and fire support coordination measures. Not one CONOP covered the non-lethal side of the fires subparagraph. The lack of airspace coordination measures contributes to slower indirect support and will be problematic when conducting unified land operations (ULO).

Fulfillment of information requirements under stability operations was rarely evident; however, some CONOPS provided information on lines of effort and were given credit. As a result, some CONOPS included information related to stability operations. This area was not covered in the manner intended by the FM 5-0.

By not providing proper assessment criteria, subordinate units have limited ability to know if they are succeeding. This, coupled with a lack of commander's intent and unclear mission statements, nearly destroys any chance of forming a COP.

Tasks to Subordinate Units

Typically, tasks to subordinate units was completed in the graphics with some 'T: P:' next to the icons. The FM 5-0 standard includes "... each task must include who (the subordinate unit assigned the task), what (the task itself), when, where, and why (purpose)...;" aka, the mission statement for subordinate units. The T/P format is effectively using shorthand in an outline while expecting everyone to get the nuances of the whole story. To add to the confusion, the graphical symbols and T did not always match and were often not nested.

Commander's Critical Information Requirements, Rules of Engagement, and Essential Elements of Friendly Information are not mentioned; however, they are practically SOP and usually posted in the TOC. These subparagraphs are typically not mission specific; however, they are typically one of the better known SOPs a unit has.

Surprisingly, risk reduction control measures did not mention proper planning and analytic procedures as one of the measures. This should be removed from the OPORD format and left in COA development. Nor were target reference points (TRP) or other direct fire control measures found in any CONOPS. This would be an automatic 'No Go' for students at the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE). Considering the time we spend copying and pasting risk assessments for a combat operation, some simple TRPs would be immeasurable in reducing risk. Under risk reduction control measures, FM 5-0 specifically states "...and fratricide prevention measures." To put it bluntly, there would be a 100 percent fail rate at the MCoE for battalion staffs and company commanders for this oversight.

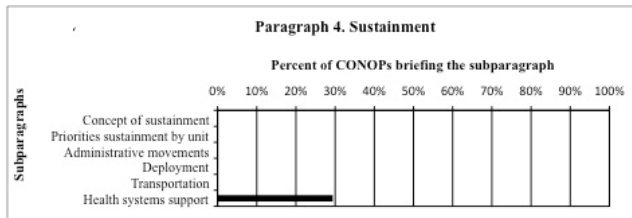
Personnel recovery information was not given great emphasis. Oftentimes units have what is referred to as 'DUSTWUN CONOP' for personnel recovery.

Information themes and messages did not receive sufficient focus. We are continuously defeated in the "IO war." Poor planning is a contributing factor.

Oftentimes coordinating instructions consisted of, at most, a timeline. The lack of coordinating instructions leads to a lack of synchronization on the battlefield. An example of this is units at JRTC starting the search before their cordon is set.

Paragraph 4. Sustainment

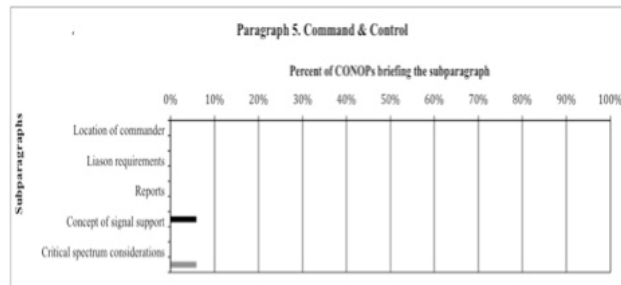
Figure 5



Medevac was the only part covered in any of the CONOPS. The PSG or XO may put out something verbally but this tends to be 'winged' with little deliberate planning such as weight carried for dismounted movement. When this is not planned, you end up with units less than an EIB road march distance away from their battalion base, BLACK on water; similar to what happened at the Battle of Wanat.

Paragraph 5. Command and Control

Figure 6



*A non doctrinal add in. EW will need to be addressed better when the FM 5-0 become the ADP 5-0

Paragraph 5 was all but ignored on the majority of CONOPs. One unit added a new subparagraph by covering effects of jamming on friendly units. In fact, the argument was put forth that, "everyone knows where the key leaders are" as a defense for lack of C2 information.

Is There a Problem?

There were a series of meetings between the staffs of the MCCC and the JRTC OC/Ts centering on why units at JRTC do not conduct good planning and mission analysis. The reason believed for poor planning was due to "product fixation." Leaders up and down the chain of command were so focused on getting CONOPs submitted, due to the lengthy approval times, that they did not take time to employ the military decision making process (MDMP) or conduct troop leading procedures (TLP). Instead of planning, staffs and commanders focused on "gaming" the system, designing a CONOP product that would satisfy higher HQs.

Harsh realities exist that force this reaction. According to those surveyed, the average CONOP approval time was 36.11 hours for a level zero and 89.4 hours for the level one CONOP. Of captains surveyed, 70.7 percent believed the enemy was able to get away or better prepare due to the slow approval process. This forces subordinates to submit the CONOP with minimal information due to fears of a more detailed one getting "kicked back." As a result, enemy analysis becomes whatever will fit in a small box on a PowerPoint slide with size ten font. What would normally be so much information it may need its own annex, is reduced to a couple of sentences.

In discussions with participants on how to get units to conduct terrain and enemy analysis, the best solution put forth was to force the writing of an OPORD and issuing a doctrinal OPORD to subordinate units. This would keep soldiers from ending up like the Marines in the AKO photo (figure 7) who had no idea about the terrain they were walking in to. With the terrain being so different from what they expected, it can be safely assumed they had little to no idea about the enemy's tactics, techniques, and procedures in that area of operations.

Due to the common practice of briefing higher's CONOP to lower, important subparagraphs were not broken down to a more relevant level for the soldier on the ground. In fact, not one examined CONOP had an annex for the relevant subparagraphs. Some company commanders are purposely not conducting enemy analysis (See Junger, Sebastian, and Tim Hetherington. Restrepo. 2010. National Geographic Entertainment. DVD). As a result, soldiers go into battle knowing less information about the enemy than is available. Of captains surveyed, 57.9 percent said their unit did not use a doctrinal planning format for planning their CONOPs. Approximately 83 percent believed their unit's performance would be enhanced by better planning practices. Nearly 70 percent said time spent writing and getting CONOPs approved used up time they would normally use for planning.

Some leaders argue that units write both an OPORD and CONOP. Only 37.9 percent of survey respondents stated their unit produced both OPORDs and CONOPs. When given a mission by their higher command, 68.9 percent of surveyed captains said they rarely to never received an actual OPORD. Approximately 80 percent said they received a CONOP instead of an operations order for a mission ordered by their higher command.

