Introduction to the Guide for Writing a SOP

Writing Standing Operating Instructions (SOPs) is something most of us have to do at one time or another in our military careers. When I had to write, my first SOP I was surprised to find that there was little in the way of published guidance on just how to do that and make it effective in the process. As a result, I did what most others have had to do. I just copied the format of an existing SOP and changed it to suit my needs.

While this approach does get the job done, it tends to leave a lingering doubt in your mind something along the lines of: did I do it right? By trial and error over the years I refined my SOP writing skills and became fairly good at it.

After opening the SOP Central Knowledge Collaboration Center (KCC) on Army Knowledge Online (AKO) I began a search to find a guide, or guides, on how to write a good SOP. I was lucky enough to find two good ones. One was a chapter of an admin procedures manual, author unknown, and the other was from the *21st TSC MAIT*. While both are very good, it would be nice to put them into a more user friendly and modern quick reference format which was tailored for use by any organization, command or unit.

I have taken the best of both of those documents and incorporated them, and a few of my own tips and experiences, into this single Microsoft Word Document you are reading.

I hope you find this guide useful in your military career. I only wish such a guide had been available to me when I was tasked to write a SOP for the first time.

Disclaimer: This Guide is *not* an approved official publication, and it is intended only as a handy reference on the subject for your use.

Constructive feedback on this guide is always welcome!

Regards;

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Definition and purpose of a SOP

SOPs are organizational tools, which provide a foundation for training new employees, for refreshing the memories of management and experienced employees, and for ensuring important procedures are carried out in a standard, specified way in routine or emergency situations.

- The acronym "SOP" stands for the term "standing operating procedures." A SOP describes and prescribes how a procedure is to be performed within an organization. It is a written guide indicating who (by job title) performs the various steps in the procedure and in what sequence the steps are accomplished. A well-written SOP is complete enough to advise new arrivals or attached units of the procedures followed in the command. The amount of detail depends on the complexity of the procedures and the state of training within the unit.
- SOPs are command administrative publications that issue instructions from a commander to his or her headquarters and subordinate elements. While giving a commander's guidance, they must agree with all current governing publications and directives. They should not be used to consolidate actions and procedures contained in other publications or documents available to the subordinate unit. The SOP, which gives guidance for routine, recurring actions, is similar to a Memorandum of Instruction, which gives instructions for a one-time event.
- The principal function of a SOP is to provide detailed, systematic guidance to employees who are required to carry out a certain procedure. It serves not only as a training aid but also as a means of helping to ensure the procedure is carried out in a standard, approved manner.
- Another important function of a SOP is to keep management informed about the way jobs are performed in areas under their supervision. A complete file of well-written, up-to-date SOPs is an indication of good management and provides instant access to information on functional details of the organization. This is of enormous benefit during inspections and management reviews, to say nothing of providing timely answers to unanticipated questions from superiors.
- Other functions of SOPs are less clear-cut but may be important in certain circumstances. For example, a SOP can be used as an administrative tool to decide where in an organization a function should be carried out, what materiel and personnel resources are required, and how much time is expended in carrying out the procedure once it is executed.

When is a SOP required or indicated?

Deciding if a SOP is required is the first step in the process. Do you really need one?

If any of the following criteria apply then a SOP is indicated:

- Whenever a procedure or an action within an organization is repetitive and is carried out in the same way each time.
- Whenever it is critically important procedure, no matter how seldom performed is carried out exactly according to details, with systematic instructions.
- Whenever there is, a need to standardize the way a procedure is carried out for ensuring quality control or system compatibility.
- When directed to do so by your commander or supervisor.

Steps in writing a SOP

- Gather and flow chart out your information using these steps:

  1. Create a time line of all events. Be thorough. The time line will become the heart of your "*Procedures*" paragraph.

2. Write a list of every person or group mentioned in your time line. List all things they do, to whom, when, and where. This list will become your "*Responsibilities*" paragraph.
3. Define special terms (if any) you have used that your readers might not understand. This will become your *"Definitions*" paragraph.
4. Indicate any paperwork required. This will become your "*Files*" paragraph.
5. List all publications that govern or guide the reader. This will become your "*References*" paragraph.
6. Write a summary that highlights your main points. This becomes your "Summary" paragraph.
7. Add "Purpose" and "Scope" paragraphs.

