Antitank missile gunners with 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, fire Javelin missile while conducting live-fire combat rehearsal during Fuji Viper 21.3, at Combined Arms Training Center, Camp Fuji, Japan, April 12, 2021 (U.S. Marine Corps/Jonathan Willcox)

Improving the Battle Rhythm to Operate at the Speed of Relevance

By Matthew Prescott

The art and science of decision-making begin with the establishment of an effective, efficient, and agile battle rhythm. Combat and stability operations throughout the past 20 years have enabled commanders and staffs to execute real-world operations based on established battle rhythms. Unfortunately, current operational-level exercises to evaluate joint force commands and their components in the U.S. Armed Forces and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization increasingly observe battle rhythms that do not effectively provide the commander and subordinates with timely information to make decisions.[1] Furthermore, our current joint force battle rhythm design involving numerous briefings, working groups, and boards does not provide the commander with timely analysis and recommendations given the speed and frequency of high-intensity operations. This article is intended for the commander or staff officer who has ever felt the pressure of a compacted battle rhythm and is interested in understanding why and how the battle rhythm is designed to drive the commander's decisionmaking process.

Personal observations from operational-level exercises, best practice reports from the Joint Staff J7, and lessons learned from the Joint Lessons

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Learned Information System reveal that many units enter exercises with fixed battle rhythms that fail to adapt to the complexities of modern warfare.[2] These scheduled battle rhythm events then feed into command-level boards—principally, a coordination and assessment board. However, high-intensity operations are not routine, and many observed headquarters do not account for the speed and frequency of enemy actions and changes in the operational environment (OE). During high-intensity operations, a flexible and agile battle rhythm is required to provide the commander with the best situational understanding of the OE and recommendations from the staff and subordinate commanders to support robust decisionmaking. If a headquarters' battle rhythm does not account for this type of conflict, multiple dilemmas can arise, such as an adversary maintaining the initiative, the commander's decisionmaking cycle remaining ahead of the staff's, or planning from subordinate and component commands outpacing their higher headquarters due to a lack of responsiveness. This article addresses this problem and recommends several ways to adjust the battle rhythm when a joint headquarters operates in high-intensity operations.

The Battle Rhythm

A *battle rhythm* is a deliberate cycle of command, staff, and unit activities intended to synchronize current and future operations.[3] A command's battle rhythm consists of a cyclic series of meetings (including working groups and boards), briefings, and other activities synchronized by time and purpose.[4] Ideally, the battle rhythms of all headquarters in the chain of command are nested within one another so that outputs of one meeting are available as inputs to higher or lower echelons. Inputs and outputs should logically support each other and decision requirements. A unit's battle rhythm manages the most important resource within the headquarters: the *time* of the commander and staff.[5] Regardless of the battle rhythm design, it must be developed to directly support the

commander's ability to make timely, well-informed decisions and to execute effective mission command.

Daily battle rhythm events traditionally consist of a morning and evening command-level update brief, joint effects and targeting meetings, and synchronization meetings among the joint functions to enable executable planned operations.[6] In low-intensity operations, where actions and effects take place at a slower rate, the battle rhythm may be more deliberate, with daily, weekly, and monthly working groups and boards. While the battle rhythm establishes a routine for a headquarters, the unit's battle rhythm is not fixed; commanders modify it as the situation evolves. In other words, the battle rhythm is the heartbeat of the headquarters and can speed up or slow down depending on the activity within the environment.

Left unchecked, a headquarters staff can determine multiple additional meetings that might be productive but not necessarily required to feed directly into the commander's decisionmaking process. These additional meetings should be avoided. If they persist, they inherently lead to time wasted and jam-packed days with the command group, staff principals, and action officers running to meetings throughout the day rather than conducting productive staff work. The desired coordination and staff interaction provided by these additional meetings is better solved by staff interface and collaboration during high-intensity operations. Furthermore, the negative impacts of a compacted battle rhythm go beyond a single unit echelon and affect subordinate units' ability to operate efficiently within a timely orders process. Failing to adhere to a disciplined battle rhythm results in everyone working harder, longer, and less effectively.[7]

Command-Level Update Briefs, Boards, and Working Groups

Daily update briefs provide analysis to the commander on information requirements within the short-term planning horizon. Typically, two command-level update briefs are held each day, with one briefing internal to the

headquarters and one with subordinate and component commands providing short-term horizon analysis and recommendations. The briefing is intended to be short, informative, and selective. A commander does not traditionally make decisions during these briefings but rather gains a current understanding of the OE. This does not preclude, however, the commander from issuing direction and guidance (D&G) for required adjustments within this planning horizon.