The CONOP does not provide the needed information to subordinate units and leaves large gaps in key areas. Unfortunately, higher HQs CONOPs were routinely briefed to subordinates without further analysis. If CONOPs were just the concept of the operation and not used as the OPORD, then much of this would be moot; however, since they are being used as THE OPORD and often not broken down further by subordinate units, all of this missing information becomes much more critical. Information is power and we are sending troops into contact with little power, and a detailed risk assessment.

Of the captains surveyed, 89.5 percent said they were not given an OPORD by higher HQ that would receive even a marginal grade at the MCCC. A little over 79 percent stated the orders they gave would also not have passed. In other words, we have accepted substandard planning.

Solutions

The solutions to our planning problems are not difficult and require no new ADP or change in teaching formats at any of the Centers of Excellence. Commanders should reinvigorate and enforce the doctrinal OPORD format and follow the rule "... generally free of mistakes." We cannot continue to advance doctrine when we have not tested its current design. With the current MCCC standard for a company OPORD with graphics at six hours, an "emergency assault plan" planning sequence should be developed. This plan would provide guidance to company level commanders for two types of missions: those that must launch in 1-2 hours and those that must launch in 3-6 hours. Additionally, we should develop a formal abbreviated format to produce battalion level orders in 6-8 hours.

Ancillary items like risk assessments should be eliminated. Currently a platoon leader may need to ask the brigade commander to sign his risk assessment. To streamline the process it should be implicit that any command that issues an OPORD has preapproved the risk involved in the mission and approved his subordinate commander to do likewise. The COA analysis is the risk assessment. The commander has determined the best and therefore safest way to achieve the mission.

In the current OE, the three biggest issues raised are battle tracking, asset requests, and bottom up refinement. In effect this is saying current doctrine does not battle track, does not assign assets, and subordinates do not talk to their superiors. It assumes that no one in US Army history did that before the advent of the CONOP. This is a false assumption. Even with CONOPs, battle tracking is done over BFT and radio. If you give a subordinate unit an order to conduct a mission you have been notified they will conduct a mission within your own scheme of maneuver. WARNOs are an integral part of the targeting process and if done properly, the foundation of the plan. By adding final details, the higher command is already tracking the mission. This is not to say units should stop sending up things like frontline trace or appropriate execution checklists. It is to say they should not have to wait for approval to conduct a mission higher HQ has already ordered them to do. It is possible this very problem allowed Bin Laden to escape from Tora Bora (See Newton, J. S. "Missed Opportunity." The Fayetteville Observer 2 Aug. 2002). It has **certainly resulted in the failure to capture other HVIs in theater.**

Asset requests via CONOPs should also be eliminated as the higher HQ's OPORD will assign priorities for various assets. Be they indirect fire, intelligence assets, or priority of sustainment, it should all be listed in the OPORD. For future missions, a request form with a mission statement covering the 5W's should be sufficient to request these assets. With the priorities already laid out by higher,

this process will be streamlined. Any adjustments can be sent in a FRAGO. This process would be covered in the coordinating instructions subparagraph.

Bottom up refinement would be handled within the normal targeting process. After a subordinate unit develops a target set, they nominate it, and send it to higher HQ for approval or given other guidance. If accepted, the approving command develops the target specific WARNO and assigns it a priority. If the targeting process is performed properly then WARNO 1-3 will be given to the subordinate units. Upon receipt of WARNO 1, the subordinate unit begins the parallel planning process that allows for a rapid preplanned thought out response to the target when it becomes actionable. The target's priority dictates what types of assets would be devoted to the mission.

All subordinate commanders and leaders should be solely responsible for approving the missions of their subordinate echelons. Platoon leaders should not be submitting CONOPs to battalion staffs for approval. This will change the focus from getting a higher HQ's approval to supervising subordinate echelons. This will also bring the span of control from 20+ back to around the 3-5 mark at the battalion level.

As we change FM 5-0 to ADP 5-0, the OPORD format should be added to and adjusted. The various detailed OPORD subparagraphs like those in FM 3-55.93 should be added. Electronic warfare should receive a subparagraph and a format similar to the IDF format developed for briefing it in the OPORD. All WFF should be grouped into one series of subparagraphs titled 'X. WFF.' The ADP 5-0 OPORD should become the most comprehensive version; therefore, allowing units to drop what is not needed during the planning process.

Conclusion

"There is a type of staff officer who seems to think that it is more important to draft immaculate orders than to get out a reasonably well-worded order in time for action to be taken before the situation changes or the opportunity passes."- BH Liddell Hart

I have never seen or written the perfect OPORD; however, given the state of our current planning, pulling out the Ranger handbook and giving verbal orders would lead to better planning and give more information to subordinates than the typical battalion CONOP. The OPORD enables mission command, which is essential in prosecuting a counterinsurgency campaign.

Not every mission will be launched with a well thought out order. This is part of warfare and the fog of war. But by constantly hitting the basics and doing MDMP/TLPs to the extent time permits, we will build a capacity to give better rapid orders when in a true time crunch.

Winston Churchill famously said, "Failing to plan is planning to fail." The CONOP process has unintentionally reduced our planning and dissemination of information. The focus is on slide construction and font management. CONOPs should be done away with. A strong effort by the CTCs to enforce planning standards would go a long way to fixing the problem. Although this paper focuses on the Army, as we can see in the AKO photo (Figure 7) there is evidence the Marines are falling prey to the same problems. If a near peer fight occurs before our planning issues are corrected, a repeat of TF SMITH from the Korean War is highly probable.

Figure 7



Reno, Nev., native Lance Cpl. Daniel Wilson, a fire team leader with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, patrols through a cornfield in Nawa district, Helmand province. **Some of the Marines from Charlie Company were surprised with the vast amount of vegetation when they arrived to the area in June, expecting instead to be operating in barren terrain like other areas of Helmand province.** (Photo by U.S. Marine Corps) {photo used on AKO login page}

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About the Author »



Thomas Doherty

Thomas Doherty has served in both the enlisted and officer ranks in both the National Guard and active duty Army. He was originally commissioned through the Arkansas National Guard OCS program and his most recent commission was via a direct commission. He has served in four military occupational specialties 11B, 15D, 18D, and 68W. His enlisted time includes service in 3rd Ranger Battalion, and 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne). His commissioned service time includes: platoon leader, anti-armor platoon; platoon leader, long range surveillance platoons, OC/T at JRTC. He has deployed to Colombia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Currently he is serving as a Special Forces officer.

Comments

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by **rgfso173** | November 10, 2013 - 8:48am

I think you hit the nail on the head about what you and I both see as a CONOP vs OPORD. What I am used to seeing would really be considered as a OPORD, it includes all the pieces, the same as you would see going down a checklist for a written OPORD. Growing up, having only seen 'CONOPs' presented in that manner is the position I take regarding their usefulness. When by your definition it would be an OPORD, only in a different format. By the same token, I feel that by saying 'Do away with CONOPs' people will take that to mean, do away with the format and style of briefing, which when done correctly is more efficient (and detailed) than a written order. Especially when it comes to streamlining information and all the various appendices and annexes that can be attached and scattered about.