- Outline and arrange your information in this sequence:

  1. References.
  2. Purpose.
  3. Summary.
  4. Scope.
  5. Definitions.
  6. Responsibilities.
  7. Procedures.
  8. Files.

- Select a suitable format for the SOP to be written. See the "*Format of a SOP*" section of this guide.

- Write a complete *draft* of your SOP. Include online links to blank forms and other documents referred to in the SOP. In cases where no online link exists, include copies of that form or document in the draft. Most forms can be found at the Army Publishing Directorate at:

http://www.apd.army.mil/

- Review, edit, and rewrite your draft.

- Have someone else edit it, review your draft SOP, and incorporate any valid changes indicated by the reviewer into the final draft.

- Request the draft SOP is reviewed for administrative adequacy by the supervisor or the officer in charge. Incorporate any valid changes indicated by the reviewer into the final draft.

- Rewrite and proofread it again.

- Date and sign the SOP and then assign a file number, and distribute the new or revised SOP. The final copy should be signed both by the official responsible for preparing the SOP and by the Commander. Copies should be provided to supervisors and officers in charge of the immediate organization, and should be posted in a SOP file for ready reference.

Tips:

- Check to see if there is an existing SOP, which can be revised or updated.
- Gather information on the procedure from referenced sources and knowledgeable employees. When possible, contact other agencies performing similar functions to see if they have a SOP, and request a copy to use as a guide or source of ideas.
- Be clear. Avoid technical language the reader might misunderstand.

- Be brief. Cut out details even the new arrival doesn't need.
- Be complete. Give enough instructions to coordinate and carry out the procedures.
- Remember that the heart of a SOP is the content listed under the section entitled <u>PROCEDURES</u>. This part specifies what people do the job and what steps are required to perform the procedure in a prescribed manner.
- The most important feature of a good SOP is it communicates what is to be done in a clear, concise, and systematic manner. The person to whom it must communicate is typically the new employee who may have little or no experience with the procedure in question. Therefore, it is imperative the writer of a SOP figuratively place himself in the position of a new, inexperienced employee in order to appreciate what must be communicated and how to communicate it.
- The content of a SOP should be comprehensive in terms of how to get the procedure accomplished, but it should not encompass matters not directly relevant to this end. Listing responsibilities in a SOP is an irrelevant digression because it does not directly address the issue of how to get the procedure accomplished and exactly who is to do it.
- Perhaps the best advice on the content of a SOP is to ask yourself: Does the SOP answer the questions, Who? What? Where? When? How? If these questions are answered, it is complete. If these questions are not answered, revise it until it does in as clear and logical an order as possible.
- Write a descriptive title for your SOP. If you have many SOPs, consider numbering them.

  EXAMPLES:

  SUBJECT: SOP #6-1: Maintenance Management
  SUBJECT: SOP #3: M16 Rifle Ranges
  SUBJECT: SOP #1-89: NBC Chamber Exercise
  SUBJECT: SOP #6-89: Office Administration

Common mistakes made in writing SOPs

Here are some common mistakes to avoid when writing a SOP:

- General
  1. Don't stifle the initiative of subordinate commanders.
  2. Don't infringe on the prerogatives of subordinate commanders.
  3. Avoid vagueness in your SOP. What if the reader of the SOP cannot figure out exactly who (by job description) is required to carry out a step in the procedure and furthermore cannot determine precisely how it is to be carried out? Obviously, the SOP has failed in its prime objective, communication. This is why a prime function of the reviewer is to check to see if the writer has conveyed the message clearly.
  4. Avoid use of buzzwords, acronyms, abbreviations and other similar items. Consider using plain old English in place of these. If you must use such things be sure to spell them out the first time to use it and *never* assume the person reading the SOP already knows what it stands for. Example:

     Bad practice: AKO
     Good practice: Army Knowledge Online (AKO)

- Content.
  1. Omitting key information.
  2. Not listing thorough and specific responsibilities.
  3. Not listing thorough and specific procedures. Failure to clearly state who carries out which step in the procedure.
  4. The "<u>Who</u>" (by position not by name) is as important as the "<u>What.</u>"

5. Inclusion of steps or procedures performed by persons outside the organization. This information has no place in a SOP because it involves actions that are beyond the direct control of the organization. Include only those steps carried out by the employees in the immediate organization.
6. Not including a summary that highlights the key points.
7. Create lists when giving a series of instructions.

