Staff Processes in Large-scale Combat Operations Part 1: The Rhythm of the Battle

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Introduction

Imagine a scenario where a division executing a wet gap crossing has just lost 50 percent of its bridging assets. The division commander is with the division's tactical command post and is trying to pull his brigade commanders and staff up on the net to discuss options. He needs information and a plan now. Glancing at the division battle rhythm, the next division course of action development working group is not for another three hours and the fragmentary order and other fighting products will not be published for another 14 hours. This timeline does not support the commander or the staff.

For the past two decades the operational environment afforded divisions the luxury of not having to move their command posts. An enduring mission allowed large numbers of staff officers and noncommissioned officers to conduct a multitude of meetings, working groups, and boards, along with the time and talent to execute these types of battle rhythms. As the Army continues to shift its focus and adapt to fight and win in multidomain, large-scale combat we must change our processes so that commanders are able to make informed decisions any time of day. A robust, rigid, and highly structured battle rhythm with many boards, bureaus, cells, centers, and working groups (B2C2WGs) as well as other staff events may support staff processes in a static environment. However, operations in competition and large-scale combat demand a battle rhythm less reliant on a full suite of meetings on a rigid schedule. A robust battle rhythm may support staff processes, but a battle has a rhythm of its own that ebbs and flows between offensive and defensive operations, periods of high and low intensity, and a relentlessly changing situation across every domain. Even doctrine acknowledges that battle rhythms change during operations.

The battle rhythm changes during execution as operations progress. For example, early in the operation a commander may require a daily "plans" update briefing. As the situation changes, the commander may only require "plans" update every three days.[1]

How do we enable division commanders to fight in synchronization with this "rhythm of the battle" and exercise the art of command while still allowing the staff to provide the analysis and science of control that the commander needs at any given time? To win in large-scale combat, divisions require agile battle rhythms that support informative and collaborative running estimates to empower decision-makers to make timely and risk-informed decisions that maximize the effects of all elements of combat power at the decisive place and time. This publication is the first in a series that will build on this discussion and explore related issues in detail. It will provide recommendations for commanders and staffs to manage information, talent,

and authorities in a way that maximizes meetings and planning efforts when the situation permits but minimizes meetings when the situation is changing too rapidly for rigid meeting schedules to keep pace. Those recommendations are:

- Adapt the battle rhythm to the operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and maximize meetings and boards during periods of low OPTEMPO (e.g., when the division is in assembly areas prior to crossing the line of departure or when the division has completed a series of offensive operations and is transitioning to the defense and will be relatively static to facilitate robust planning).
- Develop running estimates that feed any possible information requirement so that when a meeting is not possible, people can still use the division's running estimates as inputs to their processes in a less structured staff environment.
- Empower decision makers to reduce the division's dependency on one person's ability to make decisions at any given time.

Flexible Battle Rhythm Development

Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, 1 October 2022; FM 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, 16 May 2022; and FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, May 2022, emphasize that battle rhythms change as operations progress and include a cycle of activities to synchronize operations. However, observed trends indicate that units strictly interpret existing doctrine, especially doctrine specific to each warfighting function, and therefore believe a robust and rigid battle rhythm is necessary to allow for shared understanding, synchronization, and decision-making.[2] FM 3-60, *Army Targeting*, 11 August 2023, FM 4-0 *Sustainment*, and Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-37 *Protection,* 10 January 2024, are among the doctrinal publications advocating for working groups and boards to enable effective operations. This article is not arguing that such meetings in a synchronized battle rhythm are not effective in and of themselves, but it does advocate for a flexible and judicious execution of such meetings in accordance with the natural rhythm of the battle. Rigidly adhering to a set number of and times for meetings often does not facilitate timely decision-making in the fast pace of large-scale combat. A more flexible interpretation of existing warfighting function doctrine which emphasizes the timeliness of accurate information provided to the commander, not a rigid series of meetings to provide that information, will better serve units executing large-scale combat operations. For example, when a division is in a planning cycle during a period of relatively low activity, it can execute the full suite of meetings, working groups, and boards to plan, produce orders, rehearse, and prepare for operations. When the division transitions to the execution phase of an offensive operation, it may minimize meetings and function with just one or two scheduled commander touchpoints per day with the staff and the subordinate units (e.g., a battle update brief [BUB] and commander's update assessment [CUA]). The division would prosecute the fight using the orders that have already been published and use those two primary touchpoints to assess and adjust as necessary. When the division transitions to the defense and begins to consolidate gains, it may be possible to return to a denser battle rhythm including more deliberate planning.