So- an agreed upon definition and variety of formats.

I do agree that basic skills in planning and development of an order are being lost if they aren't being practiced in the creation of an OPORD in any format. A good friend of mine was previously a BOLC instructor and has proven to be a great source of information for myself and my platoon leaders when I invited him to come and give classes. I don't blame the idea of a CONOP for this loss, I blame poor execution of the idea of a CONOP. I think it would be interesting to see a design project on the OPORD, CONOP and mission command in the future. Here is where we were, here is where we are at now and here is where we want to be. I think we would find the solution to a complex problem somewhere in-between. Add another dimension to the problem by incorporating the automated systems we use today. CPOF, BFT, AFATDS, DCGS, etc- all providing realtime data that we 'cut and paste' into CONOPs or OPORDs. Can we get a system that interfaces with the ease of microsoft (that isn't human cut and paste to powerpoint) so I can quickly access all the information to produce OPORD or CONOP. Time and access might be the biggest enemies of the OPORD and since we will never allow things to take longer (even it means we end up redoing them) we must improve access to and presentation of the material of an OPORD.

by **rgfso173** | November 5, 2013 - 12:21pm

First- This article would have been much more effective had the author drawn on actual personal experience instead of weak, theoretical connections in an attempt to use the emotion of Wanat to sway his argument. Poorly executed and it detracts from what was an otherwise well written article.

Having served both the 173rd and Ranger Regiment I have seen the benefits and drawbacks from written OPORDS, powerpoint CONOPs, and patrol briefs (PLT OPORD) that were pushed over FM.

Written Orders for deliberate missions, allow flexible units the ability to, for example completely remission from a training cycle that centered on OIF and then deploy to OEF, RC-East, N2KL. When those orders are properly echoed down the chain of command and the Commander's Intent is clear and concise, the subordinate units can execute efficiently and decisively. The written order facilitates a Company that has 3 platoon Firebases to run off FM patrol briefs for 15 months because there wasn't connectivity at Vegas, Vimoto and Restrepo. Sticking to the basics worked perfectly. However, for large scale planned operations in areas that units have not operated, the detail of a CONOP is required. When I say detail I mean the depiction of HLZs, BPs, overwatch elements, a common operating picture that can't be accomplished on a word document and dispersed forces cannot conduct CARs and sand tables. A one-slider that depicts the detailed communication architecture between assets, controllers on particular nets is invaluable and would have taken up an entire page if written out.

The CONOP was a tool developed out of necessity and efficiency. In order for forces to be agile and adaptive they must be able to quickly visualize the enemy, the concept, the assets and mission command structure. OPORDs are not agile, adaptive and certainly not efficient. A 21 page OPORD with annexes to clean Fort Bragg (when it is done year after year) is hardly efficient. Like most good ideas, the Army has bastardized, standardized and bureaucratized the CONOP into its current, inefficient state. However, dismissing it completely is a 'black boot army' mentality, where instead of learning lessons from the war and implementing them correctly, we would rather go back to the way it was before the war when everything looked better on paper. Written, lengthy OPORDs didn't work for Companies and Platoons, which is why the CONOP was invented, doing away with it would be taking a step back.

I believe the CONOP is a great tool at the Company-Troop-Battery level and below. When the commander at this level receives a written and enduring OPORD, all the annexes and most importantly, unwavering Commander's Intent, he can build CONOPs with detail that allow his forces to better see the enemy, their positions, 'see' the intent and it places all the assets and enablers onto a single

product that is usable for everyone. It is the reason SOF elements can utilize a particular set of enablers, conduct a TST raid on one side of a country one night, and yet be on the other side, completely different enemy, different human and physical terrain, different assets and enablers, still a TST mission and be successful. It is the reason conventional forces right now in Afghanistan can go from retrograding their FOB and training Afghans and transition that night to take the fight to the enemy if he gives them the opportunity. Flexibility, agility and adaptability, courtesy of the CONOP.

Last—The CONOP and its' process is not an excuse for failing to plan properly, execute MDMP, IPB and proper TLPs.

Done right, with an OPORD as the base it will continue to have a place in the military.

by **Thomas Doherty** | November 6, 2013 - 7:17am

Some of our disagreement on this seems to stem from a misunderstanding on how an OPORD can be presented and whether the CONOP used by a vast majority of the military is the OPORD.

"...had the author drawn on actual personal experience instead of weak, theoretical connections in an attempt to use the emotion of Want to sway his argument."

In the remarks section I layout why Want was used instead of operations like 'CARPE DIEM 1', Operations LOKI or FREYA or even 'Operation Defeat Al-Qaeda in the North'. The awareness of, knowledge base and study of these missions/operations is minimal at best. Want however is heavily studied and well known. At the time I started writing this FOB Keating was still new, and to this day I do not think it has been studied as intensively as Want. I do not see where there is an emotional argument made. Did the Company Commander in the 'Restrepo' documentary not say he purposely did not study the enemy and is it not one of my points that we are not studying the enemy properly during our planning? Is it an emotional argument to say that Operation Frankton should have been deconflicted with guerrilla forces on the ground in Europe before conducting their raid? Or can we look back and learn from it just as we did from Operation Eagle claw. I believe I used an appropriate historical context to the topic being presented. Personnel examples of multiple people including some of my own are also presented in the remarks section.

"When those orders are properly echoed down the chain of command and the Commander's Intent is clear and concise, Sticking to the basics worked perfectly."

OPORDs are the basics. No one said it had to be a huge production. In fact I point out just taking out a Ranger Handbook and going down the OPORD would be a better order than most if not all CONOPs.

"... A one-slider that depicts the detailed communication architecture between assets, controllers on particular nets is invaluable and would have taken up an entire page if written out."

The assumption here is that OPORDs have to be some form of word document or even written for that matter. When I was re-commissioned I had two LRS Platoons during the Iraq Surge. My men always got an OPORD at the start of a mission presented to them using power point. What I presented in the studies was the information is not being presented in any of the slides. I think it is great that your unit did provide the information, most do not. If you want to use the classic word document or hand written version that the overlays accomplish the visual presentation you are referring to.

"The CONOP was a tool developed out of necessity and efficiency. In order for forces to be agile and adaptive they must be able to quickly visualize the enemy, the concept, the assets and mission command structure. OPORDs are not agile, adaptive and certainly not efficient."

I think I make a good case against the efficiency of CONOPs the surveys also shows the lack of agility. When VSO was first started 'OPS Boxes' were made according to the methodology books specifically to make us as agile as the enemy. This was a passive admission by the Army that we are not agile and flexible. The study also points out that we do not visualize the enemy properly in CONOPs. I was part of the JRTC MCCC meetings that was mutually agreed on and one of the reasons JRTC spent the money to send us over to Ft. Benning.

"... instead of learning lessons from the war and implementing them[CONOPs] correctly, we would rather go back to the way it was before the war when everything looked better on paper. Written, lengthy OPORDs didn't work for Companies and Platoons, which is why the CONOP was invented, doing away with it would be taking a step back."

