

A JTF Training Dilemma

Component Rigor *versus* Joint Realism



By THOMAS E. WARD II

Navy officer and Soldiers hook Humvee to helicopter during Exercise Granite Triangle

As we in the land component commands increasingly recognize the value of thinking jointly and prepare to be better partners with our fellow components, we find ourselves facing a training dilemma: ground combat training rigor versus the situational realism of the joint fight. Stated another way, good joint training rigor tends to limit the level of intensity for ground combat. If we fight the “joint fight” well, we shape the environment so that ground combat is minimized or even precluded, friendly ground forces are free to maneuver extensively, and these forces are not seriously threatened with penetration or annihilation by opposing ground forces.

This is not simply a Service-centric problem. Ultimately, this training dilemma

derives from the way our nation has chosen to wage its conflicts. Because we value the lives of our citizens so highly, we are loath to put them in jeopardy. This is particularly true in cases where our national interests may be at stake, but our national survival is not. In economic terms, we have chosen to employ a capital-intensive rather than a labor-intensive approach to conflict. We have been willing to make huge investments in extraordinarily capable ships and aircraft in order to minimize or preclude what Carl von Clausewitz referred to as the “cash payment” of the decision by combat—especially ground combat.¹

While our ground combat forces possess enormous strength and significant standoff advantages through the use of technology, their use places a large number of troops at

risk. We have deliberately chosen to place more of our technology-enabled capital at risk, and less of our human capital; we are much more willing to spend money and expend machines than to expend lives.

Put into a campaign perspective, this means that we have a fairly standardized sequence of priorities that we want to accomplish during a crisis leading to a conflict and then during the conflict itself. First, we want to ensure that we have freedom of action in order to project forces and ensure the continuity of their logistical support. This means establishing air and maritime superiority in the area of operations and along the lines of communication (LOC) that extend from our power projection bases to the area of operations. Such freedom of navigation is essential for projecting and deploying any type of combat power, including ground combat power. Establishing local air superiority is a

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critical precursor to employing ground forces, and we certainly strive to achieve air supremacy. We are unwilling to risk having precious ground forces destroyed by enemy aircraft or tactical ballistic missiles.

Lessons from U.S. History

We need look only as far as our own history to see how true the above assertions are and why. The turning point in the joint campaign to capture Guadalcanal, for instance, occurred when the Navy interdicted the Tokyo Express in November 1942, as it was attempting to deliver the bulk of the Japanese 38th Infantry Division to the island. Of the 10,000 Japanese troops destined for Guadalcanal, only 4,000 arrived, and the Japanese never again attempted a similar reinforcement operation.

air and ground battles. This was true during the Korean War, Vietnam, Operations *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm*, the Balkan conflicts, and Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*.

The same is true, although perhaps less so, when we consider airpower. Superiority in the air is a prerequisite for freedom of navigation, security of LOC, and the deployment or employment of ground forces. We need air superiority not only to protect our freedom of movement but also to conduct offensive air operations that shape the battle environment and protect our ground forces—close air support, air interdiction, and a strategic air campaign. One of the differences between the maritime and air environments is that we are more likely to find a challenging air environ-

ground environment in our favor, attempting to ensure that our ground forces do not have to cope with an enemy force that could overwhelm them through sheer mass.

We also enable our forces to maneuver effectively, avoiding enemy strengths and focusing on enemy weaknesses. *Desert Storm* was a superb example of this type of campaign at work. A relatively well-equipped enemy was first blinded through destruction of its air component, and then completely deceived by operational maneuver on an unprecedented scale. With air supremacy, we were able to maneuver ground forces without fear of air interdiction, or even of detection by means of aerial reconnaissance during the critical pre-ground offensive operational movement of the XVIII and VII Corps to the west, while inflicting overwhelming casualties on enemy ground forces through air interdiction.³

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How much difference did this maritime interdiction make to the beleaguered U.S. ground forces? It is hard to say, but this engagement occurred almost exactly halfway through the extended series of ground battles to secure Guadalcanal. Japanese troop strength had steadily increased until the destruction of the Tokyo Express, peaking at 30,000 in November. In December, it dropped to 25,000. Without fresh troops and effective resupply, Japanese capability to mount a counterattack dwindled, and the tactical initiative shifted to the Americans, enabling a string of hard-fought but successful ground battles, gaining momentum until the island was declared secure in late February 1943.²

