Don’t sleep on First Army’s role

By Capt. Jacob Gatewood

As Forces Command’s coordinating authority for implementation of the Army’s Total Force Policy, First Army executes a diverse mission with the purpose of improving readiness of the Reserve Component. Serving in First Army allows post-key developmental captains and their NCO counterparts the opportunity to develop their professional expertise while utilizing their experience-honed artillery knowledge to increase combat readiness of Army National Guard (ARNG) partners. First Army observers, controllers/trainers (OC/Ts) utilize tough, realistic training concepts that are tailored to the deployment mission of ARNG partner units at all levels from division down to battery. Buried within this challenging mission is the hidden gem of First Army: building relationships.

The foundational principle of building relationships is often mentioned within the Team of Teams concept. It is also an evaluated competency covered by officer and NCO evaluation reports under “leads.” For a bit more clarity, ADP 6-22 defines Extends influence beyond the chain of command as influencing others when the leader does not have designated authority or while the leader’s authority is not recognized by others, such as with unified action partners. (ADP 6-22, 2012) First Army OC/Ts obviously focus on the first half as it pertains to our own ARNG units and the command relationship with them.

Though it is becoming more prevalent within the junior officer world, most have neither seen nor read “The Iron Major Survival Guide,” in which Lt. Col. David Dunphy shares his tips for field grade officers. Dunphy’s tips for building relationships include:

“Don’t think that by sheer rank and intimidation that you will be able to bull your way through the ‘Iron Jobs’ to success. You need to solicit buy-in, loyalty and trust, from up, down, left and right, and beyond. Your influence in and outside of your unit will have a direct correlation to your success as an S3 or executive officer, and ultimately, the unit’s.” (Dunphy, 2011)

The challenge associated with “The Iron Major Survival Guide,” is that junior officers do not focus on this vital skill until intermediate-level education, and NCOs may never see it at all. Sure, leaders utilize various methods to coach subordinates to make friends outside the organization, knowing that those relationships may bear fruit in the future. Unfortunately, the ability to extend influence does not necessarily come naturally to all, and is often overlooked. Just like an assignment to First Army. But in this First in Deed provides a clear path.

In order to develop key partnerships, First Army OC/Ts must understand the operational environment of their ARNG partners. National Guard Soldiers have the unique challenge of maintaining readiness while simultaneously serving as members of the civilian workforce. They live complex lives compartmentalized between monthly drill, annual training exercises, civilian occupation requirements and community functions. The time they spend conducting Army Field Artillery training is extremely limited in comparison with their active duty peers. And yet the Enlisted Promotion System, managed at the state level, continues to churn through NCOs at roughly the same rate as regular Army (RA). Essentially, ARNG batteries are able to maintain crew stability on the same calendar timeline as RA batteries, but only get around a month of actual training together per year. Therefore, training time, whether inactive duty training, annual training, or eXportable combat training capability exercises (XCTC), must be effective. OC/Ts are vital at shaping the unit’s training schedule to ensure partnered units achieve certification and qualification requirements in accordance with quarterly and annual training strategies while still adhering to this compressed schedule.

First Army OC/Ts assist their artillery brethren to meet these training gates by offering their experience with training management in the regular Army. As former battery commanders and platoon sergeants, OC/Ts can communicate the friction they experienced during similar training events and provide lessons learned. They offer successful tactics, techniques and procedures that were effective during their operational time. Most importantly, they provide an external evaluation for their partners during every phase of training from individual to collective, home station to combat training...
center rotations. The after-action reviews (AARs) they provide are combined into a take-home package that the training unit keeps with them throughout the next phase of training. First Army OC/Ts engage with their partner units through every phase of their training progression, serving as resources for constant improvement.

Planning realistic training is a challenge for the National Guard given their reduced full-time staff and limited resources. As an organization that maintains an enduring relationship with each battalion, First Army OC/Ts utilize a coaching strategy to assist in planning. This technique is not at all dissimilar to our counterparts at combat training centers, the major difference being the ability to hone the unit planning process over time. This technique is not at all dissimilar to our counterparts at combat training centers, the major difference being the ability to hone the unit planning process over time. This timeline doesn’t stop after the exercise, unlike so many of our peers, but continues throughout the entirety of the partner unit’s readiness and mobilization cycle.