Commanders or headquarters establish boards, working groups, and planning teams to coordinate actions and solve problems. The primary difference between boards and working groups is the level of authority granted by the commander during these events. Commanders chair boards or grant decisionmaking authority to senior staff leaders within a specific functional area. Working groups coordinate action and develop recommendations for approval by the commander during a board. The number, type, composition, and frequency of boards, working groups, and planning efforts depend on the type of unit, echelon, and operation. This coordination is traditionally managed by the chief of staff. While some boards and working groups, such as the Information Operations Working Group, the Resource Coordination Board, and the Joint Targeting Coordination Board, are required regardless of the situation, others should be run only as the situation dictates. The challenge is to identify, based on the tempo of the conflict, which meetings are needed.

A board is a grouping of predetermined staff representatives with delegated decision authority for a particular purpose or function. There are two types of boards: command and functional. The command board's purpose is to gain guidance or a decision from the commander. The two principal command boards at the joint level are the Joint Coordination Board (JCB) and the Assessment Board (AB) and traditionally happen at different ends of a battle rhythm cycle. Decisions made from these command boards focus future effects,

actions, and assessment analysis across the joint force command.

The JCB, sometimes called the Commander's Decision Board, is the commander's principal decisionmaking meeting and traditionally occurs at the end of a battle rhythm cycle. Its aim is to direct future joint action, synchronize resources, issue command-level guidance across the echelons, and resolve disputes across the joint force. The JCB is an exhaustive review, covering the overall execution of the campaign. Analysis and recommendations from the staff and components are presented during the JCB, and the commander makes decisions about follow-on actions or adjustments to the plan issued to subordinate commands via a fragmentary order. Outputs from the JCB refine products such as the commander's critical information requirements (CCIR), decision support matrices, requests to higher headquarters, targeting and the defended asset lists, and risk management worksheets. The conclusion of the JCB allows the transition into the next battle rhythm cycle, beginning with the AB and follow-on working groups and functional boards to support the next JCB. The minimum composition of the JCB is the joint force commander; the chief of staff; subordinate commanders (in person, by video teleconference, or represented by their senior liaison officers); the political, strategic communications, and legal advisors; the joint operations center director; and other individuals as required.

The AB is the second principal meeting for the commander and traditionally occurs at the beginning of a battle rhythm cycle. The AB primarily informs the commander if the operation is being conducted according to the plan and if the joint force is achieving desired results. Routinely the AB will recommend what effects or decisive conditions should be the focus for the upcoming battle rhythm cycle. This provides focus to the Joint Staff and subordinate commands. A typical agenda divides the operational assessment across three distinct planning horizons: short, mid, and long term. However, to make this command board as effective and concise as possible, the

operational assessment should focus only on the priority of analysis provided by the commander's D&G during the previous JCB. The desired output is to seek the commander's endorsement of the staff's operational assessment and recommended adjustments to the plan. A commander has the option to either make decisions during this board or wait to issue additional D&G at the next JCB. The desired composition of the AB mirrors the JCB.

Three Considerations for a Unit Battle Rhythm

Developing a battle rhythm is a top-down process, and a strategic-level headquarters must develop and implement its battle rhythm first and quickly to subordinate units. The aim of the higher headquarters battle rhythm is driven by the information necessary for military and political leaders to make decisions. Without these information requirements, driven by the higher headquarters, a subordinate unit or component command is unable to design its battle rhythm to answer these requirements and focus activities within the battle rhythm cycle to coordinate and assess its military actions.

