

It's not your daddy's Army anymore

Mapping out changes for the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course CPX

Story and Photos
BY LINDA CRIPPEN

This exercise is not like the game Risk played many years ago, moving forces here and there on a map or board while trying to defeat an imaginary enemy. This command post exercise, perhaps the culminating event of the entire Sergeants Major Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, puts future sergeants major at the helm of battalion-level operations, and higher, during simulated warfare.

Class 60 performed a unique role in conducting simulated war games using the Command Post of the Future system, which enhances situational awareness and can gather 14 different software threads from the Army Battle Command System. CPOF isn't just for simulated battle; it's the Army's lifeline in the field.

Created by General Dynamics, CPOF is marketed as an executive-level decision support system for commanders and their staff. The Windows-based system offers a multiperspective view of the battlefield as well as collaboration and information sharing at many different levels among operational and organizational entities. "Boasting 2-D and 3-D visualization, CPOF saves lives by supporting collaborations from geographically dispersed locations," according to the company's Web site.

The main objective of these exercises is to better prepare students to perform in their next assignments as sergeants major and command sergeants major. Many of them will move into operations staff positions, and being familiar with CPOF and battlefield-related processes will prove instrumental to their commanding officers.

Since the course began almost nine months ago, students have been planning and preparing for the CPX, which challenges them to employ the military decision-making process. Every phase of the exercise requires detailed planning and a detail of the MDMP. Similar to decision-making processes used in the corporate world, the military version is outlined in FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*, which explains how commanders, staffs and subordinate headquarters interact during planning.

The MDMP "is an iterative planning methodology that

integrates the activities of the commander, staff, subordinate headquarters, and other partners to understand the situation and mission; develop and compare courses of action; decide on a course of action that best accomplishes the mission; and produce an operation plan or order for execution," according to the FM. "The MDMP helps leaders apply thoroughness, clarity, sound judgment, logic, and professional knowledge to understand situations, develop options to solve problems and reach decisions. It is a process that helps commanders, staffs, and others think critically and creatively while planning."

"This is a paradigm shift within the NCO Education System," explained Efren Ordaz, associate professor for USASMA's Department of Command Leadership. "We used to do battle drills, which are based on conditions and standards." But, planning does not rely on conditioned responses since every problem is different. "Planners have a scientific approach to developing an answer to a complex problem. In the Army, we call that MDMP, just like the civilian sector calls it the decision-making process. It assesses the program that takes it from looking at the problem, decomposing the problem to different parts so that each component can 'fix' its part. From there, we do a mission analysis," he said.

Mission analysis includes examining what higher commanders want organizations and units to accomplish. At each level, "we take our piece out of it, and we develop different courses of action. We look at what the enemy is supposed to do. Then, we develop courses [of action] to cover the enemy's courses of action. That's how we fight," Ordaz said, explaining that once different courses of action are developed, the commander will choose which one to employ.

The staff is equipped with critical thinking abilities to derive a solution, but ultimately the commander makes the final decision. "We compare different courses of action to see what the commander wants in terms of speed, force ratios, conservation of the force, matching the objective — if it meets all the intent of what the commander wants then he will choose the one that fits

— or there might be a combination of various courses of action that produces a better solution,” he said.

Early on, students were exposed to the beginnings of a realistic, problematic scenario that would continue to unfold throughout the rest of course. For instance, the GAAT region (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey), as well as Russia and Iran were included in the scenario. Each student was assigned a specific area within the GAAT. They grew to be quasi-experts in political and military affairs, learning what the needs and wants were of their respective areas. Two staff group rooms — 32 students — were divided into four joint task forces.

As the course progressed, events developed within the region; all the while, students learned what interests their joint task force had there. “They had classes on the original strategy, national strategy and defense strategy. Given the tools presented in these classes, students were able to extract what they needed for each country and how best to support it. We formed a group for planning — from military to interagency to non-governmental organizations — that will go out there and have an impact on that country. Then, we coordinate with the State Department to make sure that the ambassadors are involved should we need to go in there,” Ordaz explained.

SIMULATION SCENARIO / MISSION

There were some things going on in the world... Ahurastan was infringing on Azerbaijan, so Azerbaijan called for help. In prior years (the scenario buildup), coalition forces monitored their actions and interacted with them to help deter threats. Students developed a plan to defend Azerbaijan, a landlocked country, but also developed plans with surrounding countries. For example, since Georgia has a seaport, it could be a platform for

launching into Azerbaijan. Georgia, a friendly partner, gave coalition forces host ability to support Azerbaijan.

Taking about 150 days to project their buildup of corps-level forces — about 100,000 troops — the planning sequence has been underway for almost the entire course. “We give the students a complex problem, and through the critical thinking they’ve been exposed to in the primary classes here, they were able to come up with a plan,” Ordaz said. These forces comprise the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, better known as CFLCC (pronounced see-flec), which can have components from all services as well as international components. CFLCC directs all land forces on behalf of the JTF commander.

The academy students represented the land component in the simulated exercise, instructors explained. Students were tasked with the mission to defend Azerbaijan with four joint task force teams conducting their own individual planning but in simultaneously simulated exercises. The JTFs planned and carried out their missions as individual teams, but the battle simulation center was able to play out each team’s scenario simultaneously. Some teams performed very well, and some teams needed a few rotations before discovering their weaknesses, like forgetting to move air defense artillery units with the front line.

Sgt. Maj. Robert Forsyth, deputy director of the Sergeants Major Course, explained that currently, the pre-CPX phase of the course is 281 hours, with the CPX itself lasting 54 hours. The focus is staff planning, not winning a war. “This was the first time students were able to use computer-generated data and work in a staff group under pressure, under unknown reactions and counter-reactions. They were evaluated on their abilities to work in a group under those pressures, depending on the computer’s simulated results. And that’s what we were really looking for,” he said.



