

# Centralized vs. Decentralized Fires in the Brigade Combat Team

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## Introduction

This paper aims to provide doctrinal references and lessons learned for the Fires enterprise at the Brigade Combat Team level conducting Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO). The units of focus for this paper are the Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Fires Support enterprise down to the individual Forward Observers (FOs), the Direct Support (DS) FA Battalion (BN), and the Firing Battery Fire Direction Centers (FDCs). The primary audience for this paper is Brigade (BDE) and BN Fire Support Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), Field Artillery Battalion Staff Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers, Firing Battery Commanders, and First Sergeants. This paper is a collaboration of key developmental billet complete Observer Coach Trainers (OC/Ts) with an aggregate of 70 rotations of experience at the National Training Center (NTC) Fort Irwin, CA.

The three areas of focus consist of defining centralized/decentralized fires and dispelling common fallacies, discussing when either should be implemented along with associated prerequisites necessary for higher degrees of decentralized control and providing examples of successful implementation of decentralized control. Common themes observed have been a need for more understanding and trust in the fires enterprise to execute a decentralized control of fires due to lack of detailed planning, insufficient training, or understanding of the degrees of control that can be implemented before arriving at NTC. This paper seeks to provide doctrinal references and common successful Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs) to be utilized by the BCT Fires enterprise to enable the maneuver win the BDE's first fight.

## Defining Centralized vs. Decentralized Control

In order to adequately define centralized and decentralized control of fires, it is essential to discuss them regarding the acronym AWIFM-N, which describes the principles of Fire Support execution (FM 3-09 pg. 1-15 para. 1-40). Specifically, this paper will focus on "weighting the main effort" and "maximizing feasible centralized control". Doctrine defines centralized or decentralized as those that need to meet certain criteria to be considered one or the other. FM 3-09 discusses centralized and decentralized control as a spectrum in which the tactical situation will dictate the optimum degree of control necessary for a given operation.

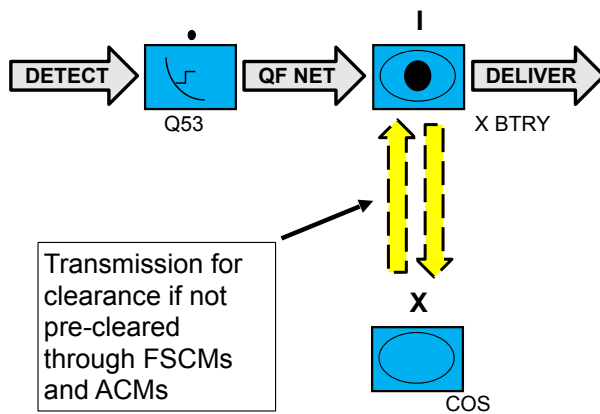
Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that doctrine interprets centralized and decentralized differently depending on which echelon is being discussed. At the BCT echelon ATP 3-09.42 discusses options for sensor to shooter linkages with varying degrees of control (ATP 3-09.42 pg. 5-30 to pg. 5-33); this is the common understanding of the methods of control. However, at the FA BN level, ATP 3-09.23 refers to centralized and decentralized control as two forms of tactical fire direction. Centralized control is Battery operations, and all fire requests are routed through the BCT Fires Cell (FC) and the FA BN. Decentralized refers to platoon-based operations and the use of data linkages and quickfire channels that bypass some or all of the normal intervening operations facilities (ATP 3-09.23 pg. 5-3 para. 5-15). No matter the echelon, the two methods of control are purposely referred to as a spectrum to allow the fires enterprise the flexibility of combining varying degrees of control at different echelons to create timely, accurate fires and enable the maneuver to defeat the enemy where the commander chooses.

The two major fallacies attributed to centralized and decentralized control are that of Direct Support (DS) and positioning guidance. While the DS relationship is a degree of decentralization, it is at the far end of the control spectrum. It is a common misconception that inside a BCT, decentralized