I believe I make a strong argument they do not work, and we should learn from our mistake in using them. In my current duty position and location I can say we have not. I say WARNOs, OPORDs and FRAGOs do/did work. I would be interested to see the history of why CONOPs were invented.

ADRP 1-02, ADP 3-0, 3-05, 5-0, and ATP 5-0.1 all created within the last couple of years make no mention of the CONOP as a mission plan or mission approval process. The Concept of operation is still mentioned in reference to its original OPORD format and purpose. So even though we have rewritten our doctrine a couple times during this conflict the chain of command that imposes 'The CONOP process' still does not see it as something that should be adopted into the foundation of our doctrine. In the remarks section I state:

The first place I have seen ...A... CONOP used as opposed to ...THE... CONcept of the OPERation in actual doctrine is in FM 6-03.05 CONVENTIONAL FORCES AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES SYNCHRONIZATION. (Currently under revision.) I have recommended not doing this to ALSA. I recommended instead using applicable OPORD formats. What they decide will be seen next year.

For now I have lost that argument for now. I believe they were invented as a convenient micromangement tool.

"When the commander at this level receives a written and enduring OPORD, all the annexes and most importantly, unwavering Commander's Intent, he can build CONOPs with detail that allow his forces to better see the enemy, their positions, 'see' the intent and it places all the assets and enablers onto a single product that is usable for everyone."

Again you are saying the commanders are presenting all the information in an OPORD but in Power Point (or similar product). If true, if they would be giving all that information normally held in an OPORD in a visual manner they are still giving an OPORD.

"It is the reason SOF elements can utilize a particular set of enablers, conduct a TST raid on one side of a country one night, and yet be on the other side, completely different enemy, different human and physical terrain, different assets and enablers, still a TST mission and be successful."

First there are extremely few TSTs that occur what you are most likely referring to is, time constrained planning etc. TST (Time sensitive Target) like DA (Direct Action) is a very commonly misused term. Second SOF can handle assets with an OPORD. I have served in both Ranger Regiment and SF and used assets before the advent of the current CONOP process. If you are issuing the new

information about the new target on the other side of the country and briefing the changes to enemy situation assets scheme of maneuver etc you just gave a FRAGO. If that FRAGO is in some digital form it is still a FRAGO.

"It is the reason conventional forces right now in Afghanistan can go from retrograding their FOB and training Afghans and transition that night to take the fight to the enemy if he gives them the opportunity. Flexibility, agility and adaptability, courtesy of the CONOP."

It is funny you should use 'retrograde' I just had a write up 'edited' changing 'retire' (one of the 3 forms of retrograde) to retrograde so certain units would feel better. What proof is there that this is a result of the CONOP or that 'writing' a CONOP and the risk assessment and getting it approved is faster than 'writing' a FRAGO and executing because you were already approved.

"Last—The CONOP and its' process is not an excuse for failing to plan properly, execute MDMP, IPB and proper TLPs."

We fully agree here. I think allot of our disagreement is based more on a misunderstanding that OPORD do not have to be word documents and visual presentations are not automatically CONOPs.

"Done right, with an OPORD as the base it will continue to have a place in the military."

I for one hope we learn from what I feel is the mistake that is the CONOP process and attempt to execute thing like mission command. I believe I make a strong argument for that in this article backed up by empirical not emotional data.

If your unit sent up a full OPORD for review then that is a whole new level of micromanagement. If they sent up the normal Level 5W/o/1/2 CONOPs used for mission approval without an OPORD in some form behind them then my point holds. Otherwise I am glad to hear that some units do the full planning process. They however are a statistical anomaly in today's fight.

by **Sparapet** | November 4, 2013 - 12:52pm

I recall having to add TRP's in Iraq to a CONOP for a raid even though no fires asset could actually touch the AO. Having to interrupt prep for the raid to truck to the TOC two miles away where the laptop with the CONOP was is not my idea of efficiency. When I asked why I was required to introduce control measures for an asset that was not part of the mission, I was told that a CONOP has TRP's. So, added were TRP ABO001, 0002, 0003, and 0004. Block checked and 30 minutes wasted.

by **Sempfilear** | November 7, 2013 - 7:26am

You do realize a TRP and a Target are two separate things? TRPs are a direct fire control measure. Something you use to control direct fires of organic systems like the M240B. Any time you employ a use SBF, like in a raid, you almost need to establish preset TRPs. Targets are indirect fire control measures.

by **Thomas Doherty** | November 7, 2013 - 8:07am

FYI they changed the definition on that one. That is what it used to be now it is.

target reference point – An easily recognizable point on the ground (either natural or man-made) used to initiate, distribute, and control fires.

No more reference to direct indirect.

Smacked into that one about a month ago scrubbing a CONOP of all things.

by **aabazin** | November 2, 2013 - 6:13pm

The quality of planning comes down to thinking. If you are in the same AO for 15 months down-range and your team is trained the tendency becomes to natural tendency is take some short cuts. However, if you are in a position to issue orders you are being paid to think. The OPORDER is the way to go because it works and it makes you think through the details.

by **major.rod** | October 7, 2012 - 1:52pm

I'm stunned! (and furious) CONOPS instead of OPORDs?!?!?!?

How did this happen? How could the basics be so forgotten? Why is this so widespread?

Another mortal sin is requiring commanders to seek approval from levels 2-3 times removed? What has created this level of micromanagement? Why do we pay Co and BN COs if their subordinate units have to brief the higher by SOP vs. by exception? This trend is highly disconcerting and reminds me of my experience in '02-'03 during simulation studies for FCS seeing a disturbing trend of increased command intervention with increased technology/situational awareness. Couple that with the most risk averse environment we operate in and the increase in PC and CYA "values and we are destroying our junior leaders/future commanders not to mention our units' current effectiveness.

Excellent insightful, eye opening article. We need help, FAST!

by **Outlaw 09** | October 8, 2012 - 2:34pm

major.rod----I am surprised you are stunned--this trend has been going on for darn near six years and it is getting worse by the year.

After coming out of Iraq and going to work with the COG at the NTC in 2006 we had assumed that the problems we were seeing first was around Intel--which we addressed, and then we thought the problems we were seeing were associated to the units' poor

understanding of JIIM/NGOs which we fixed and then we thought it was the KLEs which we fixed and expanded, then it was their poor understanding of battlefield forensics which was addressed, and then TRADOC thought it was ISR where they threw a whole ISR TOPOFF team of 30 contractors at the problem at the CTCs and now in AFG and recently it appeared to be the targeting process which was addressed by the FIRES CoE and TRADOC.

When one really took time as I have in the last six years of observing/mentoring countless unit Staff's the core problem actually started emerging in late 2009 early 2010 around unit leaders and their staffs' lack of understanding of MDMP coupled with a failing WG concept, poor use of PowerPoint as the main KM tool tied to an expanding deep lack of Trust (between Officers and NCOs/Commanders and Staff sections) and a heavy dose of micromanagement.

