A way to more efficiently train and certify fire supporters in a BCT

By Maj. Steven Huckleberry and Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin M. Block

Last year, several key leaders transitioned roles in the brigade combat team (BCT) Fires Cell and D Battery was deactivated just as the team was ramping up to conduct its bi-annual Fire Support Team (FIST) certification following a recent National Training Center rotation. The culmination of this FIST certification being a virtual Fires coordination exercise (FCX) in the virtual battlespace 3 (VBS3). Over the course of this certification, the new leadership noted a few items that warranted a reassessment and review of policies and procedures in an effort to make it a better process. First, there were several inefficiencies noted in the management of the program. This presented a throughput issue that challenged the fire supporters, given the diverse schedule of each task force and the number of hours it takes to conduct a proper certification. Second, the management and execution of the certification program reduced much of the responsibility inherent on subordinate level leaders to train and manage their formations. Not only did this diminish an exceptional opportunity to professionally develop these leaders before they assumed roles of greater re-

Leveraging the virtual gaming network enabled maneuver and fire support elements to demonstrate their proficiency prior to live-fire exercises. (Courtesy photo)
sponsibility, but it also reduced the opportunity for creative solutions to the time management issue. Third, there was very little investment by the maneuver commanders in the FCX, a critical component to Fire Support (FS) Tables III and IV. Their involvement varied across the formation, but ranged from sending only a handful of Soldiers with the company commander to a couple of lieutenants representing the entire unit. In the end, everyone worked through the friction but it took more time to complete than would be acceptable and sustainable in a more rigorous training schedule. In all, the certification took approximately eight weeks to accomplish, spread across three months.

First, we worked to develop a model that would provide a sustainable readiness for our FIST teams. Forward observer certification takes 12.5 hours for each fire support Soldier. Historically, most of this is conducted in the Call for Fire Trainer (CFFT). The CFFT most accessible to our brigade was capable of holding 15 Soldiers and evaluating one or two at a time. With a formation of over 100 fire support soldiers, certifying in this way could take over 150 working days to complete with one CFFT operating at eight hours a day. Additionally, the CFFT is limited to use during the working hours of 8 a.m to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Moreover, what was apparent is that once the brigade’s tempo picked up, as it progressed in its training cycle, it would be unfeasible for all the brigade’s fire supporters to be consolidated that long for certification. To combat this, we developed a sustainable readiness model that many would recognize as the R-A-G (Red-Amber-Green) cycle.

The goal for our internal Fire Support R-A-G cycle was to dedicate time and space for each of our battalion FS elements to conduct training and certification. We would do so by first tasking those organizations identified as red for support to FS specific requirements and, if necessary, secondly those teams identified as amber, in an effort to protect the task force identified as green. This afforded an opportunity for each battalion Fires element to focus on its collective training opportunities when it was green and focus on individual training opportunities while it was amber, before going “red” and serving to provide fire supporters for FA live Fires and other FS centric taskings that were not tied to their habitually supported maneuver battalion. With four battalion fire support elements, we developed two classifications of amber. The first month on amber equated to second in priority for tasking, while the second month on amber made a team third in priority, providing a predictable schedule in all but the most task-saturated months. This R-A-G cycle was carefully developed by reviewing the brigade and each maneuver battalion’s long range training calendar to identify time periods in which each element’s fire support teams must be trained, ready and available to support the appropriate collective training events and then balancing it against the needs of the artillery battalion.

Second, the disbanding of the battalion’s D Battery, concurrent with execution of the certification, provided an opportunity to reassess the roles and responsibilities of key leaders and the management of our resources within the fire support community. While there is much value in the fire support community. Therefore, the battalion’s long range training calendar served as a training meeting place for all artillery skill proficiency skills (ASPT) and FS Tables I-II, we empowered them to take ownership of their schedule and provided a developmental opportunity for each to plan and manage training before becoming a part of a battery command team. The brigade FSNCO would continue to serve as the quality assurance check, undersigning who could serve as certification evaluators for ASPT and Table I and providing oversight to each event, several leaders within the brigade fire support cell provided mentorship, professional development and enabled synchronization through weekly “FSO Synchs” with battalion cells. Guidance, feedback and an assessment on the training and performance measures were provided twice monthly by the FSCoord via a formal meeting dubbed the “FSCoord Synch,” that served as a training meeting with some pertinent elements of a command and staff incorporated. Additionally, FSCoord Synchs predominantly focused on the material readiness of fire support specific equipment, certification and readiness of FIST teams, and a review of upcoming planned
training by each of the battalion FSO/FSNCOs by T weeks. The meeting was chaired by the FA BN CDR, led by the BDE FSO, and attended by representatives from the BN S4, S6, BMO, BDE Fires cells, and ALO sections, in addition to the HHB CDR/XO, radar acquisition platoon leadership, and each BN FSE. This meeting, much like a battalion training meeting, provided an opportunity for the FA battalion commander to review the training and readiness of each element within the brigade’s Fires Warfighting Function. The regular formal interaction with the battalion commander also served to reinforce the professional development opportunities for the prospective future battery commanders and first sergeants.