Class 60 students at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, discuss strategies and planning activities in the classroom for the course’s command post exercise. USASMA staff is changing and updating the CPX to teach future sergeants major operational and planning activities as well as decisive action at the battalion and brigade levels.



Members of Joint Task Force 3 assess the command battlefield situation after another cycle of simulated warfare was completed. The class took about 150 days to project their buildup of corps-level forces — about 100,000 troops — and the planning sequence has been underway for almost the entire course. These forces comprise the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, better known as CFLCC, which can include components from all services, as well as international military forces. Students were tasked with the mission to defend Azerbaijan with four joint task force teams conducting their own individual planning, but in simultaneous simulated exercises.

After the CPX, Class 60 students discussed the pros and cons of the exercise through their after-action reports. Master Sgt. Robert Todd, who will be heading to Camp Shelby, Miss., after graduation, said that all of the JTFs came up with similar points for the AARs, which “mainly focused on the CPOF operations. Going into the position of operations sergeants major, it will be advantageous to learn that process while we’re here in school and have more training on the CPOF,” he said.

Todd said that based on what the instructors say, academy staff is in the midst of revamping the exercise for Class 61 to make it more realistic. “Also, allowing task forces or command groups to move around the battlefield will be better. Most of us

have never used or trained on the CPOF, so this exercise will definitely help prepare us for our assignments,” he said.

REASON FOR CHANGE

Command Sgt. Maj. David L. Yates, director of the Sergeants Major Course, explained that the change was pertinent since previous exercises were considered stand-alone. “There was nothing that really tied it to what students learned, and the way we do the exercise now, it’s tied to what they learn all year. Everything they learn all year, they bring it into the final event. Anything that’s in the curriculum is part of the exercise. It’s all the parts and pieces of what they learn; it’s more refined. It’s also a longer process,

Master Sgt. Robert Todd discusses Joint Task Force 2’s planning strategy with Efren Ordaz, associate professor for the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy’s Leadership Development Directive. Students were presented with a developing situation, specific tasks and objectives for the command post exercise, with the main focus centering on planning, strategy and decisive action.



the military decision-making process,” he said.

The changes in the curriculum were sparked by expanded responsibilities for noncommissioned officers. Yates said that in the past, sergeants major would assume roles automatically if they were capable and experienced in a certain area, experience not necessarily learned from the academy but from past performance.

“What we want the sergeants major to take away from this — when they leave here, they’re going to go work for a lieutenant colonel or major, in some cases a full-bird colonel on a staff somewhere — they’ve got to understand the process when they get there. Those officers already do. If sergeants major don’t understand the process when they get there, they’ll be behind the curve and won’t be a contributing member of the staff,” he said.

Yates said he’s seen it happen many times that if sergeants major aren’t contributing members of the staff, they get sidelined. They get “marginalized and become glorified coffee pot watchers,” he said. The academy is now arming them to speak the same language as officers, and the experience they gather through the course and CPX will afford them the knowledge and confidence to perform in the core competency areas, he said.

Understanding the process is perhaps the most important aspect. “It’s the processes that we’re trying to teach. It’s a process that the president on down performs. It’s a process for them to understand so they can explain to their Soldiers what happened for them to be standing in the middle of that third-world country,” Yates explained.

Understanding the process can also help leaders anticipate what may happen in the future as well as anticipate what the commander wants. Staff should always anticipate what the expectations are, he added.

CLASS 61

The next class to attend the academy can expect another complex and challenging CPX, more so than what Class 60

experienced, explained the staff. Class 61 will benefit from the working out of kinks and issues that Class 60 identified. Instructors are already implementing improvements in preparation for the next group of students.

“We have people rewriting the planning and operations exercise, which will cover strategic levels from the national authority down to battalion level in a consecutive and logical manner,” Yates said, hinting at the previous lessons that needed to be rearranged. “There were a couple of places that went out of sequence, so we’ll take those out and make the curriculum and exercise run through each consecutive level.”

Reworking the curriculum is a tedious process as the staff goes through each facet of the classes. It’s not as easy as simply removing certain lessons, as aspects build upon one another.

The changes will make the exercise a weeklong event, and students will be split into battalion or brigade tactical operations centers, tackling a scenario anywhere in the world, whatever the staff decides to make it. Yates said that the students will run the TOCs as 24-hour operations for the entire exercise, working in shifts, so they’ll have to do shift changes and battle update briefs,” he said.

“It’ll be a matrix of events, with us injecting information into the events. For example, Bravo Company finds a dead body at these coordinates. How long will it take operations to call brigade?” he said, explaining a possible scenario. According to Yates, the simulated exercise will arm students “with the experience of having gone through the events, so they’ll be more comfortable in the real thing.”

Ultimately, the course and CPX will show students pertinent doctrinal processes from start to finish. “They’ll understand the important things that you can’t skip. They’ll be able to anticipate what the commander wants and know what needs to be done ahead of time,” Yates said. 

To contact Linda Crippen, e-mail linda.crippen@us.army.mil.

Some members of Joint Task Force 2 discuss updates after a cycle of simulated warfare ran on the Command Post of the Future system. After each cycle, the teams necessarily regrouped, assessed the new turn of events, and planned new strategies according to the developments. Students employed the military decision-making process to help them strategize and anticipate events. Many of the recommendations made by Class 60 students will be implemented in future classes of the Sergeants Major Course to improve the experience and better prepare future students in performing at the operations level for battalion and brigade commands.