Figure 1 illustrates a way that a division could expand and contract its processes based on the OPTEMPO and ability to conduct meetings.

Note: The division's requirements to its higher headquarters and obligations to produce orders and products for its subordinate units do not change.
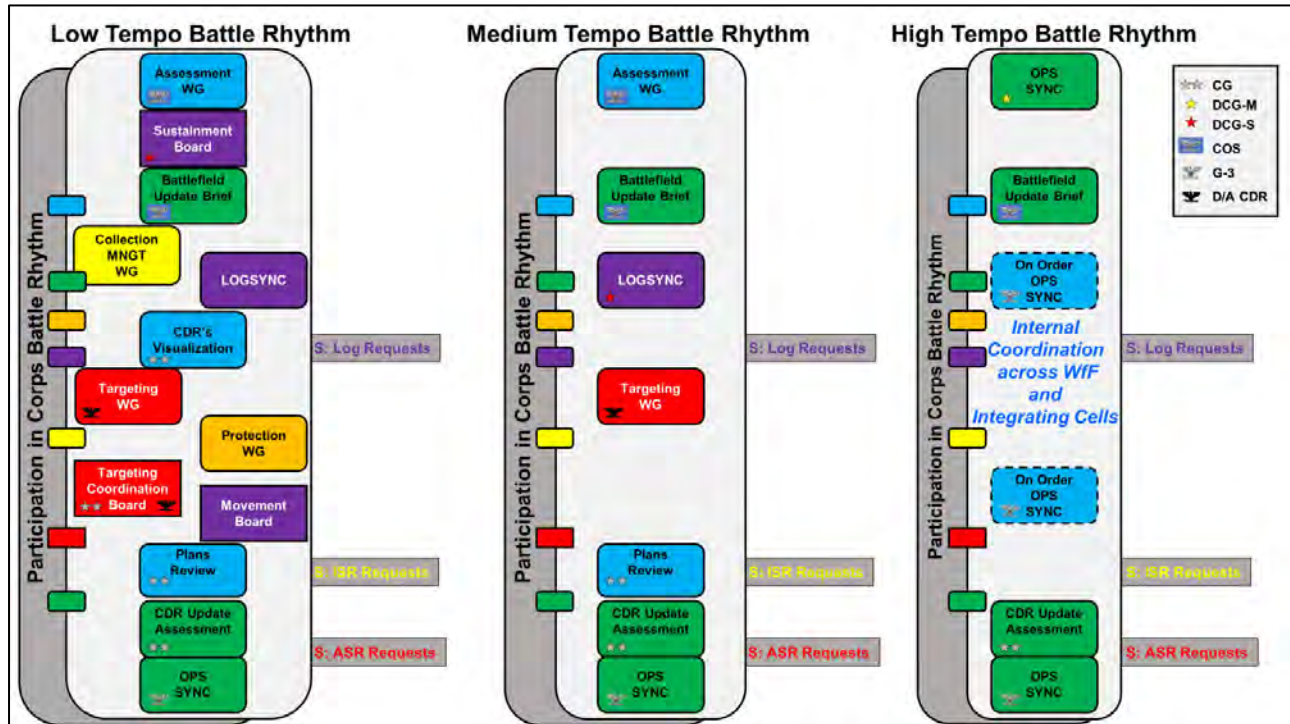

Figure 1. Meeting Density versus Operational Tempo

Running Estimates

Running estimates are the key to enabling timely commander decisions and staff understanding. A running estimate is an ongoing assessment of progress toward an end state. A Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) observation captures a common trend with running estimates across division staffs:

- Many of the working groups and planning events occurred at times that rendered their outputs dated due to the rapidly changing battlefield situation.
- Consequently, decision boards and information meetings often had inaccurate information, requiring additional input and planning.[3]

