

War Games!

By CPT Benjamin Harrell

Using Tabletop Exercises to Prepare Platoon Leadership for Field Artillery Collective Training



Left: An example of a hasty terrain model used to drive platoon-level tabletop exercise. Center: Using models and terrain models better enables participants to visualize each element of their platoon in space relative to different problems presented by terrain. Right: 1LTs Kenya Medlock, Jonathan Sumrall and Matthew Keith of the 1-161st FA work together to plan a simulated platoon movement in preparation for upcoming artillery tables.

Introduction

Collective training seeks to galvanize the proficiency attained at lower levels by putting units in situations where subordinate elements or individuals must perform their functions in synchronization in a live or simulated environment. For a Field Artillery platoon, this means that howitzer sections, the fire direction center and ammunition sections must work in unison under the supervision of the platoon leader (PL) and platoon sergeant (PSG) to achieve proficiency in their platoon battle tasks.

For new PLs, balancing the broad range of requirements while attaining the level of proficiency necessary to function in a collective training event can be a daunting task. New Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC) graduates must overcome a learning curve to convert theory into practical application. In the constant grind of competing requirements ranging from the administrative to leader tasks necessary to manage readiness, it is easy to lose sight of your own personal preparedness. Leaders must fight to train themselves with the same emphasis that they fight for their Soldiers to train.

By using tabletop exercises (TTXs) to scale down collective training, commanders can train PLs and PSGs more frequently and using less resourcing to ensure greater proficiency in collective training tasks such as those found in Artillery Tables (AT) VII through XII. The Kansas Army National Guard's 1st Battalion, 161st Field Artillery (1-161st FA) leveraged this model to conduct two training sessions with PLs to prepare them for Operation Kansas Thunder (OKT) in June 2024.

Tabletop Exercise Concept

Leading up to OKT, the 1-161st FA conducted two training sessions dedicated to preparing newly graduated lieutenants to be successful during AT XII. These events were named "LT100" and "LT200." LT100 was generally academics, discussing the bridge from skills learned and how to convert those skills into professional judgement and practical application. It was designed to revisit doctrine and fieldcraft skills that new lieutenants may be deficient in and covered doctrine specific to the battalion (ATP 3-09.50 and ATP 3-09.70). LT200 subsequently was a TTX in which lieutenants were given a modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) platoon's worth of vehicles in the form of small models, a three-dimensional terrain model roughly mirroring the training areas that would

be seen at OKT and a red team comprised of representatives from the battalion S2 and S3 to act as an opposing force (OPFOR). Each scenario forced the PLs to plan and execute the battle tasks assessed during AT VII through XII, including reconnaissance, selection and occupation of position (RSOP), tactical movements and emplacement.

The PLs had time to work through their troop leading procedures (TLPs) as a collaborative group and then issued their plan to the AS3, who acted as the mediator for the exercise. The OPFOR meanwhile would develop their own MSEL injects based on the platoon's situation. PLs maneuvered their units across the model in rounds while giving the red team opportunities to react and create engagements and dilemmas to force rapid decision making. Finally, the red team and the PLs pulled together in between iterations to hot wash the plan and determine refinements to the planning process, with emphasis on referring to the training & evaluation outlines prescribed in Training Circular 3-09.8.

These training events profoundly benefited the PLs by allowing them to collaborate and use their collective technical knowledge to enhance their understanding of platoon maneuver and 'artillerize' their foundational understanding of TLPs, which they may not have exercised since before BOLC. The exercise builds understanding of the performance measures that will be evaluated during tables, develops confidence in the requisite planning and informs preparations for the live iterations of training with Soldiers present.

The outcome of this training was validated the following summer during OKT as the battalion conducted AT XII. What was observed was a high level of preparedness in regard to execution of TLPs, more detailed and logical planning and fluency in briefing the plan to the platoons. At the conclusion of OKT, all PLs that participated in the TTX successfully completed AT XII, which was internally evaluated by the battalion master gunner, with a higher degree of proficiency and performance than those who did not.

Scalability and Applicability to Larger Units

This same framework can be applied to a wide variety of tasks and events seen within an artillery battalion, such as an R3SP or jump TOC. It can also be applied outside the battalion and scaled up for the FA brigade, or used within a maneuver battalion, forward support company or any other formation that will find itself forward deployed. The concept remains the same regardless of the type of unit conducting the training.

Units can leverage TTXs to conduct home station training, particularly Army National Guard and Army Reserve units who can only expect around 39 training days a year and must capitalize on their limited time. Another potential application could be a fire support coordination exercise (FSCX) in which battery commanders and the S3 maneuver their elements through the position areas for artillery (PAAs) in a given terrain in support of given FA tasks while making decisions on maneuver, resupply and protection. The critical piece that must scale with the audience is the presence of the red team OPFOR forcing the participants to make on-the-fly decisions and react to scenarios, otherwise the event will essentially be a rehearsal of concept (ROC) drill.

In this example, the described materials were rudimentary, using commercial modeling materials from a hobby store and 3D-printed representations of each piece of equipment. Over time the kit has been refined to provide more options for terrains and vehicles. It remains portable and can be used in conjunction with a sand table to create elevation differences and more immersive terrain.

Conclusion

Incorporating TTXs into the training regimen of FA platoons proves to be a valuable, resource-efficient method for developing junior leaders' proficiency and confidence in collective tasks. By scaling down the complexity of live training into a controlled, collaborative environment, TTXs like LT100 and LT200 equip PLs with the tools necessary to navigate the challenges of synchronization, tactical planning and rapid decision-making.

These exercises not only enhance technical and tactical understanding but also foster a culture of shared learning and professional development that benefits the entire organization. With minimal resources and a focus on realism, this approach is both scalable and adaptable, making it applicable across various echelons and formations within the Army. As leaders continue to seek innovative ways to prepare their units for the complexities of the modern battlefield, the tabletop exercise model stands out as a practical and impactful solution.

CPT Benjamin Harrell serves concurrently at the KSARNG G3 as CUOPS Officer and at the 130th FAB as the Lethal Effects Officer. He previously served as the AGR Training Officer and AS3 of the 1-161st Field Artillery. He has also served as a Platoon Leader and FDO in a Paladin Battery, as well as a Brigade S1 OIC. Prior to commissioning, he served as a Fire Direction Section Chief in the 2-130th Field Artillery (HIMARS), including a deployment to Syria in support of Operation Inherent Resolve in 2017-18.