



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail: When CONOPs Replace OPORDs

By *Thomas Doherty*

Journal Article | Aug 28 2012 - 9:27am

### **Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail: When CONOPs Replace OPORDs**

Thomas Doherty - With contributions from Mr. Welton Chang

#### **Introduction**

Anyone who has deployed has encountered the CONOP, which is the concept of the operation portion of a operations order (OPORD). The CONOP has replaced the traditional five paragraph OPORD; however, unlike the OPORD, the CONOP does not have a standardized format, nor agreed upon content and varies from unit to unit. Thus, every CONOP is different. Though it was originally developed to streamline and expedite the orders process, it has done the opposite, forcing leaders to expend time, effort and energy to push the CONOP through the approval process from the lowest to the highest levels; time that should be spent on mission planning.

Providing only the concept of the operation paragraph does not provide sufficient information to a conduct a mission. Therefore, commanders have added additional requirements when submitting CONOPs and these requirements differ depending on what level of CONOP submitted. These requirements are necessary for CONOP approval; thus, CONOPs are often written in a way that will secure higher headquarters (HQs) approval, even if the information is not completely accurate. And, because approval is the ultimate goal, planning and mission analysis receives minimal attention as a leaders time is spent developing the CONOP product. As a result, we have reduced well thought out orders to a process that goes against the tenets of counter insurgency doctrine, which emphasizes the importance of mission command.

What follows is a critical look at the CONOP process. The criticisms in this essay are based on my experience as a Special Forces Non-Commissioned Officer and Infantry Officer during tours in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Additionally, from my observations as an Observer Controller Trainer (OC/T) at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC); a survey conducted of 61 graduates from the Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC); and a comparative survey of CONOPs submitted by combat arms units during JRTC rotations. Unless otherwise cited the data and analysis presented in this article is derived from these two surveys.

#### **How Does a CONOP differ from an OPORD?**

The Army develops a twenty one page OPORD with annexes (4th BCT, 82nd ABN DIV, "OPORD 11-19 4th BCT OPERATION CLEAN SWEEP," 29 Mar. 2011) when conducting Operation Clean Sweep, which is a yearly event to clean up trash and move pine cones further away from the roads at Fort Bragg.

Conversely, the capture of a terrorist cell leader in Afghanistan is conducted with a far less detailed ad hoc CONOP, which will likely be unsuccessful due to the lack of planning. This, however, does not mean an OPORD will guarantee mission success; **so true was this for Operation Rock Move in Afghanistan, which ultimately resulted in an operational-level defeat of U.S. forces.** Thus, the order type does not guarantee mission success; however, the level of planning that occurs can tip the scales. As GEN Eisenhower said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”

A generally held belief exists that a CONOP and OPORD cover the same details. This, however, is not the case and there are, in fact, huge differences. One issue with the CONOP is the lack of doctrinal format, which is dependent on the unit’s SOPs. FM 5-0 states that the, “*Prerequisites for effective mission command are the use of mission orders, full familiarity with the commander’s intent throughout the force, and mutual trust and understanding between commanders and subordinates.*” A CONOP is not a mission order; it is a subparagraph of an OPORD. According to FM 5-0, “There are three types of orders: Operation order (OPORD), Fragmentary order (FRAGO), Warning order (WARNO).” The most descriptive and thought out is the OPORD; however, the OPORD has been relegated to executing mundane administrative tasks.