Staff practices for developing current running estimate frameworks have largely been cultivated over the last 20 years of executing counterinsurgency and stability operations. As such, they fail to communicate useful information and recommendations to the commander and other staff sections during dynamic large-scale combat. Instead, staffs need to determine what a running estimate looks like by first determining what the commander needs to know and codify that as commander's critical information requirements (CCIRs). From there, staffs compare the current situation to the end state of each phase of an operation as defined in the commander's intent and concept statement. The staff must then measure progress toward setting those conditions and communicate that in terms of CCIR, progress toward end state conditions, as well as associated opportunities, risks, and recommendations.
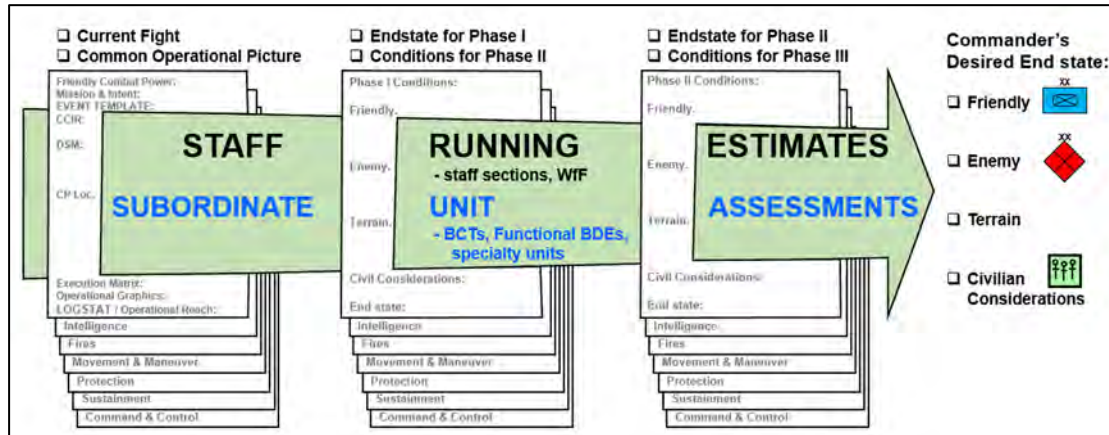
Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Staff Running Estimates

When commanders need to solve an unforeseen problem or exploit an opportunity, such as in the event of exceptional information, they may not be able to wait for a battle rhythm meeting or a working group to seize or maintain the initiative. When a division commander pulls the staff and brigade commanders together to discuss a problem, the commander needs to see the staff and commanders along with the enemy, options and risk associated with them, and then make decisions. Often, the staff is unable to provide the commander the information needed and must go back to do more analysis. This is an example of a running estimate not serving its purpose. The staff must be able to communicate the necessary information right away and anticipate what the commander will need to know in the future.
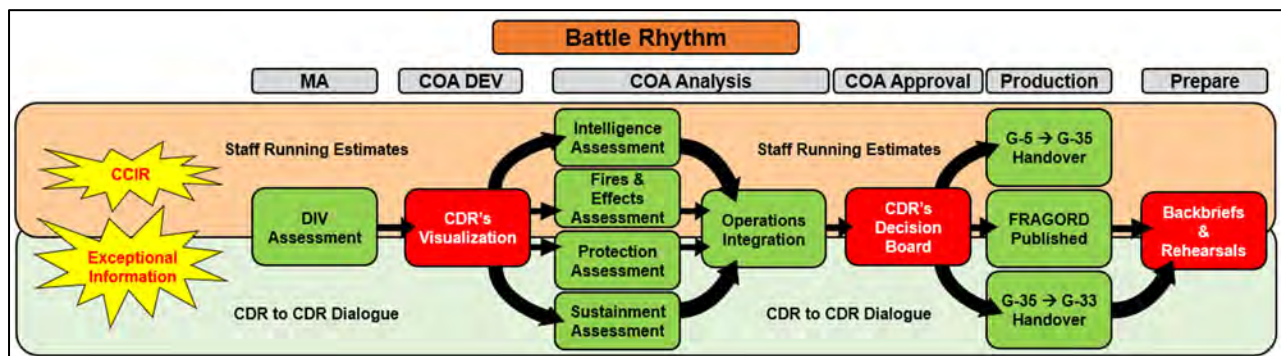

Figure 3. The Operations Process and the Flow of Information

Figure 3 depicts a full cycle of a military decision-making process (MDMP) overlaid with functional inputs, outputs, and meetings or touchpoints. Note the lack of times associated with the sequence of events on the chart. This cycle could take place over a period of 24 hours, 96 hours, or just two hours. Further, at any given time the enemy or higher headquarters could introduce CCIR into the daily schedule. For example, most division battle rhythms involve MDMP during the day and execution of operations during limited visibility hours. This rhythm is unable to rapidly adjust to enemy actions taking place during limited visibility, when most decision makers are in a rest cycle.

