



Forging Lethality

Integrating Fires and Maneuver for Decisive Operations

Key Brigade Fires Observations from JMRC

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A U.S. Soldier assigned to 3rd Squadron, 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade provides cover fire during a team live fire exercise at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, January 21, 2026. Soldiers executed team movement toward an objective and tactical combat casualty care throughout constant enemy contact. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Elijah Magaña)

“Renown awaits the commander who first restores artillery to its prime importance on the battlefield.”

– Winston Churchill

The U.S. Army’s strategic pivot from two decades of counter-insurgency operations to a focus on Large Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) against peer adversaries necessitates a redefinition of lethality by its leaders. This shift, driven by the 2018 National Defense Strategy’s focus on confronting powers like Russia and China, moves away from counter-extremist operations to preparing for a more complex, multi-domain battlefield. At the conclusion of a recent rotation at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC), General Christopher Donahue, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF), emphasized this point to a room of brigade leaders and Observer/Controller/Trainers (OCTs).

While Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, provides the doctrinal starting point with its concept of destroying the enemy from a position of advantage, observations from training environments like JMRC reveal a more focused, two-part mission for the fires community. This mission involves shaping the deep fight to protect friendly forces while simultaneously massing overwhelming firepower to ensure maneuver units are victorious in close-quarters combat. This evolution in thinking reflects lessons learned from recent conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, where the battlefield has demonstrated the devastating impact of integrated air-defense systems, long-range precision fires, and the pervasive use of unmanned aerial systems.

The ability to degrade these enemy systems is now seen as a prerequisite for successful combined-arms maneuver. Consequently, the fires community's role has become increasingly critical in achieving the "reconnaissance-strike battle" concept, where the duel between opposing reconnaissance-strike complexes often determines the outcome. This tactical reality demands that fires not only support the immediate needs of maneuver forces but also proactively shape the entire battlespace to create windows of opportunity for decisive action.

For the fires warfighting function, success at JMRC demands a dual competency: mastering doctrine and adapting with initiative. Observations show this begins with a disciplined operations process that forges synchronization through military decision-making process (MDMP), rehearsals, and battle-rhythm execution. From this foundation, effective units build a coherent battlefield framework, leveraging their targeting process to define brigade and battalion responsibilities and avoid devolving into a chaotic "fires knife fight." However, even with this planning, a critical gap remains. Despite the influx of new Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), brigades still struggle to sense throughout the depth of their AO; to close this gap, organizations must task-organize joint fire support specialists and push them forward with the right authorities and capabilities. By analyzing these observations, this paper will provide actionable recommendations across the Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities and Policy (DOTMLPF-P) framework to enhance the lethality of the fires enterprise.

OPS PROCESS

"You 'musicians' of Mars must not wait for the band leader to signal you ... You must, each of your own volition, see to it that you come into this concert at the proper time and at the proper place."

– General George S. Patton

Success at JMRC begins with disciplined planning, yet trends consistently reveal a critical point of failure: organizations not having or shortcutting their Planning Standard Operating Procedures (PSOPs) and truncating the MDMP. For the fires warfighting function, this failure becomes acute when the staff rushes the wargame, omits necessary details, or skips it entirely. The wargame is where the staff must move beyond abstract guidance to a synchronized plan with refined products like the scheme of fires, fire support execution matrix, targeting synchronization matrix, NAIs and TAIs.¹¹ Consequently, participants bog down targeting meetings with basic synchronization debates that they should have already resolved, ultimately leaving the unit perpetually behind its own planning cycle or developing a plan that lacks the necessary detail and ineffective rehearsals.

While MDMP creates the plan, the rehearsal builds the shared understanding required to execute it. Organizations execute rehearsals to ensure shared understanding across the formation, enable mission command, and validate fighting products. For the fires warfighting function, the combined Intelligence Collection and Fire Support (IC/FIRES) rehearsal is the critical event to synchronize the plan and validate its feasibility. Observations at JMRC show that a unit's approach

to this event predicts its success. Failing organizations conduct passive rehearsals: They read from a script, execute a "perfect" plan without friction, and neglect to bring fighting products for validation, thereby missing the entire point of the event. In contrast, successful organizations run a dynamic event. They use a flexible agenda to guide conversation, introduce friction to pressure-test the plan, and use the rehearsal to validate their fighting products in real-time. Critically, they designate a recorder to capture changes, which ensures the rehearsal outputs refined products, plans, and an updated Fragmentary Order (FRAGO), not just a check on a schedule. However, the organization quickly loses the shared understanding forged during a successful rehearsal without a resilient and sustainable battle rhythm to manage the friction of execution.