   WEAK: Section sergeants must ensure their sections clean all clean all weapons and field gear. They must also ensure drivers perform post-operational services on their vehicles.
   BETTER: Section Sergeants.
   a. Ensure sections clean all weapons and field gear.
   b. Ensure drivers perform post-operational services on their vehicles.

- Organization.
  1. Failing to list procedures in a chronological order.
  2. Creating paragraphs that are too long.
  3. Not using sub paragraphs and lists.
  4. Failing to maintain parallelism between the items in lists.

- Style.
  1. Not writing the responsibilities in imperative sentences that issue direct instructions.
  2. Not writing the procedures in declarative sentences that describe the events as they must occur.
  3. Shifting to the future tense (using "will" or "will be") unnecessarily.
  4. Use affirmative forms of expression. Indicate what people and units must do, not what they shouldn't do.

     WEAK: The trains will not accompany the brigade.
     BETTER: Trains remain in the assembly area until called forward.

5. Use the present tense, NOT the future tense. Avoid "will" and "will be." Also avoid "must" and "should."

   WRONG TENSE: Soldiers will turn in dirty linen every Wednesday.
   RIGHT TENSE: Soldiers turn in dirty linen every Wednesday.

6. Use the active voice when giving instructions.

   PASSIVE: The arms room locks must be checked hourly.
   ACTIVE: The CQ checks the arms room locks hourly.
   ACTIVE: Check the arms room locks hourly.

- Format.
  1. Failing to include continuing page headers and page numbers.
  2. Using improper margins and indentations.
  3. Using an incorrect signature block.

Format of a SOP

While there is no official fixed format for a SOP, other than a title for purposes of identification and utilization, here is a good format to use.

STANDARD PARAGRAPH HEADERS FOR THE SOP

1. **Paragraph 1: References**. List all publications that guide or govern the reader in this subject area (e.g., ARs, FM, other SOPs, policy memorandums, etc.). Use a separate subparagraph for each. Give the full title of each.

    a. To cite a publication, give the type of publication, its number, date of publication, and title.

    b. To cite correspondence, give the type of correspondence, office symbol, date, and subject.

    c. To cite meetings and telephone calls, list the type, the parties involved and their units, the date, and the subject.

    EXAMPLES:

    1. References.

        a. STP-21-1-SMCT, Oct 87, Soldier's Manual of Common Tasks, Skill Level 1.

        b. Memo, AFVI-S3, 6 Jan 89, subject: Bde Policy on Safety.

2. **Paragraph 2: Purpose**. Write a precise purpose statement that indicates what specific goal the publication serves. Don't merely say it announces an SOP. Word it using an infinitive verb phrase beginning "To . . . ." If it's already clear from the title, omit the purpose statement.

    EXAMPLES:

    2. Purpose. To define responsibilities and establish standing procedures for the conduct of M16 qualification ranges.

    2. Purpose. To define responsibilities and standing procedures for the set-up of the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC).

3. **Paragraph 3: Summary**. In a paragraph less than 1 inch deep, recap the main points of your document. Write it <u>after</u> you've written the "Responsibilities" and "Procedures" paragraphs. <u>Summarize</u> (don't introduce) the key points, but be precise. Write complete sentences in the present tense.

    EXAMPLE:

    3. Summary. Every time we run the NBC Chamber, the S3 tasks batteries to provide support personnel, and the Bn NBC NCO runs the exercise. Batteries conduct pre-training and transport their personnel to the NBC training site. Service Battery provides all logistical support.

4. **Paragraph 4: Scope**. State to whom the SOP applies and under what special conditions it applies.