To further maximize team readiness and reduce the time required to conduct certification, we looked to exploit training opportunities that could serve a dual role as certification events. TC 3-09.8 allocates that once every team completes their FIST certification, they have 180 days before it must be completed again. Rather than waiting until their certification was ready to expire, we worked to instill the mindset across the formation that the teams now had 180 days to complete all the task required for their next certification. By taking this approach, task forces were provided substantial flexibility in how they accomplished the required task. Conceivably, they could execute a FS Table II every time one of their teams were dispatched to an observation post to support a mortar training and evaluation program (MORTEP) exercise or a Table VI, XII, or XV for the firing batteries. It simply required the battalion FSO/FSNCO to ensure the conditions were set and coordinate for an evaluator to be on hand for its execution. Moreover, they could leverage the call for Fires (CFF) executed during the course of the exercise to count towards the appropriate fire missions dictated in the FS Table I. By requesting the list of targetry grids from range control to help determine target location error and conducting prior coordination with the mortar leadership or controlling fire direction officer, the FSO could script the master scenario event list (MSEL) to provide a variety of CFFs to better suit their needs. This provided numerous opportunities for the FIST teams to benefit from training and evaluation conducted under more realistic circumstances than those replicated in the CFFT, while reducing the burdensome requirements of their certification. After a few iterations of this, task force fire support elements (FSEs) began to increase the complexity by incorporating additional assets, such as Army Attack Aviation and joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs), to increase the training value and help maintain joint fires observer (JFO) proficiency.
Finally, we sought to rectify the issues identified during the execution of the brigade virtual FCX, serving as the FS Table III and IVs. To this end, our brigade commander provided the critical incentive to get subordinate maneuver battalion commanders invested in our training event. His intent was to make our virtual FCX serve as a train-up and rehearsal for the brigade’s upcoming company combined arms live-fire exercises. To achieve this, we structured the exercise to imitate the execution of company live Fires, with time and space designated for troop leading procedures (TLPs), operations order briefs, and combined arms rehearsals. We then developed the scenario to replicate what company-level leaders would see and face, on similar terrain when later conducting company-level live Fires. Moreover, the brigade commander directed that each company’s execution would be evaluated against the appropriate training and evaluation outlines by himself and the FSCOORD. When the commander’s schedule precluded his participation, one
of his subordinate battalion commanders would fill in to evaluate the maneuver aspect of execution. The result was a brigade training event that garnered the attention and investment of subordinate maneuver commanders at all levels. As each company executed its TLPs and virtual iteration, it was observed by senior leadership who provided feedback on planning and execution of the operation; with emphasis on tactical movement, command and control, offensive fire control and integration of fire support assets. Commanders at all levels provided positive feedback to the value of this training event, not only in its preparation for later LFXs, but also in its use of a virtual enemy that could maneuver and fire on friendly elements, presenting dilemmas and challenges that are hard to replicate in any other kind of training environment. Demonstrating the value of this exercise ensured buy-in from the maneuver battalions’ leadership and paid dividends to the level of involvement when planning began for the next brigade FCX.

The work to refocus our training and certification efforts resulted in 1st Battalion, 37th Field Artillery fire supporters increasing the efficiency of the program, while also providing formations the capacity to maximize the benefits offered by regular training exercises. These efforts were not without friction. There were times when nearly every fire support team was simultaneously arrayed against a variety of task and competing requirements, disrupting pre-planned training and certification events for task forces that was supposed to be sheltered, as well as instances when a maneuver battalion cancelled a training exercise that the Fires cell had planned to leverage for its certification, forcing its leaders to adjust their plan. Nonetheless, it provided the fire supporters more predictability, flexibility and better opportunities for integration, ultimately improving the sensor-to-shooter capability within the BCT.

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