### Comparing Apples to Crab Apples

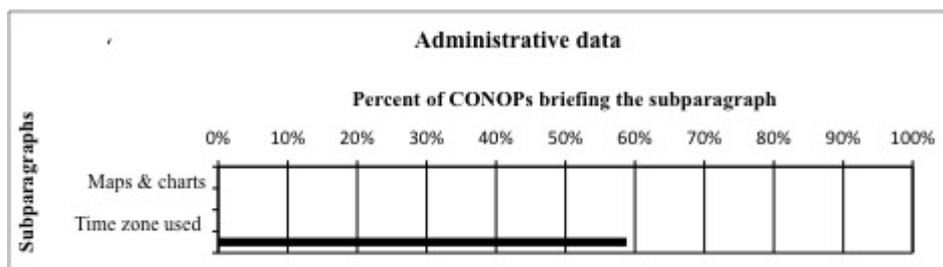
In this section I will conduct a line-by-line comparison of an OPORD layout derived from FM 5-0 Appendix E to CONOPs executed at JRTC. FM 5-0 was used instead of more detailed formats like that in FM 3-55.93 as it is applicable to most unit types. I compared the information given in five battalion and 12 company/troop CONOPs to what was supposed to be given in the FM 5-0 OPORD format.

At first I applied an MCCC standard. If the sub paragraph was briefed by a student at the MCCC, would it receive a marginal or better grade? This standard proved to be too high. In fact only 11.5 percent of captains polled stated their higher HQ’s orders would have passed MCCC standards. The standard was then lowered to a rather unscientific but illustrative level; a level called, ‘giving it the old college try.’ In this way the numbers were elevated to a measureable level.

Some examples of using the ‘old college try’ method are as follows: One CONOP stated the concept of the operation and listed out the titles of the phases but nothing else and did not receive credit. Another CONOP stated concept of the operation and gave only the company task (T). Even though it did not give any other information normally required, it was given credit. Graphics were given credit even if the T or purpose (P) was not doctrinal and/or did not match the symbols. If “as per SOP” or something similar was used, credit was given. This means even when you see specific items covered they were often covered at a substandard level.

### Administrative Data

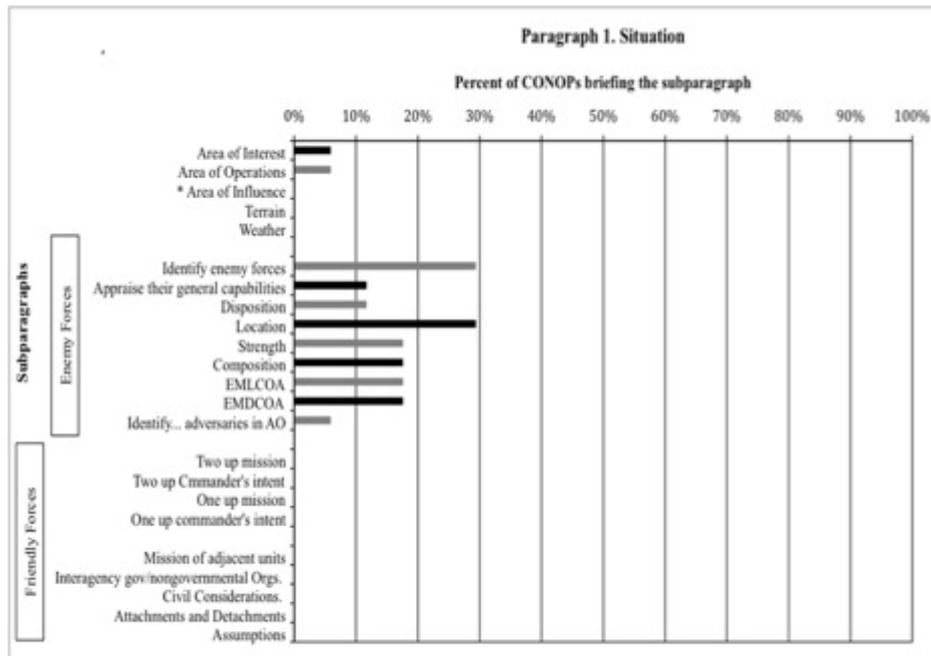
Figure 1



As seen in figure 1, the administrative data section is missing information. The ‘Clean Sweep’ OPORD had all of the administrative data. Although this information may be considered trivial, in a joint environment, time zone used is increasingly important.