A unit's battle rhythm should be its framework for discipline, a deliberate cycle that synchronizes current and future operations. While many organizations successfully execute this rhythm before deployment "into the box," it often shatters once the enemy "gets a vote." The planned battle rhythm quickly gives way to the chaotic rhythm of the battle itself. The primary cause is an overloaded, unrealistic schedule that chains key leaders to endless meetings. When friction mounts, organizations cancel events and the staff shifts into a purely reactive mode. They neglect running estimates and fall into silos of excellence, lacking cross talk to synchronize efforts and hinder the commander's ability to make decisions. In contrast, successful units design a battle rhythm that is resilient by design. They build it for the fight, not garrison, with clearly defined purposes for each event and—most importantly—built-in "white space" for critical thought, analysis, and battlefield circulation. Specifically critical to the fires warfighting function is the succinct execution of the targeting meetings and the operations synchronization meeting that generate a daily FRAGO with clear taskings that drive the operation.

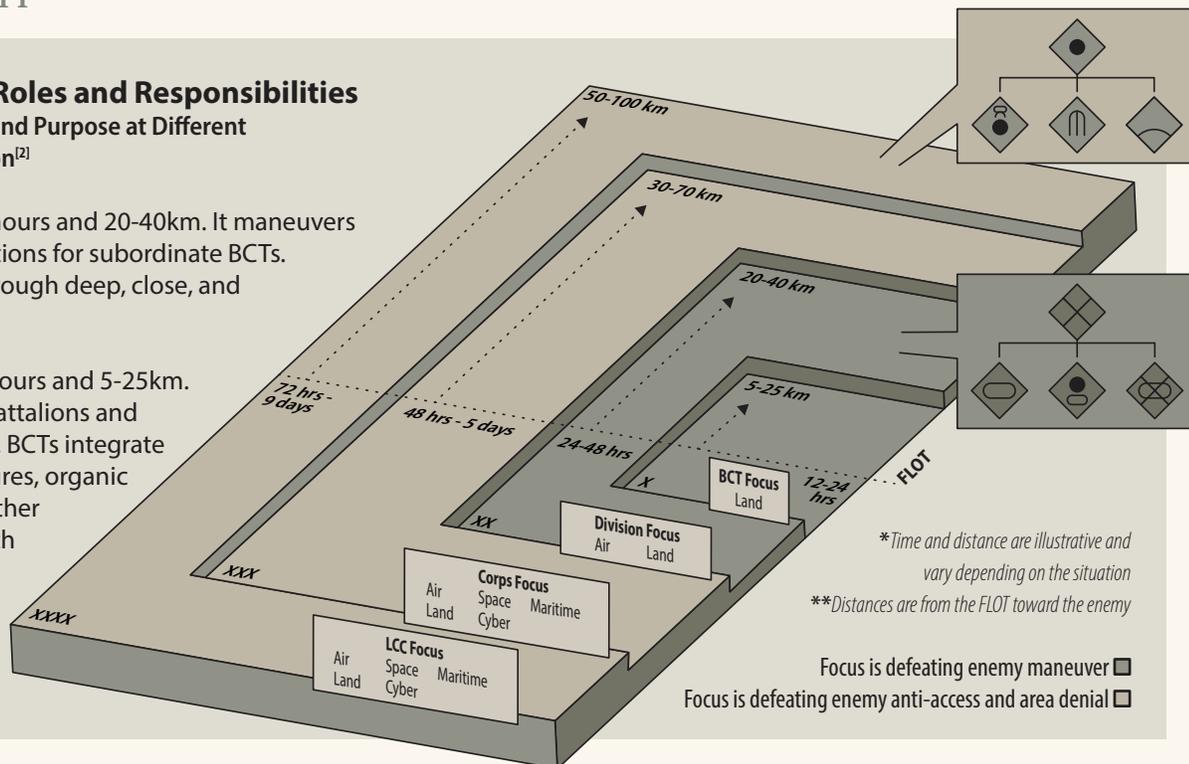
Targeting meetings are the engine of the brigade's fight, an integrating process where the staff translates the commander's guidance into lethal action. However, JMRC observations consistently show two fundamental failures cripple these critical events. First, inexperienced staff and collection managers, uncomfortable with their tools or hesitant to task subordinate battalions, fail to synchronize sensors to find the enemy. Second, and more critically, Operations Officers mistakenly see targeting as a fires-specific task rather than the integrating process it truly is. As a result, they often fail to grasp their central role in driving the Decide, Detect, Deliver, and Assess (D3A) cycle. Instead of issuing clear FRAGOs that task battalions to find and track High-Payoff Targets, they abdicate this responsibility, often citing an unwillingness to "task a battalion commander." This inaction leaves the brigade's collection assets uncoordinated and its targeting process reactive, turning the targeting meeting into a hollow discussion rather than a decisive event.