An additional consideration within a command's battle rhythm is the targeting cycle that synchronizes effects and actions in all domains and component commands. Complementing the targeting cycle are the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) requirements to plan and execute joint effects. At the joint level, there are risks associated with accelerating the targeting cycle due to the required planning, ISR requirements, resource allocation, and target approval process that must be coordinated and synchronized prior to an operation taking place. The air tasking order is a good example of a cyclic process that sequences required resources to execute effects within a joint operation that has negative consequences if not synchronized properly or sped up.

The third consideration is a joint force commander's planning horizon focus. At the strategic and operational levels, the desired timing of an action drives the

orders process and, subsequently, a battle rhythm. These levels are responsible for shaping the environment for future tactical actions, which, if not properly timed and resourced, will prevent the joint force from executing orders successfully. Military and political considerations, particularly with sustainment, force protection, and civil-military cooperation, all require strategic- and operational-level involvement to shape the environment for tactical units. Shaping desired effects, sometimes known as *notice-to-effect*, takes time and even in high-intensity operations realistically cannot take place within 72 hours. Therefore, a 96- to 120-hour cyclic battle rhythm is appropriate to coordinate and assess the joint effects required to properly shape a high-intensity environment.

The Essence of Decisionmaking and Staying in Front of the Commander

In early 2018, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford stressed that leaders in the U.S. military "must be prepared to make decisions at the speed of relevance. . . . We must further develop leaders capable of thriving at the speed of war."[8] As the speed and complexity of war increase, the requirement for faster decisionmaking resides at every level of war and "is as applicable, and dangerous, to battlefield commanders as it is to strategic leaders."[9] In high-intensity operations, speed of action requires timely decisions and adjustments to the joint force plan. As mission command systems improve and information-gathering sources increase, a consistent challenge for a staff is determining the relevant information to analyze for decisionmaking. In contemporary military operations, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley notes that "the sheer volume and speed of conflicting information can easily bring decisionmaking to a screeching halt."[10] Normally, proactive commanders do not like to wait for the staff to methodically develop and issue orders to lower echelons. In this environment, the commander often can get ahead of

Coast Guardsmen assigned to Tactical Law Enforcement Team 109, Cape Cod Maritime Safety Security Team, and Sailors assigned to Freedom-variant littoral combat ship USS *Sioux City* participate in noncompliant vessel pursuit tactics exercise in rigid-hull inflatable boat, April 1, 2021, Atlantic Ocean (U.S. Navy/Marianne Guemo)

the staff's decisionmaking cycle. This is not a poor reflection on the staff, but rather falls within the nature of the commander's desire to make timely decisions and execute effective mission command for subordinates.

In most cases, the commander will always have a better situational understanding than does the staff due to his or her experience, the numerous interactions he or she has had with the higher headquarters, and battlefield circulation with subordinate units. Over the course of these multiple higher and lower echelon engagements, a commander may receive new guidance or issue numerous new tasks to subordinate commands that the staff may not be aware of until the commander's return. Using modern command and control technology and available information systems should minimize the lag time between a commander directing subordinates and updating the staff. Once the staff is informed on the outputs of these engagements, it should immediately analyze the new information, update staff estimates, and ensure the entire headquarters is aware of new requirements.

Although the commander may desire to make an immediate decision, there must be a balance between the effect the commander wants to achieve versus the relevance of that decision within a given time. Within complexity there is an art and science to decisionmaking. Simply acting faster than an adversary may not achieve the desired effect if there are gaps in the commander's situational understanding. Although warfare is arguably more complex today, historically the need to make high-quality decisions faster than an adversary was a fundamental tenet for success.[11] John Boyd, a U.S. fighter pilot during the Korean War, developed his OODA (observe-orient-decide-act) loop decisionmaking theory precisely to outthink an adversary. He believed that by *observing*, *orienting*, *deciding*, and *acting* faster, one can exploit opportunities to defeat an adversary, and this theory arguably applies to all levels of war.[12]