### Paragraph 1. Situation

Figure 2



\*Area of Influence has not been added to the FM 5-0 yet, it is a subparagraph briefed in the MCCC

As students of the Art of War, most of us have heard the Sun Tzu quote, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” From this quote we can discern the chances of success in a near peer fight.

### Enemy Forces

The lack of terrain analysis is a noted trend at JRTC as units rarely had or referenced graphical terrain analysis or a Modified Combined Obstacle Overlay. Oftentimes CONOPs were constructed with a quick look at a map or aerial photography without deeper analysis for intervisibility lines, etc. Units that conducted a thorough terrain analysis performed better. For example, at the **Battle of Wanat** approximately two companies of enemy combatants got into their assault positions undetected. The enemy was only seen once before the fight though they were so close that some suspect they reversed the direction of emplaced claymore mines. They did this even though Coalition Forces (CF) were equipped with a high-tech optics. The enemy had clearly conducted a thorough terrain analysis prior to the attack.

The CONOPs were slightly better regarding enemy analysis. Enemy locations and identification on the objective is often the target house, which contains the High Value Individual (HVI). This is usually the strongest part of the enemy analysis portion of the CONOP. It was rare to see some form of planning aid such as a “Red Checkbook” used by commanders and staffs. It was easy enough to know if a planner was using these aids. For example, one CONOP stated the enemy composition was an HVI with 3-5 associated personnel; however, the graphics showed four fire team sized elements; thus, an obvious disconnect. With

the exception of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) not one CONOP included the suspected positions for enemy crew-served weapons. In addition, subordinate elements were often given limited and conflicting information on what to expect from the enemy.

The enemy's most likely or most dangerous courses of actions (EMLCOA/EMDCOA) were lacking as well. CONOP's tended to give rather "canned" enemy situation statements such as "the enemy will be alerted and run" for the EMLCOA and "they will conduct a complex attack with an IED and small arms fire" for the EMDCOA. Therefore, using the EML/MDCOA analysis to determine enemy reaction was not accomplished. A lack of terrain and enemy analysis means units cannot anticipate where the enemy might run or how they will use terrain to their advantage. An objective EML/MDCOA, coupled with the other portions of paragraph one, will make units more effective at anticipating enemy actions.

### **Friendly Forces**

Surprisingly, none of the CONOPs included higher commander's intent, which ultimately causes a breakdown of the common operating picture (COP). Commanders cannot trust a leader two levels down if he does not know or understand your intent. Without this basic understanding, subordinate units cannot take initiative and operate effectively to support the overall mission.

In the current operating environment, coordination with the interagency, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations is vital to mission success. Thus, we must understand that our operations affect their ability to operate and vice versa. We must work together and synchronize our efforts to prevent disjointed messaging and duplicative efforts. This will prevent project and information operations (IO) fratricide.

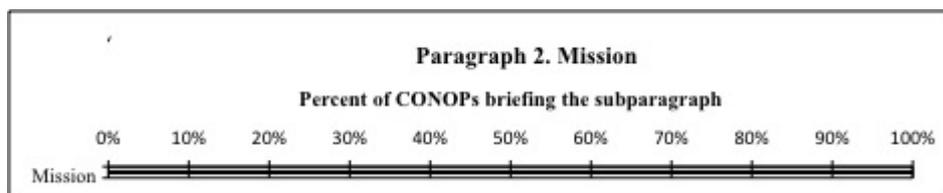
"In COIN operations, the population is vital—since whoever the populations supports has the advantage. Consequently, civil considerations are normally the most important mission variable for COIN."- FM 3-24.2. Although all of the CONOPs analyzed were for OEF/OIF-based mission readiness exercises, none contained information on civil considerations (ASCOPE) or COIN operational variables (PMSII-PT).

Sometimes units assumed attachment/detachment information to be the same as the task organization and therefore did not provide a separate attachment/detachment list of any type. This is integral to the common operating picture when operating in a joint environment, as other organizations must know what key pieces of equipment or elements are attached/detached.