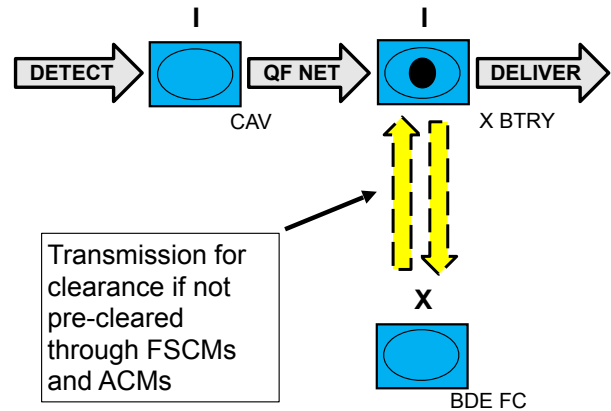


## Decentralization Examples

### Counter Battery Quickfire Net



### CAV Quickfire Net



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*Examples of Successful Decentralized Control Options*

control means a maneuver battalion will get a DS Battery or platoon during an operation. Other measures, such as quickfire nets and appropriate priority of fires, can be utilized to provide timely fires while mitigating the risk associated with a DS Battery. The second fallacy concerns the FA BN and the positioning guidance of its firing units. Decentralization of control within the FA BN does not mean the batteries determine the platoon positioning guidance. Put simply, it involves the FA BN in producing a more detailed plan to determine the positioning of platoons, not just the batteries. Decentralization of control is not just pushing responsibilities to lower headquarters (HQs) but also producing detailed, permissive plans that enable the elimination of nodes in the kill chain to expedite fires.

### Centralization vs Decentralization in the Offense and Defense

When determining the degree of centralized or decentralized control, FM 3-09 provides guidelines for whether it is a defensive or offensive operation. Higher degrees of centralized control are normally more appropriate in the defense since the enemy has the initiative. Therefore, the commander cannot afford to dissipate fires capabilities on secondary priorities before determining the enemy's main effort. In the offense, the degree of control can lean more decentralized because friendly forces have the initiative and will have a greater need for responsive fires (FM 3-09 pg. 3-37 para. 3-96). These guidelines nest directly with the aforementioned tenets of AWIFM-N; "weighting the main effort" and "maximizing feasible centralized control".

### Prerequisites for Decentralized Control

BCT after BCT, the Wolf Team observed a tendency to higher degrees of centralized control of fires in both the offense and defense. The lack of successful decentralized control of fires is due to two factors: a lack of training appropriate sensor-to-shooter linkages and a lack of detailed, permissive planning.

Decentralized control of fires is observed to be avoided because the trust has not been built with

a proper training progression. Additionally, if the BCT does attempt decentralization of control for the first time at NTC, it is likely to be unsuccessful, which further degrades trust with maneuver commanders and within the fires enterprise. Critical to the ability to deliver decentralized fires is the fires enterprise's ability to build and maintain the necessary data linkages or lines of communication and train them prior to executing at NTC. A regular, robust Digital Sustainment Training (DST) plan, preferably signed by the BCT commander, is essential in giving the Fire Supporters and the FA BN FDCs the necessary repetitions to be successful. This DST plan must be used to identify Command and Control (C2) requirements and shortfalls of participating units to give the BDE FSO, FSCoord, and BCT commander a realistic picture of what decentralized degree of control the BCT can implement. Additionally, although these sensor-to-shooter linkages are decentralized, they could have to be resourced by echelons not in the linkage to ensure communications. A prime example would be utilizing a BDE retransmission team to ensure a quickfire net is viable at the extended distances projected during the conflict. After validation of decentralization capability through DST, the BCT Fires enterprise should use the pre-existing Artillery Table progression or company/BN CALFEXs to demonstrate competency and build trust.

Once mutual trust in a BCT fires enterprise's capability to decentralize fires is built, emphasis must be placed on creating a permissive battlefield to employ them. First, the supported units must have Fire Support Coordination Measures (FSCMs) and Air Coordination Measures (ACMs) that ensure air space remains clear for the firing unit or allows for expedient clearing of air space. The sensor and shooter must understand the coordinating altitude (CA) and the range at which the decentralized firing unit breaks the CA. Additionally, supported units must efficiently provide ground clearance through accurate, common operating picture and permissive FSCMs. The second variable in achieving effective decentralized fires is disseminating and understanding the High Pay-off Target List, Attack Guidance Matrix, and Target Selection Standards (HPTL-AGM-TSS or HAT). Too often, OC/Ts observe the trend of BCTs attempting to implement a quickfire net straight from sensor to shooter without setting those subordinate units up for success. Centralized planning at the BDE must be utilized to make the battlefield permissive.

## Conclusion

Centralized and Decentralized control is a spectrum of varying degrees of control that the mission determines. Centralized control lends it to be used in defensive operations because of the flexibility to mass fires that the commander retains. The responsiveness of more decentralized fires allows commanders to seize opportunities created by taking the initiative in offensive operations. The observed trend is centralized fires in the BCT. Trust built through robust training of alternate kill chains and detailed, permissive planning has proven to enable maneuver to defeat the enemy where the BDE chooses.

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