If the enemy unexpectedly counterattacks and the unit has no plan for this, what should it do? Does the staff wake up the commanding general (CG)? Does the unit allow a deputy commander to make an adjustment decision immediately? Does a key leader assemble the night shift staff for the rapid decision making and synchronization process and then decide what to do?

This all depends on how much time is available and when in the daily cycle this type of event occurs. Regardless, there must be a system (running estimates) in place to understand the situation, a decision maker with authority in the right place at that time, and the requisite talent available to process the developing situation into decision worthy information in the available time frame.

Products and Processes

Once a staff determines what information the commander needs and builds running estimates to communicate this information accordingly, the staff can start to develop the tools and vehicles (products and processes) to deliver that information. The legacy quad charts we have all seen are typically not useful in division staffs. What should a running estimate look like and what information should it maintain? If the product is the tool to maintain the information, then the process that uses the running estimate as an input or an output is the vehicle that delivers it to people who need the information. For the commander and the staff, a current operations integrating cell (COIC) synchronization is one vehicle for discussing running estimates, and an operations synchronization (OPSYNC) is a vehicle for doing the same with the brigades as well as the staff.

During fast-paced periods of battle, especially periods in which the commander is circulating and perhaps the main command post is jumping, it may not be possible for the entire staff to be planning or conducting meetings for many hours. In large-scale combat operations, these periods must center around fewer meetings. What those meetings must be and when they occur are a mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations (METT-TC) equation. This publication proposes that these periods of high intensity and low meeting density utilize two CG touchpoints per day: a BUB and a CUA. The division should supplement the BUBs and CUAs with as many OPSYNCs as needed per day to allow the commander to exercise distributed command and control of the division from his vehicle or the operations center or wherever the division's communications architecture allows.

Again, the BUB, CUA, and OPSYNC should only occur as needed to enable integrated staff efforts and ultimately drive decisions. However, staff estimates, which are the key ingredient to every meeting, need to be current and accurate to enable timely decision making. The challenge here is to develop staff products that feed those minimum touchpoints, and more importantly, the unexpected ones. To do this effectively, the division's knowledge management (KM) system is vital and every person on the staff has a responsibility to this system. Staffs need to be disciplined in updating and maintaining integrated running estimates constantly even if they are not briefing them in a battle rhythm event on a regular basis. An integrated running estimate clearly reflects the impacts each warfighting function has on the others and therefore accounts for all elements of the division's combat power to update decisions.

Flexibility in battle rhythms also must extend to flexibility in planning horizons. While there are doctrinal planning horizons outlined in FM 6-0, the staff should be organized in a manner that is agile enough to compress or expand planning horizons in accordance with the rhythm of the battle. Planning for some operations may occur within what is traditionally viewed as the "current operations" window, and necessary battle rhythm events may need to occur under a compressed timeline to facilitate planning and decision making under such circumstances. Conversely, staffs should be capable of expanding their planning horizons out to give time for more thorough and deliberate planning and synchronization. The arrangement of the plans, future operations, and current operations cells (to include clearly defined roles and responsibilities with division chief of staff, G5, and G-3 oversight) is critical to enabling flexible planning horizons. Large-scale combat assures that planning horizons will collapse, but the division must be able to get those horizons back when the rhythm of the battle allows.

Finally, the current situation must update plans, and those plans must be refined as the current situation changes. Updated running estimates do not just feed current operations and staff battle tracking, they also update future operations and plans. Therefore, staffs must have a mechanism such as an OPSYNC to help inform planners of the current situation and provide planners with updated running estimates. This is especially true when the received exceptional intelligence leads to a decision that requires modification to the future plans.

Talent, Time, and Task Management

To effectively plan and synchronize operations in accordance with the rhythm of the battle, units must also consider how they array their personnel. Many unit command posts tend to have most personnel, including decision makers, work during daylight hours. This results in:

- Units are unable to make timely decisions in the middle of the night.
- Running estimates become stale overnight.

These situations cause units to lose valuable planning time and often cause them to miss opportunities in the battle. Units regularly find themselves behind the enemy's decision cycle because they spend several hours catching up with developments that occurred during periods of darkness.