Boyd's theory has theoretical linkages with the purpose of designing a battle rhythm. But within a complex environment, Boyd's theory is effective only when the commander has a true understanding and perspective of what the enemy is doing and the cause and effect of those actions within the OE. Furthermore, if subordinate and component commands do not have

the capability to "act faster," based on resources, geography limitations, and competing tasks, then acceleration could increase the risk to one's force. When discussing opportunities and time-sensitive decisions, General Douglas MacArthur famously stated, "The history of failure in war can almost be summed up in two words: too late."[13]

Instilling the commander's true understanding should be the goal when developing the battle rhythm. Consistent gaps in a headquarters' understanding are indicators that its battle rhythm is not effective. Continuously updating staff estimates and enemy threat templates can assist the commander with understanding friendly and enemy capabilities, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. In addition, assessments that determine what the headquarters has learned from previous actions enable better judgment by the commander. Covering this relevant analysis during the daily update brief will increase the commander's understanding, enable better decisionmaking, and minimize risk.

One method by which the plans section can remain ahead of the commander's decisionmaking cycle is to use the commander's critical information

U.S. Army paratroopers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, alongside French paratroopers from 8 Regiment Parachutiste D'Infanterie de Marine, 11 Brigade Parachutiste, conduct airborne assault onto Hohenburg Drop Zone as part of Exercise Rock Topside II, at Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, March 6, 2021 (U.S. Army/John Yountz)

requirements to anticipate future planning requirements and decisions. Ongoing CCIR and assumptions, analyzed and approved by the commander, should already have branch plans developed based on the likelihood they could happen. As the situation evolves in favor of or against the joint force command, a disciplined staff should anticipate future actions and decisions the command should make. CCIR and the decision support matrix both assist with this anticipation. To remain ahead of the commander's decisionmaking cycle and ensure that decisions flow seamlessly down through the echelons to remain at the speed of relevance, branch plans should include "draft" changes in task organization and in synchronization and troop-to-task matrices.[14] Once the situation dictates a decision by the commander, these prearranged planning products allow the staff to immediately finalize and issue the necessary orders to

any subordinate component commands and minimize the friction of a commander being ahead of his or her staff. Using unit liaison officers will assist in allowing parallel planning with subordinate commands to minimize the notice-to-effect lag time.

Three Recommendations for Improving the Battle Rhythm in High-Intensity Operations

Focus Command-Level Daily Update Briefs to Describe Only the Information a Commander Needs to Know Within the Short-Term Planning Horizon. A concise update brief will keep the commander's attention on providing D&G to assist the staff with making adjustments to the current plan. Every staff principal should not be required to brief if their analysis does not directly assist with the commander's understanding or assist in synchronizing the conduct of the operation. Blending current operational

assessments into the daily update briefings, while ensuring it is focused to answer command-level questions and understanding, will negate the need for short-term assessments during the AB.

Combine the JCB and AB. Although the JCB and AB have different purposes and take place at different times during a unit's battle rhythm, they fundamentally strive to provide the commander with analysis to understand the environment and make decisions. Since both boards require staff-wide collaboration to be effective, the Joint Coordination and Assessment boards should be combined to synthesize this analysis. If the AB explains what needs to be done and the JCB provides the commander with options detailing how it can be accomplished, then combining these two command boards saves time in producing orders and can reduce the battle rhythm cycle. To further streamline the analysis presented in the board, the operational

assessment portion should focus only on the commander's priority of analysis in the mid- to long-term planning horizon. Under this construct, the deputy chief of staff for operations or the J3 should lead this planning effort and direct the necessary working groups across the joint functions to achieve the needed inputs of this singular command board.

Build a Culture Across the Staff That Promotes Interface and Collaboration. To build this culture and minimize stovepiping, use effective collaboration methods rather than scheduled meetings to develop staff inputs. Decision support is enhanced when functional expertise from across the staff is brought together via cross-functional cells to enable unity of effort and direct support to the commander's decisionmaking cycle.[15] Effective cross-functional staff integration will minimize meetings and working groups within a command that do not feed directly into command-level boards. This recommendation can be achieved only if the command group makes this a priority and grants the necessary authorities for staff members to speak on behalf of their respective staff principal. One effective method to create this culture is by locating functional areas such as intelligence, operations, planning, sustainment, and assessments in close proximity to one another. Locating these groups in one area within the headquarters and not distinguishing them as separate staff sections with their own internal meetings should naturally build a cohesive relationship.