    EXAMPLES:

    4. Scope. This SOP applies to all personnel assigned or attached.

    4. Scope. This SOP applies to all NBC defense teams during decontamination exercises.

5. **Paragraph 5: Definitions**. Define all terms your readers might not fully understand. If not needed, omit this paragraph.

6. **Paragraph 6: Responsibilities**. Focus here on WHO does WHAT. List precise duties for key persons or groups.

   a.   Specify WHOM you're addressing. Write a short title. EXAMPLE: Commander, Battery A.

   b.   Write imperative sentences as if addressing the person directly. Use the present tense and active voice. Start with an action verb. Avoid unneeded helping verbs such as "must," "will," or "will be."

   c.   Maintain parallelism in your lists. If you have an "a" or a "(1)", have a "b" or a "(2)".

   EXAMPLE:

   6.   Responsibilities.

      a.   Commander. Appoint a range OIC, a safety officer, and three safety NCOs three weeks in advance.

      b.   Range OIC.

         (1)   Coordinate all logistical support for the range: medical support, mess support, transportation, and warming tent.

         (2)   Supervise all aspects of the operation of the range per Range Control's SOP #4-89.

7. **Paragraph 7: Procedures**.

   a.   Focus here on the sequence of events to be followed. In chronological or topical order, describe exactly what happens. Indicate WHO does WHAT, WHEN, HOW, to WHOM, and in WHAT ORDER.

   b.   Write declarative sentences with a subject and a verb in the present tense and active voice. Describe what happens. EXAMPLE: On the day of firing, the supply sergeant provides a warming tent at the range. He also issues MREs and collects money from soldiers on separate rations.

   c.   Create new paragraphs or use enclosures to discuss miscellaneous administrative and logistical topics.

8. **Paragraph 8: Files**. If applicable, state what files or records must be kept.

   EXAMPLES:

   8.   Files. The Bn Safety Certification Officer maintains in the S3 office a file of all test results.

   8.   Files. The S3 maintains rosters of all personnel who qualified with their weapons.

9. **Authority Block**. At battalion level or higher, use an authority block (FOR THE COMMANDER, FOR THE DIRECTOR, etc.) if someone other than the commander, director, etc. will be signing it. Otherwise, omit it.

10. **Signature Block**.

   a.   Use the commander's (or director's, etc.) signature block.

   b.   If someone is authorized to sign for him or her, use the authority block and the signer's signature block. For example, an adjutant or assistant adjutant may sign at battalion level or higher if they use the authority line FOR THE COMMANDER.

   c.   Have battery commanders sign battery SOPs.

11. **Enclosures**. As needed, use enclosures for detailed discussions, tabular data, charts, statistics, figures, or illustrations. Assign them numbers.

SOP Example 1

 Page 1

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<u>3</u>   DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
                        Headquarters, 5th Battalion, 55th Field Artillery
                                 55th Armored Division
                           Fort Phillips, New York 11111-3333
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<u>4</u>   ACD-SS (310-2d)   27 Jan 89
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2
<u>3</u>   MEMORANDUM FOR All Battalion Personnel
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<u>2</u>   SUBJECT: SOP #11: Battalion Command Maintenance
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<u>3</u>   1.   Reference. Memo, ABCD-SS, 10 Nov 87, subject: SOP #10: Maintenance of Equipment.

2.   Purpose. To establish a weekly command maintenance period that devotes quality time and command emphasis to the care of our equipment.

3.   Summary. Starting 4 Feb, the battalion conducts command maintenance each Thursday from 0830 to 1500. Unit commanders announce detailed maintenance objectives ahead of time. Key leaders throughout the battalion give their personal attention to the maintenance period. The Bn XO coordinates the help from special staff sections.

4.   Scope. This SOP applies to all personnel assigned or attached to the battalion.

5.   Responsibilities.

   a.   Commanders.

      (1)   Three weeks in advance, outline specific plans and objectives for command maintenance, and list them on your training schedule.

      (2)   Emphasize these maintenance areas: vehicles, power generation equipment, weapons, NBC equipment, billets, TA-50, tentage, and mess equipment.