We have been uncontested during real conflict at sea since World War II. Just the same, because the Soviet Union was perceived as such a serious threat during the Cold War, we invested enormous talent and treasure to ensure that we could prevail in any conflict, especially that we could maintain freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic through the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom gap in the event of a conflict in Europe. Local threats to freedom of movement, through the Straits of Hormuz or in the Gulf of Sidra, for example, have been taken seriously and dealt with successfully without major sea battles. Consequently, during major conflicts, our maritime forces have been employed primarily to augment and support domination of the

ment than a challenging maritime environment. Since the United States has no peer in the maritime environment, an adversary would be unable to challenge U.S. forces there, except in a relatively small locale, and then only for a short time.

The situation is not quite as rosy in the air environment. Many nations, among them potential adversaries, have chosen to invest heavily in their air components and air defense forces. With these forces, they are able to establish at least parity over their sovereign territory and may have the capability to extend an umbrella of superiority in the region beyond their borders, including maritime areas. Consequently, to maintain freedom of movement, reduction or elimination of the air threat is a high priority, even with secure strategic LOC from power projection bases. We secure the sea and air first and then launch ground operations.

This style of warfare has allowed us to prevail, using our technological advantage to enable maneuver of forces and massing of fires without necessarily massing our most prized resource—personnel. Our ability to establish superiority, even supremacy, over enemy air and maritime forces means that we are able to interdict those forces not only as they deploy through the air and maritime environments, but also, almost at will, as they attempt to move or maneuver on the ground. We use these advantages to shape the

The Dilemma of Success

Phenomenal success has created a training dilemma. We still want our ground forces to experience the rigor of engaging a competent near-peer ground force in a high-intensity environment. We have done so in the past by creating training experiences largely devoid of the synergistic contributions of the other Services. The Combat Training Center (CTC) experience and the Battle Command Training Program (BCTP) “Warfighter” experience have been superb for supplying rigorous, high-stress training for ground combat, but until recently, they have been relatively devoid of joint context. Even now, providing a joint context in the “dirt” CTC and “virtual” BCTP training environments is focused primarily on tasks supporting the tactical level, providing nonorganic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support, fire support, or logistics.⁴

Participants in CTC training perceive a joint environment, but the joint context is shaped to provide an awareness of other Services, not an appreciation for capabilities that can furnish operational level shaping of the battlespace. This is not a criticism of the tactical focus of CTC; it is merely an observation of a limitation imposed by that focus. Part of the Army’s Title 10 responsibility is to provide trained, equipped, and ready forces to combatant commanders. Tactical proficiency is paramount, so we have learned how to develop and maintain superb tactical proficiency.

Excessive focus on the contributions of other Services at the tactical level of ground

combat causes us to overlook or ignore the operational level contributions they make through the prosecution of their own tactical level engagements in their respective environments. Maritime interdiction of a sea LOC and air interdiction of deploying ground forces, for example, are tactical missions for the respective Services, but they have operational level impact on the campaign.

As ground component forces, we have trained well to succeed at the tactical level of combat. We can congratulate ourselves for becoming the best in the world at what we do. But we must temper that pride with recognition of two significant facts: the contributions of our comrades in arms in the other Services have enabled success through their contributions to the campaign; and we need to be able to think operationally as well as tactically in order to get the most out of the capabilities of the other Services. Tactical level mastery at any level, from fire team to field army, is

a perishable skill. We must retain our level of excellence in the ground combat environment by sustaining rigorous training. But we must not rest on our laurels, because we have learned the hard way that tactical level success can be extraordinarily expensive and that tactical success on the ground does not necessarily translate into operational or strategic level victory.

Training at the Operational Level

If the Army and Marine Corps are to fulfill roles at the operational level in the joint tactical/operational/strategic framework, we need to develop an ability to think and plan at the operational level. That includes an ability to shift focus from the ground tactical fight to the joint multicomponent fight. This ability seems a simple thing, but it has proven extraordinarily difficult, and that is not unique to the Army. Each Service has a tendency to see the universe from its

own habitual perspective. For the ground components (and this is especially true of their staffs), there is a tendency to focus on the close fight, while ignoring the value or even the possibility of air or sea interdiction of deploying forces or lines of communication. Air and maritime component personnel show the same characteristic: a tendency to seek elimination of all risk from an enemy operating in their respective domains before they are inclined to provide resources to support other components' fights. This is not necessarily a matter of Service parochialism; it is a predictable consequence of the way we concentrate on our own tactical domains within each Service in our respective professional development processes of training, experience, and self-study.