While other battle rhythm events may be flexible, the operations synchronization meeting must be a non-negotiable, decision-making forum. Its purpose is to answer one question: "Are we on plan and on time?" To answer that question, all command posts and relevant staff sections must be present to provide their assessments. By providing a continuous flow of updated information from distributed and subordinate Command Posts, running estimates empower the staff and

Figure 1. Notional Roles and Responsibilities
In Terms of Time, Space, and Purpose at Different
Echelons During Execution^[2]

Division focus is 24-48 hours and 20-40km. It maneuvers brigades and sets conditions for subordinate BCTs. It sustains the tempo through deep, close, and rear operations.

Brigade focus is 12-24 hours and 5-25km. Its role is to maneuver battalions and successful close combat. BCTs integrate information collection, fires, organic and allocated EW, and other available capabilities with ground maneuver to destroy enemy forces and seize and control key terrain.



commanders to refine the battlefield framework and support the commander’s decision-making process. However, trends show units degrade this event into an S3-centric huddle that lacks the authority and input to be effective. A simple but critical discipline gap compounds this failure: the failure to capture and disseminate meeting outputs. Without shared notes or a resulting FRAGO, the meeting becomes a discussion with no lasting effect. A poorly attended, undocumented ops sync is arguably worse than no meeting at all, as it creates a false sense of control while guaranteeing a desynchronized fight. In conclusion, a disciplined operations process weaponizes time, allowing a brigade to out-think and out-pace the enemy. From the initial wargame to the final rehearsal, each step builds momentum that the battle rhythm must sustain during execution. At JMRC, successful organizations don’t build a battle rhythm packed full of garrison-style meetings; rather, they create a lean framework of essential touchpoints. By focusing exclusively on the critical decision forums—the CUB, BUB, TWG, TCB, and the daily Ops Sync—a brigade creates the “white space” necessary for leaders to think, circulate, and adapt. This minimalist approach, however, demands a non-negotiable standard for the events that remain; each must culminate in a decision that is immediately captured and published as a FRAGO. This discipline transforms the battle rhythm from a rigid schedule that shatters under pressure into a dynamic engine for command and control, ensuring every critical decision translates directly into synchronized action across the brigade and the depth of their AO in time and space.

Battlefield Framework

“Artillery conquers and infantry occupies.”

– J.F.C. Fuller

Army doctrine now positions the division and higher echelons as the primary owner of the deep fight, focusing the brigade combat team on the close area. However, observations

at JMRC reveal a critical nuance to this framework. The most successful brigades are those that, while still mastering the close fight, aggressively define and influence a “deep” area within their own battlespace. By leveraging their targeting methodology to delineate responsibilities and shape the enemy well before direct-fire contact, these units seize the initiative and create a decisive advantage. This section will analyze how the establishment of a meaningful deep area within the brigade’s framework is the key to synchronizing effects and enabling mission success. Figure 1 below depicts notional responsibilities in terms of time, space, and purpose at different echelons during execution.