(3)   Conduct Thursday formations at 0800 and ensure the entire chain of command is present, visible, and actively involved throughout the maintenance period, 0830-1500.

b.   Battalion XO. Three days in advance, coordinate the activities of the Battalion Maintenance Section, Battalion Communications Section, the Forward Support Company, and Battalion Food Service personnel to assist units during command maintenance.

6.   Procedures.

a.   Planning for Command Maintenance.

(1)   Three weeks in advance, battery commanders plan command maintenance. They identify maintenance activities and objectives, and then list them on the training schedule.

Sample SOP

Page 2

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<u>8</u>   ABDC-SS (310-2d)
    SUBJECT: SOP #11: Battalion Command Maintenance
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<u>3</u>   (2)   Three days in advance, the battalion XO coordinates the support from the special staff sections to help the units.

b.   Sequence of Events for Thursday Command Maintenance.

(1)   At 0800, units form for command maintenance.

(2)   From 0830 to 1500, the battalion conducts its Command Maintenance Period. Units work to meet objectives set by their commanders. The entire chain of command closely supervises. Special staff sections help as directed by the Bn XO.

(3)   During Command Maintenance, our focus is on devoting quality time and command emphasis to the proper and thorough care of our equipment and facilities.

c.   Areas of Emphasis.

(1)   Vehicles.

(2)   Power generation equipment.

(3)   Weapons.

(4)   NBC equipment.

(5)   Billets.

(6)   TA-50.

(7)   Tentage.

(8)   Mess equipment.

d.   POC. MAJ Mechanic, 1-5555/5556.
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JEFFREY G. GOODWRENCH
                                          LTC, FA
                                          Commanding

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SOP Example 2

<u>Page 1</u>

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<u>3</u>   DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
                    Headquarters, 5th Battalion, 55th Field Artillery
                              55th Armored Division
                         Fort Phillips, New York 11111-3333
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<u>4</u>   ACD-SS (310-2d)   27 Jan 89
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2
<u>3</u>   MEMORANDUM FOR All Battalion Personnel
1
<u>2</u>   SUBJECT: SOP #11: Battalion Command Maintenance
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3   1.   Reference. Memo, ABCD-SS, 10 Nov 87, subject: SOP #10: Maintenance of Equipment.

2.   Purpose. To establish a weekly command maintenance period that devotes quality time and command emphasis to the care of our equipment.

3.   Summary. Starting 4 Feb, the battalion conducts command maintenance each Thursday from 0830 to 1500. Unit commanders announce detailed maintenance objectives ahead of time. Key leaders throughout the battalion give their personal attention to the maintenance period. The Bn XO coordinates the help from special staff sections.

4.   Scope. This SOP applies to all personnel assigned or attached to the battalion.

5.   Responsibilities.

     a.   Commanders.

          (1)   Three weeks in advance, outline specific plans and objectives for command maintenance, and list them on your training schedule.

          (2)   Emphasize these maintenance areas: vehicles, power generation equipment, weapons, NBC equipment, billets, TA-50, tentage, and mess equipment.

          (3)   Conduct Thursday formations at 0800 and ensure the entire chain of command is present, visible, and actively involved throughout the maintenance period, 0830-1500.

     b.   Battalion XO. Three days in advance, coordinate the activities of the Battalion Maintenance Section, Battalion Communications Section, the Forward Support Company, and Battalion Food Service personnel to assist units during command maintenance.

6.   Procedures.

     a.   Planning for Command Maintenance.

       (1)   Three weeks in advance, battery commanders plan command maintenance. They identify maintenance activities and objectives, and then list them on the training schedule.

Sample SOP

Page 2

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8   ABDC-SS (310-2d)
    SUBJECT: SOP #11: Battalion Command Maintenance
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2
3   (2)   Three days in advance, the battalion XO coordinates the support from the special staff sections to help the units.

    b.   Sequence of Events for Thursday Command Maintenance.

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       (2)   From 0830 to 1500, the battalion conducts its Command Maintenance Period. Units work to meet objectives set by their commanders. The entire chain of command closely supervises. Special staff sections help as directed by the Bn XO.