In the face of this just how do we expect Design and Mission Command to succeed or as COL Guthrie 2012 recently wrote " Do we really have the stomach for implementing mission command, or is this concept a passing fancy, the Army's current bright shiny object? If we intend to truly embrace mission command, then we should do it to the fullest, and that will require commitment to changing a culture from one of control and process to one of decentralization and trust."

ADP 6.0 THE PRINCIPLES OF MISSION COMMAND

5. The exercise of mission command is based on mutual trust, shared understanding, and purpose. Commanders understand that some decisions must be made quickly at the point of action. Therefore, they concentrate on the objectives of an operation, not how to achieve it. Commanders provide subordinates with their intent, the purpose of the operation, the key tasks, the desired end state, and resources. Subordinates then exercise disciplined initiative to respond to unanticipated problems. Every Soldier must be prepared to assume responsibility, maintain unity of effort, take prudent action, and act resourcefully within the commander's intent.

ADRP 6.0 PRINCIPLES OF MISSION COMMAND

2-1. The mission command philosophy helps commanders counter the uncertainty of operations by reducing the amount of certainty needed to act. Commanders understand that some decisions must be made quickly and are better made at the point of action. Mission command is based on mutual trust and a shared understanding and purpose between commanders, subordinates, staffs, and unified action partners. It requires every Soldier to be prepared to assume responsibility, maintain unity of effort, take prudent action, and act resourcefully within the commander's intent.

The interesting thing is that while we focus the training of Mission Command on Commanders (Art of Command) and Staff's (Science of Control) we fully fail to train ALL leaders (NCOs/Officers) at ALL levels from Strategic to Operational to Tactical on Mission Command.

WHY should we train the entire force (all NCOs/all Officers) on Mission Command?---for MC to be successful one has to understand the concept of open critical conversation/dialogue without fear built on Trust---once ALL understand that and understand just WHY micromanagement is created---coupled with a rebuilding of the MDMP process driven by Design THEN and only THEN can the Force move off of the ISAF treadmill of checklists which I wrote about recently in FP.

If one looks at the problems seen in the last six years ie the intel process, the ISR process, the targeting process, the operational process, failure of the WG process---all point to a lack of correctly run/understood MDMP, which led to checklists (and yes CONOPS are a checklist as well as the OER), which is based off of a lack of Trust, and the lack of Trust led to heavy micromanagement.

And yes I agree with COL Guthrie---currently Big Army does not have the stomach to address the increasing failure of MC and Design because to do so requires addressing a deep cultural problem ie the promotion/PME system to LTC/COL and up to the two Star that does not allow for failure for failure means no star promotion.

by **Outlaw 09** | October 8, 2012 - 2:33pm

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by **VB** | October 6, 2012 - 1:50pm

Very interesting essay and comments. Thanks a lot.

In my PoV due to toxic leadership and modern technology the basics of good leadership are more and more forgotten.

I completely agree with the author: why an CONOP approval after an OPORD?

Good leadership is based on trust.

Built on trust and solid training there can be true mission command.

Best example: Moltke and the prussian-german army 1870 (best practice: his OPORD for the attack at the meuse).

Those basic truths are not only neglected in the military. Also in the management of companies there is more and more toxic-micromanagement instead of true leadership and command.

What is the answer to this? The timeless basics of mission command - not only for the military.

Interesting read on this topic:

<http://www.ashridge.org.uk/Website/Content.nsf/wArtOfAction/The+Art+of+A...>

by **Thomas Doherty** | September 25, 2012 - 9:50am

Similar line of thought also brings up CONOPs and why we use them.

http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/18/can_an_army_of_checklist...

by **jholm** | September 7, 2012 - 10:51am

Wow, I'm surprised there hasn't been more discussion on this topic because, in my experience, this is a hotly contested topic amongst commanders and staff. CONOPs have become a conglomeration of bits and pieces of an OPORD pasted together on a series of slides. I think using a CONOP in lieu of an OPORD to subordinate units is the wrong answer. However, I think a CONOP, if properly executed (and not referred to as a CONOP), can be a useful tool to augment a confirmation brief or back brief to higher.

Without question, a CONOP does not include all of the detailed planning required for an OPORD or at least I have never seen one that does. The 5 paragraph OPORD is a tried and true method of conveying orders to subordinate units. The main problem I've seen is that HHQ rarely conducts a proper MDMP. The 1/3 2/3 rule is rarely applied, WARNOs are rarely published in a timely manner, and the concept of parallel planning is a dying art. Staffs get so caught up in trying to produce a perfect product that the order gets published too late to allow for bottom up refinement. If there's no time for bottom up refinement and no effort to include subordinate units in parallel planning, the subordinate units don't even have the time to conduct sufficient terrain/enemy/friendly analysis, think through the details of their sustainment plan, etc. When this becomes the rule, rather than the exception, those skills atrophy in training and in combat.

Another problem with the lack of parallel planning and 1/3 2/3 is that it undermines the subordinate unit's initiative by making them feel like a no-notice, micro-managed, order could be dropped on their lap at any time. Occasionally that's a necessary evil to stay inside the enemy's decision cycle, exploit an opportunity, or mitigate a risk but, in my experience, far too many of these short-suspense missions were missions that HHQ new about and staffed in a vacuum.

If improper coordination between higher and lower - not to mention within the staff itself - does not occur, their ability to accomplish the mission has been undermined. A bad order is a bad order regardless of whether it is published in the form of a CONOP or OPORD.

However, if MDMP is properly conducted and the subordinate unit receives a series of WARNOs with suspenses for bottom up refinement and some sort of venue for parallel planning, by the time the final OPORD is issued, there should be no surprises to anyone.

After lower receives the OPORD, the CONOP can be a useful tool to augment the confirmation and back briefs. The operative words in that sentence are "can be". One of my BN CDRs once told me that good units do routine things routinely. If 1st PLT rolls out pretty much every day to go to the nearby police station to train their partners, why waste the PL's time making a CONOP. That time would be better spent on rehearsals or PCCs/PCIs. He needs to brief his commander on the plan and the CO is responsible for ensuring that the plan meets his intent, that 1st PLT doesn't set a pattern with SP times and routes, that they've adjusted their plan based on the latest intel, etc.