Doctrinally, FM 3-0 lays out a battlefield framework that establishes a clear division of labor: The division prosecutes the deep fight, while the brigade combat team (BCT) fights and wins in close combat.^[3] Fires planning directly reflects this structure. In the deep area, fires are a critical shaping operation designed to set favorable conditions for future success. This involves using joint assets to interdict enemy forces out of contact, disintegrate key systems like air defense and sustainment, and create a marked advantage for friendly forces before the decisive engagement begins. Conversely, fires in the close area provide immediate, responsive support to troops in direct-fire contact.^[4] Doctrine is explicit that these are not separate efforts; deep fires are an absolute necessity, but commanders and staffs must tightly synchronize them over time and space with the close fight to ensure every asset contributes directly to winning the battle.

While the division-brigade split appears straightforward, a deeper reading of doctrine reveals significant ambiguity, empowering the brigade to shape its own battlespace. The doctrinal definition of close combat, warfare conducted in a direct firefight supported by indirect fires and other assets, blurs the clean delineation between division and brigade fights. At the same time, the doctrinal focus of a brigade, 12 to 24 hours

and 5 to 25 kilometers, means a brigade’s assigned area of operations exceeds the reach of its direct-fire systems. Therefore, as doctrine itself states, close support fires must “expand the battlefield depth” and inflict damage “well beyond direct fire ranges,” inherently pushing the brigade’s influence beyond immediate contact. Most critically, FM 3-0 states that a division’s “close operation” is the BCT’s entire battlespace, which itself contains deep, close, and rear areas. This, coupled with the explicit permission for commanders to adapt their framework to nest with higher echelons and the requirement to fight isolated,⁶⁵ reveals that a brigade defining its own deep area is not contradicting doctrine, but applying it with tactical acumen to set conditions for its own success.

Successful brigades at JMRC don’t just acknowledge their battlefield framework; they weaponize it. They begin by defining an Area of Operation (AO) they can realistically sense and affect with their own collection and fires assets. This clarity allows them to identify capability gaps and negotiate adjustments with Higher Headquarters to enable their fight. While understanding the division’s deep-area responsibilities, they refuse to cede the initiative. Instead, their planning process defines a “brigade-owned deep area,” giving their targeting team a clear mandate to employ artillery and other assets as a deep-strike tool. The objective is to attrit enemy artillery, disrupt command and control, and interdict reserves—shaping the fight before it begins. This proactive application of mission command is the key to creating windows of opportunity and ensuring the close fight is fundamentally unfair in their favor.

Eyes Forward and in the Brigade Deep

“The speed, accuracy and devastating power of American Artillery won confidence and admiration from the troops it supported and inspired fear and respect in their enemy.”

– General Dwight D. Eisenhower

While defining a deep battlefield framework is a crucial first step towards success, JMRC observations consistently reveal a subsequent point of failure: the inability to resource the “detect” phase of D3A. Despite a proliferation of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) through Transformation in Contact initiatives, technology alone has not solved this problem. The issue is twofold. First, improper planning that ignores critical time and distance limitations often cripples UAS employment, rendering the systems unavailable when needed. Second, and more critically, there is a persistent unwillingness to dynamically task-organize human sensors—the Forward Observers (FOs)—and push them into positions where they can effectively see the brigade’s deep area and providing key information to potential enemy formations and actions, rather than remaining tied to a maneuver unit not yet in contact. The mismanagement of UAS and FOs is creating critical information gaps. Real-time reports from the ground are failing to reach fires and intelligence cells, leading directly to delayed tactical decisions and an inability to effectively manage key assets.

While the Army pursues a permanent, runway-independent replacement for the RQ-7 Shadow—a valid and necessary effort—brigades at JMRC must fight with the tools they have, not the ones they hope for. Observations at JMRC show that the

current proliferation of smaller, commercial-based drones—like the Skydio, C-100, and Ghost X—is not a complete solution. While staffs plan using maximum “brochure” data for range and endurance, the friction of weather, battery logistics, and limited operator availability consistently degrades their actual performance by half. This data-driven reality check proves that without a dedicated long-range reconnaissance platform, technology alone cannot fill the sensing gap. To gain an edge, we must fuse technology with human expertise. This means pushing specialized Forward Observer teams deep to hunt the brigade’s High-Payoff Target List (HPTL). Positioned on key terrain, these teams act as a potent, twofold sensor, feeding actionable intelligence directly to commanders and enabling them to dominate the battlespace. This is not a subordinate’s choice; it is a brigade-level responsibility. The brigade must use the operations process to create an adequate and redundant observation plan for all templated targets by tasking the necessary assets to execute its information collection plan.