A single exercise cannot adequately meet the desired training objectives of all the training stakeholders. Conflicting requirements from the various Services weigh against

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Soldiers participate in Exercise Omega at the Joint Multinational Readiness Training Center

Training during Exercise Fowl Eagle 2007

Fleet Combat Camera Group
(Sandra Palumbo)

U.S. Army (Gary Kieffer)



Multinational troops staff operations headquarters during Exercise Tradewinds

DOD (Joseph Bonet)

the design of an exercise that can be all things to all components. Meeting the needs of the land component is particularly difficult if the air and maritime components are exercised well and employed effectively. This becomes a strong argument against embedding a warfighter exercise (WFX) in a joint training exercise, which may appear to be cost efficient from a training dollar perspective but competes with training effectiveness.

For example, for an Army corps (or a Marine expeditionary force, for that matter) acting as a joint task force (JTF) headquarters, the first priority must be to fight the joint fight—that is, to take advantage of the synergy available from synchronized, coordinated employment of capabilities from all the Services. If they fight the joint fight well, they are unlikely to face the ground combat intensity that characterizes WFX rigor. Only if they fail to perform their JTF headquarters role well will they experience WFX-style rigor in the ground fight. To achieve that level of intensity in the ground fight would require restraining the success of the air and maritime components by constraining their actions to limit effectiveness or overwhelming them with a superior opposing force. Both of these options (constraining and overwhelming) require a highly contrived scenario—entirely possible, but not necessarily good training.

There are exceptions. Embedding a lower level exercise—a brigade or division WFX, for example—within a joint level exercise in which the WFX training audience is not a joint level headquarters allows deliberate shaping of the virtual battle environment in order to create what we have traditionally considered WFX rigor. This would require much less contrivance, as opposing ground forces could reasonably be expected to gain local tactical superiority from time to time.

Another approach would be to rationalize training objectives more rigorously for joint level exercises. This approach would

prioritize the training value for the joint level headquarters and provide clear priorities for the training experiences of the secondary training audiences (the Services). A well-written scenario and effective exercise design could provide a rigorous training experience for any component, but such a design requires acknowledging that not every component can have the first priority. For example, in one year, in a given exercise, we would give the higher training priority to the land component as the supported command, with the air and maritime components as the supporting commands. The following year, or in another exercise, the training priority can be different. It is not an issue of which component is more important but rather of getting the best training experience for all the components and recognizing that we probably cannot accomplish all of that in a single exercise. From a systems perspective, it is merely recognizing that in order to optimize the entire system, we may have to accept suboptimization of a system component, at least from that component's perspective.

Yet another approach would exercise a joint force through all the phases of an entire campaign: deter/engage, seize the initiative, decisive operations, and transition.⁵ This approach is seldom if ever seen because it takes so long to develop the campaign and its outcomes. However, by linking a series of exercises, such an approach would be possible. Service training experience priorities can be built into the different phases of the campaign that run through and link the series of exercise events. This would allow the JTF headquarters to experience the challenges of not only integrating the component capabilities but also allowing the headquarters to experience the challenge of planning and executing the transitions between phases and shifting supported and supporting command relationships. A natural byproduct of this design would be to allow each of the Services to experience

supported and supporting command responsibilities and to experience the kind of training rigor each desires.

Joint training exercises create a Service training dilemma: good joint level training does not necessarily provide a good component training experience. This is not an unsolvable problem, but it will require a systems view of the joint and Service training experience. A single exercise cannot be all things to all components. Rather, to provide good joint and operational level training experience, individual components may find their experience suboptimized in any given exercise. With a long-term approach to exercise planning, however, everyone (the JTF headquarters and the individual Services) can experience the kind of training rigor they desire. They simply cannot all experience it at the same time or in every exercise. Overall systems optimization will most likely require suboptimization in order to put everyone through the desired level of rigor over time. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Penguin Books, 1982).

² Charles R. Anderson, *Guadalcanal—The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1989), available at <www.army.mil/cmh-pg/brochures/72-8/72-8.htm>.

³ Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1993).

⁴ William S. Wallace, Timothy D. Livsey, and Richard A. Totleben, "A Joint Context for Training at the Combat Training Centers," *Military Review* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2004).

⁵ Joint Publication 5–00.1, *Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, January 2002).