Separately, if 1st PLT gets tagged to execute a raid against an HVI, and that's not a routine task for them, taking the time to put together a CONOP can be worthwhile. I think Commanders need to realize the time investment that goes into a CONOP and ensure they are only asking to see specific items of interest to them. I think it is OK if this is not 100% standardized. Some things (task org, CDR's intent nested with higher's, mission statement with proper doctrinal terms, ops graphics that include MCOO/SITEMP/friendly graphics/control measures, etc) may need to be present in every CONOP. Having a slide that includes graphics, command and signal info, and task org at the TOC is very helpful if the subordinate unit runs into trouble. However, over-standardization reduces the thought that goes into specific missions. If you're executing an air assault with multiple units/enablers that have not previously worked together, the CDR SHOULD place greater emphasis on the concept of rehearsals, C2 plan, fratricide mitigation. If the mission is a KLE with a tribal elder who's on the fence about supporting a new police checkpoint, the emphasis of the backbrief should be more on the KLE talking points, condition setting, IO, KLE exploitation (ensuring promises made become promises kept). Not every mission is the same so why should the backbriefs be the same?

Which leads to my next point, we need to stop calling them CONOPs. There is little value in providing a product that only includes the Concept of the Operation and nothing else. Calling it a CONOP and using a format that dumbs down the details of the order defeats the point. There is information that the TOC needs to have on hand for complex or non-routine missions. Call it a TOC Sheet or Ops Snapshot or something that more clearly identifies the intent of the product and makes it clear that it is by no means a replacement for an order. There is also specific information that the CDR may want to be backbriefed on that exceeds the minimum info needed in the TOC. If OPTEMPO, timing, or Battle Rhythm prevents a personal backbrief, the most efficient method of conveying the information should be used (email, word document, whatever maximizes the subordinate CDR's time available to refine the plan, execute TLPs, and supervise). This also saves time for the approving commander. If he only cares about specific aspects of the operation, why does he need to look through 10 slides to find that info, especially if he has to follow up with a phone call anyway since the subordinate unit dumbed that info down and stripped out key details the boss cares about in order to make all the text fit on the slide?

In summation, the problems and potential solutions (as I see them) are:

- 1) A CONOP issued in lieu of an order doesn't contain sufficient information and inhibits detailed planning... so, let's not use them. Use the orders process the way we learned it, with WARNOs, parallel planning, and 1/3 2/3 rule applied.
- 2) A full-blown OPORD takes too long to generate for us to gain and maintain the initiative... so, see the solution to #1. Providing a WARNO with a well thought out CDR's Intent is a pretty darn good start and typing a WARNO usually takes less time than building a CONOP. Does the subordinate unit really need you to put a snapshot of his AO and all of the unit icons depicting his task org on a CONOP slide for him? If you are telling a subordinate commander what his route should be and where he should emplace is SBF positions, what's the point of keeping him around? It wastes your time and his and gives him information he doesn't need.
- 3) Different types of operations must be approved by Commanders at different levels... so, CDRs must be selective in which types of ops require their approval and which types of ops are implicitly approved (again, doing routine things routinely). If there is a type of operation that does require explicit CDR approval, provide specific backbrief requirements that address your concerns.
- 4) The TOC needs to know what's going on since it's a lot harder to assist a unit in need if you don't know the plan and are building situational awareness/understanding while the unit's in contact... so, give the TOC what it needs to know but what's the point of an 8+ page CONOP that is either copy/pasted, poorly conceived, or unrehearsed because the subordinate unit doesn't have time to plan, do TLPs, and fill in all the fields of a CONOP. Decide what the TOC needs to know, give them that, and don't waste their and your time typing in IO themes and messages that the Battle CPT couldn't care less about. The backbrief should be commander-to-commander, the TOC Sheet should be CP-to-CP.

In short, a good unit can solve this conundrum with good staff-to-staff and commander-to-commander coordination throughout the orders/planning/backbrief process.

by **Move Forward** | August 29, 2012 - 7:46pm

Nice piece and it's great seeing someone with so much varied wartime and Observer/Controller experience trying to influence doctrine using solid stats to back it up. Just a few observations from a novice who teaches some of these obscure concepts and attempts to make them as applicable as possible to students, and pretend it all can occur rapidly or in the correct sequence that few understand or practice in real staffs/units.

This, however, does not mean an OPORD will guarantee mission success; so true was this for Operation Rock Move in Afghanistan, which ultimately resulted in an operational-level defeat of U.S. forces.

How was the OPORD the problem at Wanat and what was the operational-level defeat? Was it not more Murphy's Law, "no plan survives enemy contact," and a tactical small unit self-rescue of Soldiers making the best of a bad situation? The decision to withdraw was more about demonstrated villager and local police deceit. Commanders recognized that a less resourced and experienced follow-on unit could never hope to secure the same indefensible terrain or win over the population of a largely hammered Wanat.

Wanat also may be a classic example of why BCT or battalion commanders might want to approve a company CONOP. Otherwise, as occurred, higher commanders are blamed for any Murphy's Law events. 20/20 hindsight of external parties follows from press/bloggers/distraught family members, who weren't there at the end of a 15 month tour not recognizing that 173rd was attempting the right thing in closing an even more imperiled COP Bella for their follow-on unit.

The Wanat valley COP site, dictated by vehicle/road and town location (Bella did not even offer that), was the major Wanat problem. Lost UAS support the night of the attack, the platoon leader's placement of OP Topside, and failure to employ ANA Soldiers to patrol were other problems.

When this is not planned, you end up with units less than an EIB road march distance away from their battalion base, BLACK on water; similar to what happened at the Battle of Wanat.

The ANA could have used local water and hand pumps also were available (but unused) to purify US troop water. Even a SSG was quoted in the final CSI study that they believed they had brought ample water and ammunition in their five vehicles for the first few days of their July move.

More Murphy's Law: the lack of a planned route clearance package due to unforeseen events prevented contractor supply and construction material movements by jingle truck leading to more limited resupply by Toyota trucks. The commander arrived with more water the day before the attack in a Chinook due to a weather delay and a higher command-driven 15-6 investigation related to the July 4th Apache engagement that killed insurgents and civilians in hijacked trucks near COP Bella.

That Apache attack may have encouraged the 13 July 2008 attack at Wanat but it also probably prevented attack of the aerial evacuation at COP Bella, thought to be the most dangerous threat COA. A downed Chinook with 30 on board would have been even more disastrous than the nine tragically lost at Wanat, primarily on the misplaced OP Topside with dead space within 10 meters surrounding it.

With a ground QRF just 5 miles away, 50+ 155mm rounds that began landing within minutes, a B-1B strike that occurred within about 40 minutes, and Apaches on station at the hour mark, you can hardly cite any lack of Wanat enablers. Unlike Ganjal for instance, there was no shortage of external and internal combat power planned or actually available in response, not to mention 70+ troops, and five uparmored HMMWVs with crew-served weapons. The 40mm weapons, however were placed too close to potential targets meaning they could not arm at short range.

Waigal valley where Wanat's COP Kahler was being built was historically the least likely of the 14+ COP/FOBs in the battalion sector to experience a TIC and hence was largely an economy of force effort relative to other COPs in Korengal, Watapur, Chowkay, and Pech valleys. You could argue it should have been the main effort given the move but other events and TICs were also happening in the same timeframe.

