



*Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, perform calibration on an M777 howitzer during Decisive Action Rotation 16-03 at the National Training Center. Decisive action rotations give Soldiers a realistic training experience to enhance their skills, and prepare for future deployments. (Pfc. Kyle Edwards/U.S. Army)*

# The right way to rehearse at NTC

By Lt. Col. Jonathan Shine

For years, observer coach trainers (OC/Ts) at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., have been giving units the same feedback after their rehearsals, "That was a pretty good back-brief, but it sure wasn't a rehearsal."

When I came to the NTC as a fire support coordinator (FSCOORD), I was determined that I was not going to get that observation from my OC/T. I soon realized, however, that I did not really know what the difference was, or why it mattered. Even when I completed my rotation, I knew that I was not conducting effective rehears-

als, but I did not have model of "what right looks like" to draw on. During my year as Wolf 07, the senior FA/Fires OC/T, I have observed similar struggles with enough FSCOORDs to believe that this trend persists.

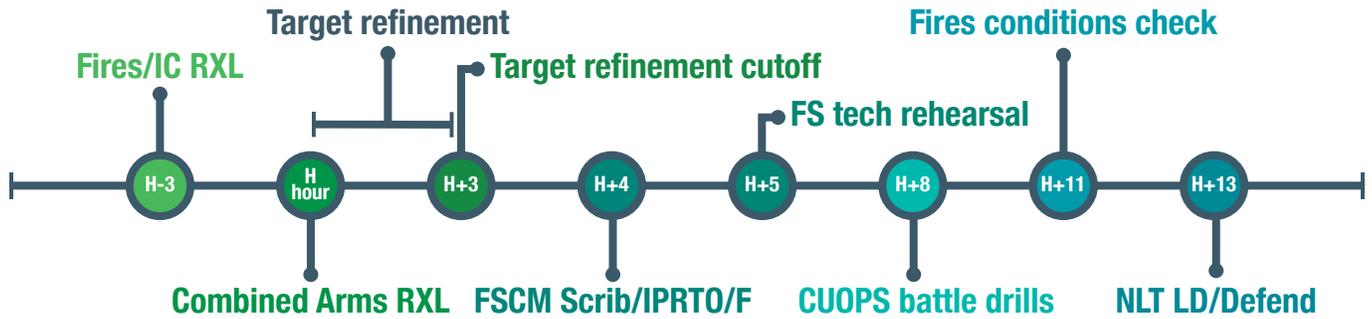
## Why?

The simplest explanation for why a planned rehearsal turns into a back-brief is that a rehearsal requires all participants to fully understand the plan from the beginning. With the extremely short timelines of action at the NTC, this is a luxury few units can achieve. In that case, a back-brief

is absolutely necessary. As a force, we have embraced the importance of rehearsals, but we place less emphasis on back-briefs as scheduled events prior to operations. Trying to rehearse a plan that is poorly understood is a waste of time. In a time-constrained environment, the FSCOORD may have to accept that a back-brief is the best the team can accomplish prior to the technical rehearsal.

## Think of it like sports

I played soccer in high school. When coach wanted to teach us a new play, he would first draw it up on a white board



Fire support coordinator's tasks based on H-hours. (Rick Paape, courtesy information)

(he called this a “chalk talk”) with X’s and O’s to represent each player on the field. The operation order brief is the brigade’s chalk talk. Afterwards, we would stand on the field and coach would physically place each player in their correct position. One at a time, we would walk through what we thought we were supposed to do, with coach correcting us if we had not fully understood our role. He called that “lineup.” Once we all knew where we were supposed to be on the field, we would move on to practice, where players moved and reacted with respect to their position to the ball, each other and the other team. This would start slowly, with the tempo increasing until we were ready for a scrimmage at “game speed,” with other players trying to stop us from scoring. That is a rehearsal.

### What’s the difference between a back-brief and a rehearsal?

A back-brief confirms that everyone on the Fires team understands their tasks, targets, triggers and observation responsibilities. It usually begins with the brigade combat team fire support officer (FSO) or FSCOORD describing the commander’s intent for Fires and the decisive point of the battle. Fire supporters should speak one at a time, with battalion FSOs typically briefing in regimental order following a pre-formatted script from the brigade’s standard operating procedure. During the back-brief, FSOs should cover the details of their targets (most often using the target, trigger, location, observer, delivery asset, attack guidance, communication net or TTLO-DAC method), and the FSCOORD injects little or no friction as the brief proceeds.

Once the team knows the plan, the FSCOORD can proceed to a BCT Fires rehearsal. Unlike a back-brief, the rehearsal is event-based. If the BCT has the initiative, then fire supporters move in accordance with the scheme of maneuver, calling out they are in position ready to observe, or IP-

RTO times and the targets as they meet the triggers. Adjacent players move at the same time, and if targets are triggered simultaneously, both FSOs call them out at the same time. The FDO allocates the targets to firing units and calls out the fire order for each mission as he receives them from the BCT. Simultaneously, the aviation representative and the intelligence collection manager move along the planned air routes for manned and unmanned aircraft in accordance with the air coordination order. These techniques help the whole team identify potential synchronization challenges and determine how to overcome them. In addition, the team works through the high payoff target list, rehearsing the entire kill chain as planned in the targetting process, from identification by a collector, through ground and airspace de-confliction, strike, and assessment communicated to the BCT commander. The FSCOORD, S2, or FSO induces additional, unplanned friction in the middle of the rehearsal (like opposing players during a scrimmage), with the Fires team reacting to the friction appropriately. The most obvious example is a counter-fire acquisition in the middle of a critical massed fire mission. At the end, the most successful FSCOORDs will re-set the board and rehearse again, at an increased tempo. The FSCOORD continues to have the team “do it again” until he or she is comfortable with the level of understanding and coordination amongst the team. At the end of the rehearsal, a designated officer or non-commissioned officer reviews any required coordination that has been identified, and the FSCOORD directs the target refinement cutoff time and the time of the Fires technical rehearsal.

### The toughest constraint: time

When time is limited, the FSCOORD directs the most decisive or most complicated portion of the fight to rehearse, with players moving to their position on the ter-

rain model that they would occupy at that phase of the battle. Even in this scenario, re-rehearsing the critical event at faster speed after a walk-through may be a better use of available time than working through the entire target list, ensuring the decisive tasks are well understood and synchronized. Regardless of constraints, the Fires team must enforce a target refinement cutoff time and a disciplined Fires technical rehearsal. In establishing the cutoff time, FSOs and FSCOORDs should consider the time required for FSOs to travel from the rehearsal site back to their own battalions and the time they need to conduct analysis and refine their targets and observation plan. From that point, time must be allocated to the BCT fire support element to validate the refinements and publish a refined target list worksheet (TLWS), and to the field artillery battalion fire direction officer to analyze the TLWS and conduct initial tactical fire direction. This allocation determines start time for the Fires technical rehearsal (see figure above).

A brigade Fires plan that is not rehearsed will not be responsive. Many FSCOORDs and FSOs fail to execute an effective rehearsal either because they try to rehearse a plan that is poorly understood, or because they are simply unable to visualize what an effective rehearsal looks like. Adding a back-brief to the schedule, even if it occurs immediately prior to the rehearsal, ensures understanding of tasks and allows the team to truly rehearse the plan prior to execution. Thinking of the rehearsal in terms of sports practice, rather than a scripted military briefing, helps many FSCOORDs direct a more effective and efficient rehearsal process.

*Lt. Col. Jonathan Shine is currently a student at the U.S. Army War College. Shine formerly served as a National Training Center senior fire support trainer.*