> ### One MCTP observation states:
>
> The group's internal battle rhythm consisted of many meetings and planning groups during the day while leaving the night largely open. This led to challenges for planners and staff leads during the day as they were consistently engaged in meetings, losing time for needed analysis and internal planning. It also reduced the staff leads' abilities to provide oversight and direction to their sections. This forced many of the staff planners to work beyond their ordinary shift to catch up, increasing fatigue over time. Further, this higher tempo in the day required a greater number of personnel, limiting the night shift's personnel and overall effectiveness. This subsequently produced gaps in continuity between the shifts and placed a vast majority of the workload on the day shift.[4]

However, a couple of simple TTPs allow divisions to operate at peak efficiency throughout a 24-hour day. First, clearly delineate or delegate authorities as the commander does not need to be the

sole decision-maker. Units can use terms of reference (ToR) as a baseline document to codify the duties, responsibilities, and divisions of labor amongst the senior leaders across the warfighting functions, command posts, and battle rhythm events. Units must maintain a delegated authorities matrix (DAM) to enable subordinate leaders to make many decisions quickly, freeing senior leaders to insert themselves at other points of friction. The standing division ToR and DAM should be aligned with each other and the tactical SOP. These can be modified to meet the current operational environment and the authorities and capabilities allocated from the higher headquarters. The example DAM in Figure 4 is a useful tool for analyzing authority coverage around the clock as well as at the various locations on the battlefield.

Delegated Authorities Matrix

	Delegated Authority To:	HHQ	DIV CDR	DCG-M	DCG-S	DIV COS	DIV G-3	DIV FSCOORD	DIV CHOPS	JAGIC Chief	BDE CDR	GFC
Movement and Maneuver	Task Subordinate unit(s) using the orders process					2	1					
	Retask subordinate unit(s) during operations					2	1					
	Change the task org of OPCON subordinate units					2	1					
	Reposition subordinate fires assets			1			3	2				
	Adjust priority of FS from Div and higher assets			1			2	3				
	Commit the Division Reserve		1	2		4	3		5			
	Boundary changes					2	1					
	Task / re-task strike assets (ISR)						2	1				
	Establish a Consolidation Area		1		2							
	Designate a Support Area				1	2	3					
Fires	Adjust the CFL								2	1		
	Request the Corps adjust the FSCL								2	1		
	Conduct cross-boundary fires (international border)							2	3	1		
	Add or Remove targets from the NSL or RTL	Req										
Intel	Establish IC hand-over lines (Div > BCT)								2	1		
Protection	Modify the PPL		1	2								
	Reassign AMD assets (change directed coverage)				1		2	3				
	Change MOPP Level					2	1				3	
	Designate EPW Camp (PMO) / DCAA / DCCP (G-9)					2	1					
	Employ air-delivered scatterable mines	Req										
	Change MSR / ASR within Division AO										SB	
Sustainment	Emergency Resupply				1	3	4				2-SB	
C2	Initiate COMSEC Compromise Drill					3	2		1			
	Displace CP (M-Main, T-DTAC, R-RCP)			M2, T2	R1	M1	T1				R2-SB	

Color Code:
GREEN – Authorized to make decision
AMBER – Auth to make decision if others are unavailable
RED – Not authorized to make decision
BLUE – Decision may be directed by HHQ
BLACK – Not applicable

If there is a priority listing (numbers), then priority must be followed when a decision is required and time-sensitive for operations
Req – must be requested to higher headquarters
Numbers signify priority for request for decision
M (Main), T (DTAC), R (RCP)

Figure 4. Example Delegated Authorities Matrix

For example, if a division is unable to conduct a protection working group, the ToR and DAM can be used together to identify what decisions did not get made and therefore what decisions will still eventually have to be made while determining who can make those decisions.

To do this, decision makers need the products that update decisions. Without meetings to create such products, how does the staff produce them? As mentioned previously, a well codified KM system is critical, but talent and task-management are the next steps. Leaders must array their personnel in a manner that ensures competent, well-informed staff members are always available

to inform decisions. This requires a whole-of-staff approach including developing and empowering even junior members of the staff. Individuals must have clear guidance for what products to update and maintain throughout periods of darkness. They must clearly understand what information is required for timely decisions. Lastly, they should use the various COIC synchronizations and OPSYNCs as processes to help keep running estimates current and accurate. Even if an AWG does not take place overnight, those who own the output products of the AWG can participate in COIC drills and use their own networks to collaborate in lieu of a meeting. Clear transitions of updated running estimates between individuals coming on and off duty will ensure that staffs will always have the most current running estimates on hand to drive effective decision-making.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Warfighter exercises represent the culminating exercise for division and higher commanders and staffs. Time and again, these exercises demonstrate that in large-scale combat while a corps or land component command headquarters can maintain rigid battle rhythms independent of the rhythm of the battle, divisions should not. During periods of low activity, a division can very effectively conduct the full suite of meetings and detailed planning, but it is not sustainable to do so during periods of high activity. The chief of staff will have to plan and direct the staff to conduct necessary meetings and to do without them when not needed. Units should plan and publish orders and products by phase. In execution or high-tempo periods, units conduct only necessary commander and staff touchpoints to maintain situational understanding and adjust or re-synchronize through OPSYNCs. In doing so, divisions will have to use published orders and exercise mission command to allow leaders at all echelons to make decisions with the published end state in mind. This decentralized decision-making system will move up and down within the rhythm of the battle. The commander may be able to provide detailed guidance at times and at other times must simply trust and empower others. What follows are some specific recommendations for consideration.