For example, at the Battle of Wanat approximately two companies of enemy combatants got into their assault positions undetected. The enemy was only seen once before the fight though they were so close that some suspect they reversed the direction of emplaced claymore mines. They did this even though Coalition Forces (CF) were equipped with a high-tech optics.

Your Wanat study link is the original Cubbison draft that included some cited biases unlike the more balanced final version. I did appreciate Cubbison's mention of a villager inquiring about UAS support the night before the attack...a conversation missing in the final study. Cubbison's version also cites several initial sightings in the days before the attack.

It is disturbing that all the CONOPs and OPORDs you mention lack CCIR which means they lack a focused RSTA effort reconnoitering areas important to the operation and answering gaps in the commander's information collection. Too often, it appears, that commanders/S-3s/S-2s are going through the motions on CCIR and information collection often assigning valuable assets like UAS to constantly staring at the friendly unit instead of the terrain surrounding, ahead, and behind the lead convoy vehicle, area being secured, or objective. It's possible to look at more than one thing in an orbit after all, and as mentioned the COP/BFT can track unit locations without micromanaging friendly positions via video.

As you mention, the lack of terrain and weather information in the orders is also problematic. That should be one of the primary products of reconnaissance, as well, to eliminate some of the Murphy uncertainties and let you know whether some of those aerial enablers will actually be available due to weather, and if line of sight and dead space is a problem as it was at Wanat's OP Topside.

If a CONOP was truly a concept of the operation, this subparagraph would be the only portion needed and all CONOPs would be one slide put together after COA approval. Due to the typical practice of using the CONOP as an OPORD means attention must be paid to explaining the concept.

I noted that you used FM 5-0 a lot and seem to have the new OPORD format. Another more recent publically released publication, ATP 5-0.1, Sept 2011, does not describe a CONOP anywhere but does outline requirements for the Concept of Operations under the Execution paragraph (as you show in your paragraph 3 graph). The Concept of Operations in Chapter 12 is described as either using Decisive, Shaping, or Sustaining Operations or Phases to describe the concept of operations. Both new ADRP 3-0, and new ADRP 5-0 also list additional operational frameworks to describe the concept of operations to include Deep, Close, Security operations and Main and Supporting Efforts.

In addition, ADRP 5-0 says *The concept of operations is a statement that directs the manner in which subordinate units cooperate to accomplish the mission and establishes the sequence of actions the force will use to achieve the end state.* If the commander provides his initial commander's intent early and allows subordinate units to submit a "CONOP" through the chain of command, it supports the notion of mission command (subordinate initiative) while still allowing higher HQ to synchronize different company "CONOP" into a unified plan. Not every company can be the Main Effort. Some companies get shortchanged when limited enablers, time, or maneuver terrain are available...such as at Wanat which was not the battalion main effort due to more TICs occurring elsewhere, and time was lacking because of the 15-6 and a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs visit was occupying key leaders.

If according to ATP 5-0.1, "The COA statement becomes the concept of operations for the plan," and ADRP 5-0 lists the broad concept of operation under the COA statement/sketches under Step 3: COA Development, it will take time until a WARNO is issued after COA approval step 6. The companies in effect are submitting their desired CONOP up the chain of command for COA development and wargaming/comparison/approval consideration? Isn't the submitted company CONOP in effect the Troop-Leading Procedure "Tentative Plan?"

If so, parallel planning can continue and be modified in the "complete the plan" and "supervise and refine the plan" TLP stages after the COA Approval WARNO because as you cited General Eisenhower, "In preparing for battle, I have always found that plans are useless but planning is indispensable." If you plan, you are familiar enough with what is planned to occur that you can adjust based on Battalion/BCT plan changes, during execution, and create contingencies at various decision points when things invariably change due to the enemy's or Murphy's vote.

The real question should be how do we accelerate MDMP and TLP since they are interrelated. How does this new fangled Design process fit into time-constrained planning. Do we bypass subordinate and staff initiative and allow battalion/BCT commander intuition to dictate a COA that companies must live with? How do commanders gain this intuition if they are never allowed to practice TLP/MDMP as junior commanders and staff officers? Is a good concept of operations executed now better than a brilliant one delayed until next week, even if the accelerated plan has no analysis or comparison based on updated running estimates, mission-specific CCIR, or reconnaissance to verify a COA's viability?

No answers from amateur me. I guess I'm wondering if the Captains Career Courses and CGSC have just not caught up yet with the new doctrine or if CONOP as described needs to be better established or eliminated in doctrine and the schoolhouses to reflect or

refute doctrine on the ground in theater. But if your stats about OPORDs in theater and UAS operator experiences with commanders misusing UAS are any indication, the combat leader does not always know best. That lack of adherence to doctrine and proper TTP leads to lost lives and opportunities to conduct better COA development, planning, reconnaissance, preparation, and mission execution/assessment.

by **Thomas Doherty** | August 29, 2012 - 9:34pm

First thanks.

Second I do not want to reinvestigate Wanat (aka WANAT). I thought about using other experiences. However since Wanat was so public readers are more likely to be familiar with the history of Wanat than 3/7 SFG's Operations 'CARPE DIEM I/II/III' My answers here try to remain focused on the main point of the article. I want to stay away from should have/could have. I am always open for side bar discussions in another format.

1. "How was the OPORD the problem at Wanat and what was the operational-level defeat?"

The OPORD was not a problem. It should be counted as a plus that one was done. It is given as an example. I am not saying we will always win if we do OPORDs.

The mission in the Waygal valley was to hold some portion of the valley. Depending on how far left or right you want to shade the space between Strategic and Tactical will depend on whether or not you want to call the multiyear operation in the valley as 'Operational'. The fact that the OPORD was drawn up with the idea of holding at least some of the valley and as a result of enemy actions CF forces ultimately left. (Even if it was after a tactical level victory.) The enemy therefore achieved their 'operational level' goals we did not achieve our 'operational level' goals. Not to mention the successful IO campaign mounted by the enemy throughout the entire execution of 'Rock Move'. From this I also consider it an operational level defeat. The same argument could be made for the initial pull out of Fallujah. One difference being we eventually retook Fallujah.

2. "Wanat also may be a classic example of why BCT or battalion commanders might want to approve a company CONOP."

They did approve the company CONOP so that is not a 'Joe Proof' methodology either. For the record there is not one. We have a span of control for many reasons.

3. "Even a SSG was quoted in the final CSI study that they believed they had brought ample water and ammunition in their five vehicles for the first few days of their July move."

If I remember correctly no one sat down and planned out [(#) soldiers x (#) quantity of water per day] + (#) Murphy buffer = (#) water needed.

All other discussions on what could have been done is hind sight and a subject for side bar conversation.

4. "Cubbison's version also cites several initial sightings in the days before the attack."

No doubt some of those that attacked had been seen face to face in the bazaar prior to the attack. Our soldiers are seen on patrol all the time also. I am referring to the final infiltration of the attack force. The morning of the attack in both versions the enemy was only detected just prior to the attack and it was not part of the assault element which is believed to have turned around some of the claymores by this time. We however are consistently compromised even on purely standoff reconnaissance missions.