The end result is we have limited knowledge of the enemy and even less knowledge of ourselves. We have set the stage for defeat. Although we believe we have never been defeated, that statement is not accurate. For example: CF unit X is tasked to SECURE a logistics convoy against Anti-Coalition Forces unit Y. Unit Y is tasked to DISRUPT CF convoys. One exploded IED on one CF vehicle and six hours of recovery operations later-- CF has failed and the enemy has succeeded. We have lost innumerable fights and perhaps would have lost less if we had conducted the proper analysis needed to write paragraph one of a doctrinal OPORD.

### **Paragraph 2. Mission**

Figure 3

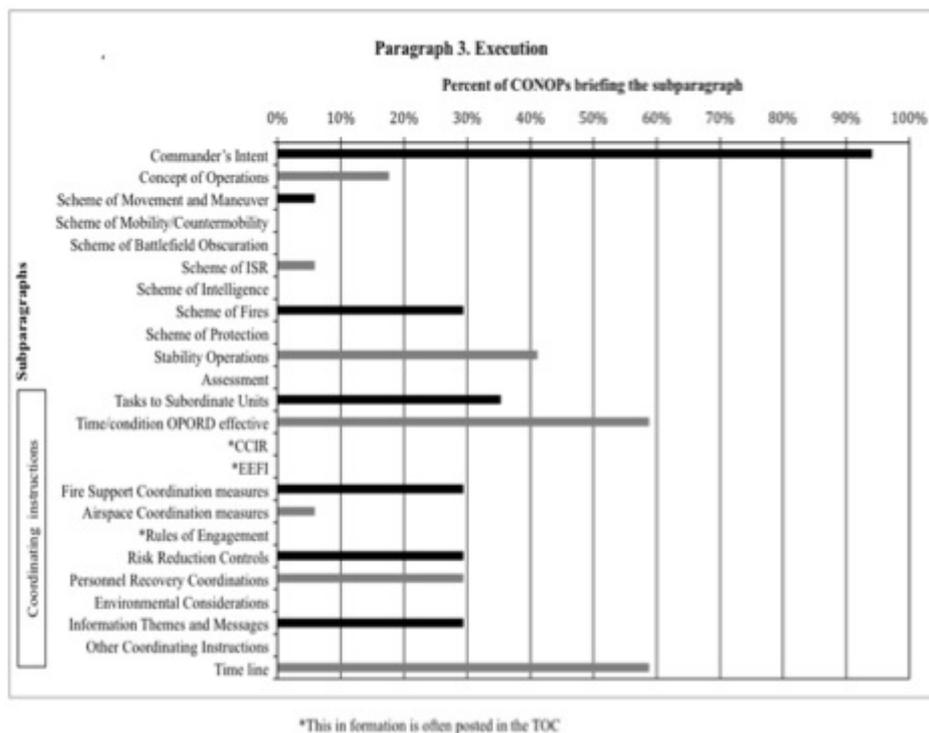


Mission statements typically did not use doctrinal terms or when used, use them correctly. There was a lack of emphasis on producing a correct mission statement, which could ultimately affect deliberately planned orders. At lower levels, within purely organic small units, this may not be an issue; however, in joint environments, using doctrinal terms and using them correctly becomes more important.

There is a common belief that key leader engagements (KLE) and joint presence patrol (JPP) are tactical tasks. When S3s were asked what these various Ts and Ps meant, they would typically give different answers or say 'I do not know.' Then, when you add an ambiguous purpose statement such as "...in order to GAIN time and space" you have essentially added to the fog of war. No common operating picture exists between boots on the ground and brigade battle CPT for a unit with T: JPP and P: Gain time and space.

### Paragraph 3. Execution

Figure 4



There is a lack of understanding of the importance of synchronizing movement and maneuver. Having some form of commander's intent at this level demonstrated an attempt to present the immediate level commander's intent. When this was done at battalion level it gave sufficient guidance to the squad level.