Managing an Agile Battle Rhythm

To achieve battle rhythm agility and outfight the enemy, think of battle rhythms on a red (high OPTEMPO), amber, and green (low OPTEMPO) scale. Use low-tempo periods to maximize meetings and planning. When the situation does not allow all those meetings, identify and conduct the essential meetings and fill gaps with shorter, more efficient synchronization meetings and commander-to-commander dialogue.

Draft SOPs for red, amber, and green battle rhythms provide a flexible start point from which to adjust the daily meeting schedule. The chief of staff is responsible for determining which meetings must take place each day and therefore which version of the battle rhythm to start from and communicate this with guidance to the staff daily. The division must train to plan by phase and produce all the necessary orders, annexes, and products needed for the next phase of the operation so that the division and brigades can fight from them with minimal meetings.

Running Estimates, Products, and Processes

Running estimates are not just a situational report. Running estimates are a measurement of progress toward an end state. How are we doing, what is next, and what adjustments can and should we make? What format does this require?

Divisions must redesign running estimates including the systems, products, and processes with which they are built so that running estimates do not rely solely on meetings to force updates. They must feed decisions and adjustments at any time and therefore must be accurate at all times. They must inform planners who are trying to build plans or resynchronize a changed event from a published order when meetings and working groups are not feasible.

To do this, start with the COIC synchronization. Build this synchronization format on command post computing environment (CPCE) and virtual joint operations center (VJOC) (and Joint Battle Command Platform for those who are mobile) so that the division common operational picture and running estimates (by warfighting function and unit) have a short information slide deck with CPCE layers or acetate flips that accompany each slide of information. Start each drill with a quick review of the synchronization to determine where the division is in relation to the end state of the next phase and then discuss the relevant information and recommendations. This drill is basically a boiled down assessment working group (AWG); therefore, the same deck and process can be used regardless of which version of the battle rhythm is in effect.

Once these products are built, the processes they feed develop two flavors:

- The formal full-scale meeting flavor
- The behind-the-scenes, somebody owns it even if there is no meetings flavor

In either case, the KM system is critical, and every person on the staff must know the KM standard operating procedure (SOP) and fulfill responsibility to it.

Time, Talent, and Authorities

The night shift battle major is not a commander, but typically, divisions leave that junior major at the helm all night during the division's most active period of fighting. The deputy commanding general maneuver (DCG-M) should own the fight and run the COIC during high OPTEMPO periods of the day (typically during limited visibility hours) and may chair the AWG if it happens. Further, the DCG-M is authorized to make as many decisions as possible that the CG would make. The G-3 can also fill this role and would be offset from the DCG-M by shift. This allows the CG freedom to place people where and when that commander sees fit and keep a division key leader in the center of the hub of information around the clock. When the main command post is jumping, the tactical operations center has the fight. Who has the authority then? How do running estimates enable these leaders to make their decisions?

With the tactical decision-making addressed, now the division can look at decision making in the planning process. If the ToR, DAM, and tactical SOP align, the DCG-M and G-3 can effectively use running estimates to synchronize the commands, and the deputy commanding general-support (DCG-S) and chief of staff can effectively use running estimates to synchronize the entire staff enterprise. When a battle rhythm meeting takes place, it is chaired by a decision maker. When a unit is not holding meetings other than a BUB, CUA, and an OPSYNC for days at a time, these same decision makers are still responsible for making the same decisions but must rely on well-integrated, current, and accurate staff running estimates and less formal processes to make those decisions.

In short, to win in large-scale combat, divisions must adopt agile battle rhythms. When necessary, divisions feed fewer touchpoints they can execute with accurate, informative running estimates. Divisions empower leaders to seize and maintain the initiative.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.