The most profound failure in sensing is not a lack of technology, but a failure of will. It is the failure to employ the Forward Observer in concert with other systems to create a layered and redundant plan for the identification and prosecution of targets. The persistent misuse of the FO—keeping them bound to a habitual support relationship to a specific maneuver element—violates the explicit doctrinal authority found in ATP 3-09.42, which states fire support personnel are brigade assets to be task-organized by the commander “when and where needed.”⁶⁶ The justification for this authority is clear: Commanders must weight the main effort. If the brigade’s main effort requires shaping the deep battle, then the brigade commander must task the sensors—the FOs—to that decisive point. This is not about breaking habitual relationships; it is about applying priorities of support and priorities of fires. This is a brigade-driven decision, formalized in a FRAGO, that transforms the FO from a reactive asset into the proactive reconnaissance element needed to contact the “smallest element possible” and win the deep fight.⁶⁷

Select DOTMLPF-P Considerations to Support LSCO

The U.S. Military’s ability to adapt has always driven its success. To be effective, the critical lessons observed at JMRC must directly inform the Army’s Transforming in Contact initiative to prepare the force for the next conflict. To that end, the following recommendations use the lens of DOTMLPF-P to offer an operational framework for institutional change.

Doctrine:

- Update doctrine to formally include a deep-area operational framework at the brigade level, recognizing that units are already performing this function out of necessity
- Formally codify the best practices for conducting rehearsals, which are often observed at CTCs, into foundational doctrine like ADP 6-0 to ensure standardization

Organization:

- Evolve the employment of Forward Observers (FOs) from static, unit-assigned assets to a brigade-level resource that can be dynamically task organized

FORGING LETHALITY

- Enable commanders to shift FOs to meet the most critical battlefield priorities, a flexible practice already influencing how successful units train and organize

Training:

- Improve the advanced fieldcraft of Forward Observers by sending them to demanding specialty courses like the Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course (RSLC)
- Integrate UAS operator skills as a foundational component of the 13F Advanced Individual Training (AIT) curriculum to institutionalize this capability from the start
- Update the Intermediate Level Education (ILE) curriculum to provide future field-grade officers with more hands-on repetitions in detailed wargaming techniques
- Institutionalize the use of small UAS at the unit level by establishing robust home-station training, maintenance programs, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Materiel:

- Close critical sensing gaps by equipping brigades with improved targeting suites on Medium-Range Reconnaissance (MRR) platforms and a dedicated Long-Range Reconnaissance (LRR) capability
- Replace legacy systems, such as the LLDR and SHARK, with a modern and more capable handheld targeting device to increase effectiveness and reduce burden

Leadership and Education:

- Increase the emphasis on the detailed planning and execution of rehearsals within Professional Military Education, specifically at the Field Artillery Captains Career Course (FACCC) and Intermediate Level Education (ILE)

Conclusion

The fires warfighting function forges its path to lethality when leaders blend doctrinal mastery with bold tactical initiative. The lessons from the Joint Multinational Readiness Center offer more than simple observations; they provide a clear blueprint for victory that demands action and institutional change.

First, successful units build their operations on a disciplined process. Leaders must conclude every meeting by publishing a written order that contains clear, actionable tasks. This essential step translates planning and discussion into synchronized action across the formation, driving momentum and ensuring shared understanding.

Next, brigade commanders seize success by proactively shaping their own deep battlespace. A commander who rejects a narrow, reactive focus on the close fight creates opportunities and dictates the battle's tempo. By engaging the enemy at a time and place of their choosing, brigade commanders set the conditions for victory long before the main engagement begins.

Finally, commanders empower the entire enterprise with their will to act. They must dynamically task-organize their assets and courageously push human observers to the point of friction. This critical action provides the eyes and ears needed to execute a brilliant plan, connecting high-level intent with ground-truth reality.

When leaders master these interconnected disciplines—a rigorous process, an expanded operational framework, and empowered forward sensing—they build a more agile, lethal, and dominant fires enterprise. By embracing these principles, the Army forges a force that is not just ready for the complexities of the next conflict, but one that is already postured to win it.

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