If a CONOP was truly a concept of the operation, this subparagraph would be the only portion needed and all CONOPs would be one slide put together after COA approval. Due to the typical practice of using the CONOP as an OPORD means attention must be paid to explaining the concept.

The combination of limited infrastructure, terrain in the OE, and use of heavy vehicles with limited off road capabilities, canalizes our forces. Understanding the scheme of maneuver, mobility/counter mobility, and battlefield observation will increase safety and mission success. For example, F/51 (LRS) (ABN) combined this information with the information in paragraph one during the Iraq surge. As a result they were able to maneuver throughout the Diyala province for four months without striking any IEDs.

## **Subparagraphs**

Considering that “intel drives ops” the intelligence subparagraphs should be emphasized more. Oftentimes unmanned aerial surveillance receives more attention than the soldier. The soldier is the most prolific organic intelligence asset to the unit and should be used as such.

All CONOPS examined belonged to units that had some form of organic fire support. Units that briefed fires were given credit under both scheme of fires and fire support coordination measures. Not one CONOP covered the non-lethal side of the fires subparagraph. The lack of airspace coordination measures contributes to slower indirect support and will be problematic when conducting unified land operations (ULO).

Fulfillment of information requirements under stability operations was rarely evident; however, some CONOPs provided information on lines of effort and were given credit. As a result, some CONOPs included information related to stability operations. This area was not covered in the manner intended by the FM 5-0.

By not providing proper assessment criteria, subordinate units have limited ability to know if they are succeeding. This, coupled with a lack of commander’s intent and unclear mission statements, nearly destroys any chance of forming a COP.

## **Tasks to Subordinate Units**

Typically, tasks to subordinate units was completed in the graphics with some ‘T: P:’ next to the icons. The FM 5-0 standard includes “... each task must include who (the subordinate unit assigned the task), what (the task itself), when, where, and why (purpose)...;” aka, the mission statement for subordinate units. The T/P format is effectively using shorthand in an outline while expecting everyone to get the nuances of the whole story. To add to the confusion, the graphical symbols and T did not always match and were often not nested.

Commander’s Critical Information Requirements, Rules of Engagement, and Essential Elements of Friendly Information are not mentioned; however, they are practically SOP and usually posted in the TOC. These subparagraphs are typically not mission specific; however, they are typically one of the better known SOPs a unit has.

Surprisingly, risk reduction control measures did not mention proper planning and analytic procedures as one of the measures. This should be removed from the OPORD format and left in COA development. Nor were target reference points (TRP) or other direct fire control measures found in any CONOPs. This would be an automatic ‘No Go’ for students at the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE). Considering the time we spend copying and pasting risk assessments for a combat operation, some simple TRPs would be immeasurable in reducing risk. Under risk reduction control measures, FM 5-0 specifically states “...and fratricide prevention measures.” To put it bluntly, there would be a 100 percent fail rate at the MCoE for battalion staffs and company commanders for this oversight.

Personnel recovery information was not given great emphasis. Oftentimes units have what is referred to as ‘DUSTWUN CONOP’ for personnel recovery.

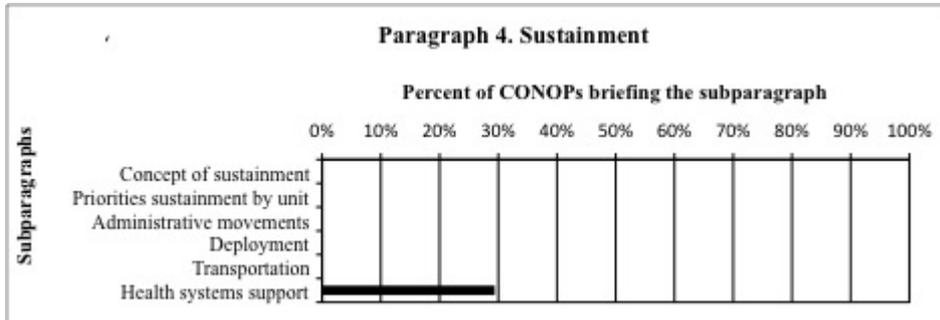
Information themes and messages did not receive sufficient focus. We are continuously defeated in the “IO war.” Poor planning is a contributing factor.