Conclusion

The current joint force battle rhythm design involving coordination and assessment boards does not provide the commander with timely analysis and recommendations given the speed and frequency of high-intensity operations. Current designs of battle rhythms involving numerous boards and supporting working groups are tailored to—and should be used only in—low-intensity operations, where changes to the environment occur at a much slower rate.

The strategic-level headquarters must define the character of a conflict

and quickly identify the military- and political-level information requirements while directly supporting the strategic commander's ability to make decisions and execute effective mission command. Therefore, a battle rhythm should be constructed on a hierarchical basis, by managing the time of the staff and commander to interact with higher and subordinate commands. Once complete, the operational-level headquarters can develop its battle rhythm to best answer information requirements and organize the cyclic events required to drive the conduct of operations.

Although not necessarily fixed, the chief of staff should be cautious about making any major alterations to the battle rhythm unless there are clear gaps in the headquarters' overall understanding of the OE. Two broad principles should apply when developing a unit's battle rhythm: It should not be a slave to the rate of information flow, and it should maintain a rate of effectiveness and efficiency that enables understanding across the headquarters and decisionmaking by the commander. It is the headquarters that controls the battle rhythm, not the battle rhythm that controls the headquarters. In high-intensity operations, the battle rhythm should remain adaptive based on the operational tempo and ensure it remains ahead of an adversary and, when possible, the commander's decisionmaking cycle. **JFQ**

Notes

[1] U.S. Army Combined Arms Center Headquarters, *MCTP Trends in a Decisive Action Warfighter Exercise* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Mission Command Training Program, January 14, 2015), 9; U.S. Army Combined Arms Center Headquarters, *WFX 16-4 CJTF/CJFLCC Initial Impression Report* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2016); Milton Hileman, *JFLCC/OSD Bilateral Command Post Exercise Report* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2015).

[2] Personal observations are drawn from my experience as an operational planning advisor observing North Atlantic Treaty Organization operational-level command post exercises Trident Jackal 19, Trident Jupiter 19, and Steadfast Jupiter-Jackal 20. See also Deployable

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[3] Field Manual 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, May 2014), 1–12, available at <https://www.milsci.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.mili.d7/files/sitefiles/fm6_0.pdf>.

[4] Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 6-0.5, *Command Post Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, March 2017), 3–6.

[5] Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff J7, *Joint Headquarters Organization, Staff Integration, and Battle Rhythm*, 9.

[6] Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, October 22, 2018), 3–14.

[7] ATP 3-92, *Corps Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, April 2016), 2–8.

[8] Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., "The Character of War and Strategic Landscape Have Changed," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2nd Quarter 2018), available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89_2-3_Dunford.pdf>.

[9] Joe Dransfield, "How Relevant Is the Speed of Relevance? Unity of Effort Toward Decision Superiority Is Critical to Future U.S. Military Dominance," *The Strategy Bridge*, January 13, 2020, available at <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/1/13/how-relevant-is-the-speed-of-relevance-unity-of-effort-towards-decision-superiority-is-critical-to-future-us-military-dominance>.

[10] Mark A. Milley, speech, 1:27:02 video, at Dwight D. Eisenhower Luncheon, Association of the U.S. Army, Arlington, VA, October 4, 2016, available at <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/485996/ausa-2016-dwight-david-eisenhower-luncheon>.

[11] Dransfield, "How Relevant Is the Speed of Relevance?"

[12] Colin S. Gray, *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 2012), 205–206; Robert R. Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1991), 51.

[13] Robert R. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 107.

[14] Dransfield, "How Relevant Is the Speed of Relevance?"

[15] Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff J7, *Joint Headquarters Organization, Staff Integration, and Battle Rhythm*, 1.