       (3)   During Command Maintenance, our focus is on devoting quality time and command emphasis to the proper and thorough care of our equipment and facilities.

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       (1)   Vehicles.

       (2)   Power generation equipment.

       (3)   Weapons.

       (4)   NBC equipment.

       (5)   Billets.

       (6)   TA-50.

       (7)   Tentage.

       (8)   Mess equipment.

    d.   POC. MAJ Mechanic, 1-5555/5556.
1
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5   JEFFREY G. GOODWRENCH
                       LTC, FA
                       Commanding

SOP Example 3

Page 1

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
Headquarters, 1st Battalion, 13th Field Artillery
213th Field Artillery Brigade
Fort Sill, Oklahoma, 73503-6000

ABCD-E (310-2d)   12 May 1989

MEMORANDUM FOR All Commanders, Executive Officers, and Staff Officers

SUBJECT: SOP #12: Battalion Readiness Council

1.   Reference. AR 220-1, Unit Status Reporting.

2.   Purpose. To establish routine procedures for a readiness council that ensures accurate monthly Unit Status Reports and Bn Priorities Lists.

3.   Summary. The Battalion Readiness Council meets monthly to gather and check administrative and logistical data relevant to our unit readiness. It prepares the monthly Unit Status Report and Bn Priorities List which the battalion and battery commanders later verify.

4.   Scope. This SOP applies to commanders, executive officers, and staff officers assigned or attached to this battalion.

5.   Definitions.

    a.   Bn Readiness Council (BRC). A framework for the battalion to improve reporting of our combat readiness and our potential problems in readiness. Members include the Bn XO, S1, S3, S4, BMO, CESO, and Btry XOs.

    b.   Bn Priorities List (BPL). A list of priorities in the areas of personnel, training, supply, and maintenance to improve combat readiness.

6.   Responsibilities.

    a.   Bn XO. As the Chairman of the BRC, convene, supervise, and report the results of monthly meetings of the BRC.

    b.   S1. Report on these personnel issues that adversely affect readiness:

        (1)   Shortages in grades, MOSs, and skill levels (projected to the 15th of the month and the next 30, 60, and 90 days beyond that).

        (2)   The 10 most critical personnel shortages (in order of priority).

    c.   S3. Report on these training issues that adversely affect readiness:

        (1)   Shortfalls in training (at present and projected to the next 30, 60, and 90 days) and problems in training that require special command emphasis.

Sample SOP

ABCD-E (310-2d)
SUBJECT: SOP #12: Battalion Readiness Council

       (2)   Our needs for on-the-job training and formal schooling for individual skills (e.g., armorer, NBC NCO) and for team skills (e.g., NBC teams, field sanitation teams).

    d.   S4. Report on the ten most critical shortages of equipment.

    e.   BMO and CESO.

       (1)   Report the Equipment Readiness rate (ER) and the Equipment Status rate (ES) for the past 30 days (as of the 15th of the current month).

       (2)   Report equipment usage (a listing of the most frequently used).

    f.   Btry XOs. Represent the interests of your batteries and verify data.

7.   Procedures.

    a.   The BRC meets monthly (or more often as necessary) at the time and place picked by the Bn XO.

    b.   Beforehand, BRC members collect and report data as described above.

    c.   At the meeting, they brief the Bn XO on the critical issues listed in paragraph 6 for their areas.

    d.   Then the council reviews all key data and issues affecting the readiness of the battalion. This produces the input for the monthly Unit Status Report (DA Form 2715).

    e.   Then the BRC develops the BPL.

    f.   Next, the Bn XO briefs the battalion and battery commanders on the products of the BRC meeting: the draft Unit Status Report and the BPL.

    g.   Finally, the commanders resolve any discrepancies and approve the Unit Status Report. They then discuss the BPL and plan how to implement it.

8.   Files. The Bn XO files Unit Status Reports (DA Form 2715) in the headquarters for one year under MARKS number 220-1a.

                               CARL C. CARLSON
                               LTC, FA
                               Commanding