Oftentimes coordinating instructions consisted of, at most, a timeline. The lack of coordinating instructions leads to a lack of synchronization on the battlefield. An example of this is units at JRTC

starting the search before their cordon is set.

### Paragraph 4. Sustainment

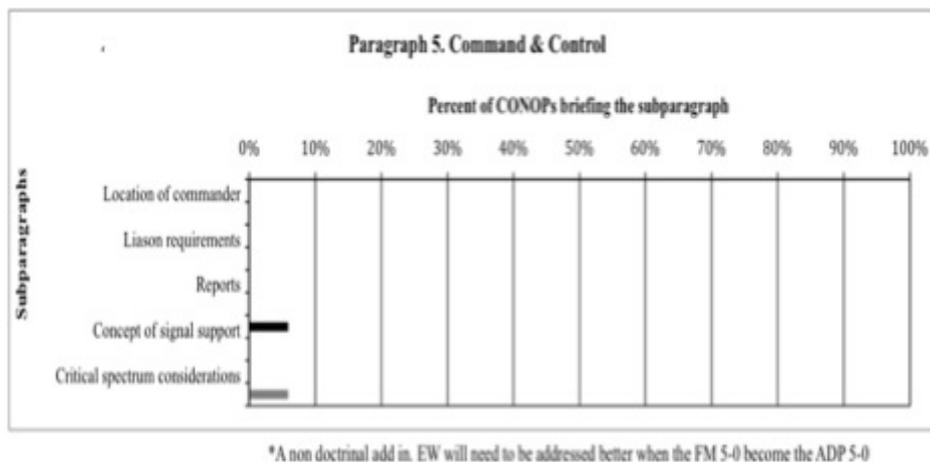
Figure 5



Medevac was the only part covered in any of the CONOPs. The PSG or XO may put out something verbally but this tends to be ‘winged’ with little deliberate planning such as weight carried for dismounted movement. When this is not planned, you end up with units less than an EIB road march distance away from their battalion base, BLACK on water; similar to what happened at the Battle of Wanat.

### Paragraph 5. Command and Control

Figure 6



Paragraph 5 was all but ignored on the majority of CONOPs. One unit added a new subparagraph by covering effects of jamming on friendly units. In fact, the argument was put forth that, “everyone knows where the key leaders are” as a defense for lack of C2 information.

### Is There a Problem?

There were a series of meetings between the staffs of the MCCC and the JRTC OC/Ts centering on why units at JRTC do not conduct good planning and mission analysis. The reason believed for poor planning was due to “product fixation.” Leaders up and down the chain of command were so focused on getting CONOPs submitted, due to the lengthy approval times, that they did not take time to employ the military decision making process (MDMP) or conduct troop leading procedures (TLP). Instead of planning, staffs and commanders focused on “gaming” the system, designing a CONOP product that would satisfy higher

HQs.

Harsh realities exist that force this reaction. According to those surveyed, the average CONOP approval time was 36.11 hours for a level zero and 89.4 hours for the level one CONOP. Of captains surveyed, 70.7 percent believed the enemy was able to get away or better prepare due to the slow approval process. This forces subordinates to submit the CONOP with minimal information due to fears of a more detailed one getting “kicked back.” As a result, enemy analysis becomes whatever will fit in a small box on a PowerPoint slide with size ten font. What would normally be so much information it may need its own annex, is reduced to a couple of sentences.

In discussions with participants on how to get units to conduct terrain and enemy analysis, the best solution put forth was to force the writing of an OPORD and issuing a doctrinal OPORD to subordinate units. This would keep soldiers from ending up like the Marines in the AKO photo (figure 7) who had no idea about the terrain they were walking in to. With the terrain being so different from what they expected, it can be safely assumed they had little to no idea about the enemy’s tactics, techniques, and procedures in that area of operations.