As a vignette, during the 34th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) XCTC in the summer of 2018, 1st Battalion, 120th Field Artillery (Wisconsin ARNG) and their First Army partners developed a 72-hour situational training exercise based on the direct action training environment approach used at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk and the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. First Army OC/Ts developed the exercise concept while working with the training unit’s full-time staff to achieve their commander’s intent. The relationship leveraged training resources that replicated an operational environment, forcing batteries to operate using multi-echelon procedures in both day and night conditions.

Before entering the training area, each battery received a battalion operations order complete with templated position areas of artillery, in-position-ready-to-fire times, and an enemy situation which prompted battery commanders to conduct troop leading procedures. OC/Ts were imbedded with battery leadership to provide external evaluation and coaching throughout the scenario.

When batteries conducted movement, they encountered opposing forces that engaged them with small-arms fire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and simulated electronic attack. The battalion tactical operations center (TOC) requested routine reports and also provided daily operation and intelligence updates in accordance with the unit standard operating procedure. The scenario forced batteries to maintain constant firing capability in support of maneuver forces, prompting the need for an occasional emergency fire mission during movement. Simulating counterfire and assessing casualties provided an opportunity for batteries to train similar to how they’ll fight against a peer threat.

Throughout the exercise, OC/Ts gathered data for the purpose of providing a formal AAR, facilitating an opportunity for battery leaders to discuss methods of improving performance over the next fiscal year. Lane training involved continuous operations over 72 hours; a method different from the standard training executed during previous training events. Batteries operated in both day and night conditions, reacting to injects such as emergency fire missions, regular fire missions, movement orders, survivability moves and dismounted attack. Soldiers were constantly shooting, moving, communicating, decontaminating, medicating, supplying and defending themselves in support of maneuver elements, resulting in confidently trained batteries capable of fighting and winning in a modern operational environment.

If this part of the job sounds just like every NTC or JRTC rotation, that is because it is. The XCTC package has similar capabilities for data tracking as are used at both Fort Irwin and Fort Polk. What is missed by the vignette is the work done before training ever really kicked off. First Army personnel established long-term relationships with their ARNG partners, assisted in planning, executing and evaluating training for years leading up to the XCTC. And continue to work with the unit afterward to implement

Observer-coach trainers work with partner units. (Courtesy photo)
sustains and improves identified during the AAR process. This is not a one-shot transaction, but a mission of steady mentorship and coaching a unit. If this sounds just like a battalion or brigade commander’s vision for their unit, that’s because it generally is.

Of course, other assignments exist that allow Army leaders to hone their skills of extending influence. The latest of these being the Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), which executes a similar mission to First Army, though directed toward partner nations. To quote the Sergeant Major of the Army Daniel Dailey, “This [Security Force Assistance Brigade] is the number one priority for the Army’s Chief of Staff.” This is certainly true and our SFAB structure continues to be increased. But what the First Army mission allows captains above and beyond the SFAB are longer timelines for unit relationships and the ability to work with units deploying to multiple theaters. Soldiers from one First Army battalion mentored units mobilizing in support of Central Command, U.S. Army Europe and Africa Command in the space of just under two years.

To imply that the main benefit of serving as a First Army OC/T is teaching young captains the art of relationship building ignores the purpose associated with this task: to increase the readiness of the Total Force. First Army OC/Ts are the primary element in providing bottom-up feedback through FA doctrinal and command channels. The data captured during unit assessments drives the honest picture of artillery readiness across the Army that allows strategic leaders to make informed decisions.

None of the positive impacts associated with coaching and mentoring ARNG partners, like increased deployment and Total Force Readiness, are possible without first building the relationship. Establishing mutually beneficial partnerships is tantamount to extending influence beyond the chain of command. That influence allows First Army OC/Ts to engage partners with doctrinal-based coaching techniques and incorporate realism into their collective training. This process facilitates a noticeable and lasting impact on the readiness of the Total Army Force.

But not only are the ARNG partners more lethal and adaptive, but also the First Army team mentoring them. The artillery Soldiers who come to this assignment have the opportunity to fine tune the craft of relationship building that is vitally important to successful performance as either majors or first sergeants. The natural outcome of quality key leaders within all artillery battalions is the successful achievement of the commander’s vision. As Dunphy says, “When you take care of the boss, you take care of the unit.” (Dunphy, 2011) As a premier enabler for helping the Total Force achieve readiness, First Army leads the way in leader development for the future.

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