5. "I noted that you used FM 5-0 a lot and seem to have the new OPORD format. Another more recent publically released publication, ATTP 5-0.1, Sept 2011, does not describe a CONOP anywhere but does outline requirements for the Concept of Operations under the Execution paragraph (as you show in your paragraph 3 graph)...."

The first place I have seen ...A... CONOP used as opposed to ...THE... CONcept of the OPERATION in actual doctrine is in FM 6-03.05 CONVENTIONAL FORCES AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES SYNCHRONIZATION. (Currently under revision.) I have recommended not doing this to ALSA. I recommended instead using applicable OPORD formats. What they decide will be seen next year.

6. "If according to ATTP 5-0.1, "The COA statement becomes the concept of operations for the plan," and ADRP 5-0 lists the broad concept of operation under the COA statement/sketches under Step 3: COA Development, it will take time until a WARNO is issued after COA approval step 6."

Actually that would be WARNO #3 the companies should have already received WARNOs 1 and 2 prior to COA development.

7. "The companies in effect are submitting their desired CONOP up the chain of command for COA development and wargaming/comparison/approval consideration?"

I am open to any discussion on adjusting the MDMP process. As stated we all know that the leaders are talking when possible. If on sight having the company commanders play BLUEFOR would be interesting. But they have subordinates that need to be supervised and have to conduct their own war gaming etc. This can be handled with brief backs, confirmation briefs etc.

8. "Isn't the submitted company CONOP in effect the Troop-Leading Procedure "Tentative Plan?""

NO.

The problem is it has become THE plan. Tentative also means I have not finalized it and can change 1st PLT from blocking to breaching. After a CONOP is approved that usually cannot be done without reapproval.

9. "How does this new fangled Design process fit into time-constrained planning."

"We cannot continue to advance doctrine when we have not tested its current design."

10. "How do commanders gain this intuition if they are never allowed to practice TLP/MDMP as junior commanders and staff officers?"

"Commanders should reinvigorate and enforce the doctrinal OPORD format and follow the rule "... generally free of mistakes."
"A strong effort by the CTCs to enforce planning standards would go a long way to fixing the problem."

11. "Is a good concept of operations executed now better than a brilliant one delayed until next week, even if the accelerated plan has no analysis or comparison based on updated running estimates, mission-specific CCIR, or reconnaissance to verify a COA's viability?"

Yes, but if we are going to force units to ask permission to conduct the missions we have in theory already ordered them to do; why not plan it out? Otherwise that is why we gave them an OPORD that included 3 (total) commander's intents. Now they get to demonstrate initiative within those intents.

I also believe in the "RULE of CHOW". Whoever eats chow closest to the fight knows best.

12. "I guess I'm wondering if the Captains Career Courses and CGSC have just not caught up yet with the new doctrine or if CONOP as described needs to be better established or eliminated in doctrine and the schoolhouses to reflect or refute doctrine on the ground in theater."

When I was at MCCC we asked to be taught CONOPs. They in effect said no CONOPs are the wrong answer. We are here to teach you the right answer. As I was writing this MCCC still refused to teach CONOP as THE order. I believe they are correct.

by **Morgan** | August 29, 2012 - 9:20am

While serving in Kandahar as team leader for a Police Mentor Team, we submitted CONOPs that covered us for an entire week. They usually took 24 hours or less to get approved (and less time that that to build). Once approved, we could (and did) roll out whenever we wanted as long as we called in our SP and RP. I suspect much of that had to do with the fact that we had one O6 in charge, teams spread out everywhere, and the Canadians, who were in charge of Kandahar Province at the time, weren't focused on us. Isn't that the way CONOPs are supposed to work? It worked quite well for us.

by **Thomas Doherty** | August 29, 2012 - 11:45am

That is not unheard of. In 02-03 we figured out any CONOP that said CA was an automatic go. In '06 the SF FOB refused to even consider our 'CONOP' because we did not have the ability to send it digitally. So the Canadian company commander called it over voice and got approval within an hour. During the OIF surge we figured out it was quicker to do a piggy back with the MTTs. As it says it was an average time. 'Task force' for example does not suffer from the time delay problem. The question then becomes was there a proper planning also or was the CONOP used as the order. There are a few units trying to do the right thing. Unfortunately, they are not in the majority. If they were JRTC would not have sent a dozen OC/Ts on TDY to the MCoE to find out why they are not doing the right thing.

I hear from the boys that the VSO 'OP BOX' (in effect a special AO for the VSP sight) is helping them out allot on time constraints.

by **Thomas Doherty** | August 29, 2012 - 4:57am

It is well understood by the tactical leaders that we are outside of the enemy's decision curve. An argument for operational and strategic level is a different story. There is a strong belief that I constantly ran into that CONOPs get approved rapidly. A brigade CoC approves a CONOP within a couple of hours but they do not see the hours it took to get it up there in the first place or ask 'Why am I the approval authority?' Answers to the time question in the survey varied from instantly to days. With the average time being "... 36.11 hours for a level zero and 89.4 hours for the level one CONOP". I personally remember missing the birthday party for the son of the Governor of the Helmond province. He personally invited us and therefore we personal insulted him by not going. His compound was only 400m away from the FB. i.e. within grazing distance of our M240s. We missed the birthday party waiting for CONOP approval. What was worse I was on an ODA at the time. Meanwhile units roll out the gate of their FOBs and receive small arms fire or more within an hour.

I always told my soldiers and the units at JRTC; 'All of warfare is a series of skill level 1 and 2 tasks. The best units in the world are the best units at skill level 1 and 2 tasks.' AKA 'blocking and tackling' or as medics like to say 'sticks and rags.'

I do love that video it is sadly so true.

by **Biggs Darklighter** | August 29, 2012 - 3:09am

The author makes a great point and the CONOP is nothing more then a modified FRAGO. Bottomline is we always hurt ourselves when we depart from the basics.

by **Morgan** | August 28, 2012 - 4:18pm

That video was way too funny.

Maybe the micromanagement indicative of the multi-page CONOP process is a good indicator that we really do need to reduce the size of the Army (perhaps more than we are already doing), particularly senior staffs/ HQ elements, and flatten the decision-making process to enable a more rapid response to issues/ problems (like the enemy).

by **Dave Maxwell** | August 28, 2012 - 12:31pm

Sometimes we should consider just sticking to the fundamentals. Blocking and tackling are always needed in any football game. Maybe OPORDS are one of those fundamentals. I am sure the argument is that we can use CONOPs instead of OPORDs so we can operate inside the enemy's decision cycle. Wonder how that is working out these days.? This is what the troops think of CONOPs (leave it to "Joe" to come up with the most scathing way to critique ourselves) see this You Tube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X6HnOA88vw> "Hitler's Response to the CONOP Process."