Due to the common practice of briefing higher’s CONOP to lower, important subparagraphs were not broken down to a more relevant level for the soldier on the ground. In fact, not one examined CONOP had an annex for the relevant subparagraphs. Some company commanders are purposely not conducting enemy analysis (See Junger, Sebastian, and Tim Hetherington. Restrepo. 2010. National Geographic Entertainment. DVD). As a result, soldiers go into battle knowing less information about the enemy than is available. Of captains surveyed, 57.9 percent said their unit did not use a doctrinal planning format for planning their CONOPs. Approximately 83 percent believed their unit’s performance would be enhanced by better planning practices. Nearly 70 percent said time spent writing and getting CONOPs approved used up time they would normally use for planning.

Some leaders argue that units write both an OPORD and CONOP. Only 37.9 percent of survey respondents stated their unit produced both OPORDs and CONOPs, When given a mission by their higher command, 68.9 percent of surveyed captains said they rarely to never received an actual OPORD. Approximately 80 percent said they received a CONOP instead of an operations order for a mission ordered by their higher command.

The CONOP does not provide the needed information to subordinate units and leaves large gaps in key areas. Unfortunately, higher HQs CONOPs were routinely briefed to subordinates without further analysis. If CONOPs were just the concept of the operation and not used as the OPORD, then much of this would be moot; however, since they are being used as THE OPORD and often not broken down further by subordinate units, all of this missing information becomes much more critical. Information is power and we are sending troops into contact with little power, and a detailed risk assessment.

Of the captains surveyed, 89.5 percent said they were not given an OPORD by higher HQ that would receive even a marginal grade at the MCCC. A little over 79 percent stated the orders they gave would also not have passed. In other words, we have accepted substandard planning.

## **Solutions**

The solutions to our planning problems are not difficult and require no new ADP or change in teaching formats at any of the Centers of Excellence. Commanders should reinvigorate and enforce the doctrinal OPORD format and follow the rule “... generally free of mistakes.” We cannot continue to advance doctrine when we have not tested its current design. With the current MCCC standard for a company OPORD with graphics at six hours, an “emergency assault plan” planning sequence should be developed.

This plan would provide guidance to company level commanders for two types of missions: those that must launch in 1-2 hours and those that must launch in 3-6 hours. Additionally, we should develop a formal abbreviated format to produce battalion level orders in 6-8 hours.

Ancillary items like risk assessments should be eliminated. Currently a platoon leader may need to ask the brigade commander to sign his risk assessment. To streamline the process it should be implicit that any command that issues an OPORD has preapproved the risk involved in the mission and approved his subordinate commander to do likewise. The COA analysis is the risk assessment. The commander has determined the best and therefore safest way to achieve the mission.

In the current OE, the three biggest issues raised are battle tracking, asset requests, and bottom up refinement. In effect this is saying current doctrine does not battle track, does not assign assets, and subordinates do not talk to their superiors. It assumes that no one in US Army history did that before the advent of the CONOP. This is a false assumption. Even with CONOPs, battle tracking is done over BFT and radio. If you give a subordinate unit an order to conduct a mission you have been notified they will conduct a mission within your own scheme of maneuver. WARNOs are an integral part of the targeting process and if done properly, the foundation of the plan. By adding final details, the higher command is already tracking the mission. This is not to say units should stop sending up things like frontline trace or appropriate execution checklists. It is to say they should not have to wait for approval to conduct a mission higher HQ has already ordered them to do. It is possible this very problem allowed Bin Laden to escape from Tora Bora (See Newton, J. S. "Missed Opportunity." The Fayetteville Observer 2 Aug. 2002). It has **certainly resulted in the failure to capture other HVIs in theater.**

Asset requests via CONOPs should also be eliminated as the higher HQ's OPORD will assign priorities for various assets. Be they indirect fire, intelligence assets, or priority of sustainment, it should all be listed in the OPORD. For future missions, a request form with a mission statement covering the 5W's should be sufficient to request these assets. With the priorities already laid out by higher, this process will be streamlined. Any adjustments can be sent in a FRAGO. This process would be covered in the coordinating instructions subparagraph.

Bottom up refinement would be handled within the normal targeting process. After a subordinate unit develops a target set, they nominate it, and send it to higher HQ for approval or given other guidance. If accepted, the approving command develops the target specific WARNO and assigns it a priority. If the targeting process is performed properly then WARNO 1-3 will be given to the subordinate units. Upon receipt of WARNO 1, the subordinate unit begins the parallel planning process that allows for a rapid preplanned thought out response to the target when it becomes actionable. The target's priority dictates what types of assets would be devoted to the mission.

All subordinate commanders and leaders should be solely responsible for approving the missions of their subordinate echelons. Platoon leaders should not be submitting CONOPs to battalion staffs for approval. This will change the focus from getting a higher HQ's approval to supervising subordinate echelons. This will also bring the span of control from 20+ back to around the 3-5 mark at the battalion level.

As we change FM 5-0 to ADP 5-0, the OPORD format should be added to and adjusted. The various detailed OPORD subparagraphs like those in FM 3-55.93 should be added. Electronic warfare should receive a subparagraph and a format similar to the IDF format developed for briefing it in the OPORD. All WFF should be grouped into one series of subparagraphs titled 'X. WFF.' The ADP 5-0 OPORD should become the most comprehensive version; therefore, allowing units to drop what is not needed during the planning process.

## **Conclusion**

“There is a type of staff officer who seems to think that it is more important to draft immaculate orders than to get out a reasonably well-worded order in time for action to be taken before the situation changes or the opportunity passes.”- BH Liddell Hart

I have never seen or written the perfect OPORD; however, given the state of our current planning, pulling out the Ranger handbook and giving verbal orders would lead to better planning and give more information to subordinates than the typical battalion CONOP. The OPORD enables mission command, which is essential in prosecuting a counterinsurgency campaign.

Not every mission will be launched with a well thought out order. This is part of warfare and the fog of war. But by constantly hitting the basics and doing MDMP/TLPs to the extent time permits, we will build a capacity to give better rapid orders when in a true time crunch.

Winston Churchill famously said, “Failing to plan is planning to fail.” The CONOP process has unintentionally reduced our planning and dissemination of information. The focus is on slide construction and font management. CONOPs should be done away with. A strong effort by the CTCs to enforce planning standards would go a long way to fixing the problem. Although this paper focuses on the Army, as we can see in the AKO photo (Figure 7) there is evidence the Marines are falling prey to the same problems. If a near peer fight occurs before our planning issues are corrected, a repeat of TF SMITH from the Korean War is highly probable.

Figure 7



Reno, Nev., native Lance Cpl. Daniel Wilson, a fire team leader with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, patrols through a cornfield in Nawa district, Helmand province. **Some of the Marines from Charlie Company were surprised with the vast amount of vegetation when they arrived to the area in June, expecting instead to be operating in barren terrain like other areas of Helmand province.** (Photo by U.S. Marine Corps) {photo used on AKO login page}

## About the Author



## **Thomas Doherty**

Thomas Doherty has served in both the enlisted and officer ranks in both the National Guard and active duty Army. Originally commissioned through the Arkansas National Guard OCS program he was re-commissioned via a direct commission. He has served in multiple military occupational specialties. His enlisted time includes service in 3rd Ranger Battalion, and 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne). His commissioned service time includes: platoon leader of both anti-armor and long range surveillance platoons, OC/T at JRTC, MFF ODA Commander, and other staff positions. He has deployed to Colombia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Tajikistan, Botswana, and Germany. Currently he is serving as a Special Forces officer.

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