The Operations Targeting and Effects Synchronization Process in Northern Iraq

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The secret of all victory lies in the organization of the non-obvious.

—Marcus Aurelius, 121-180 CE

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IMAGE: Coin of Marcus Aurelius.

IN THE EARLY 4th century BCE, more than five centuries before the great philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius made the observation quoted above, Gallic tribes sacked Rome. Faced with the first real threat to its existence, the young Roman state recognized the need to rethink how it organized for combat. Of the various changes adopted, the most important and extreme transformation was the abandonment of the Greek-style phalanx. This military organizational structure had been long-established as the most effective way to achieve success against opponents with a similar operational paradigm. However, the Romans understood that—unlike Greece—Italy and Gaul were not governed by city states, whose armies met on large plains deemed suitable by both sides to settle disputes. Rather, they were a collection of hill tribes adept at using the complex terrain to their advantage. Accordingly, the Romans acknowledged the need for something more flexible than the unwieldy, slow-moving phalanx to achieve their operational goals. Faced with a newly complex operating environment, the Romans took the transformative step of adopting the more flexible infantry formations of their most tenacious enemies, the Samnites.[1]

Today, America is experiencing an analogous military epiphany as its military adapts to complex, adaptive, and asymmetric operating environments that defy accepted military conventions. In January 2008, in the wake of its final after action review from its 2006-2007 deployment to northern Iraq, the U.S. Army 25th Infantry Division Headquarters found itself revising longstanding organizational thinking to adapt its structure to the new demands it would face in northern Iraq later that year. The division's new operational milieu presented an increasingly complex operating environment, an adaptive asymmetric threat, and a traditional staff organization ill-suited to deal adequately and effectively with either. The division recognized a vital requirement to rethink how to organize its staff to best meet the commander's vision and intent (as embodied in our campaign plan). We felt this reorganization should fulfill three critical roles: inform and enhance the commander's decision making cycle, create a logical nesting of our staff processes with the Joint architecture used by our higher headquarters, and

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE **JUN 2010**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2010 to 00-00-2010**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **The Operations Targeting and Effects Synchronization Process in Northern Iraq**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Army Combined Arms Center,Fort Leavenworth,KS,66027**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**9**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

make our subordinate units more effective in their counterinsurgency roles across northern Iraq.

To support the needs of the command, we applied a deliberate problem-solving process. This process was rooted in "value-focused" thinking; that is, we first delineated what was important to achieve —operational success (what we valued). Then we built our organization around it. The result was a staff organization employing an "operations, targeting, and effects synchronization" (OTES) process appropriate to our goals. This process evolved in the context of Joint doctrine, as we projected the best likelihood for achieving the "enduring effects" envisioned in our campaign plan. This article sets forth—

- The *methodology* we applied.
- The *results* of the process.
- The *implementation* of the desired course of action.
- An *assessment* of how it performed in a combat environment.

Methodology

- Our staff organization methodology began in January 2008, after the 25th Infantry Division's after action review of its recent deployment to northern Iraq from August 2006 to October 2007. Foremost among various lessons learned, we determined that a conventional Prussian general staff structure was inadequate to address the complexities of the evolving operational environment. The following factors drove this determination:
- There was exponential growth in relevant available information.
- Staff responsibility lines had become less clear as problem complexity grew.
- There was a limited ability to synchronize efforts in time and space.
- The asymmetric nature of the environment did not fit with the traditional staff architecture, requiring us to simultaneously and continuously develop multiple operational planning teams with expertise from the across the staff.
- A "pick-up team" mentality for ad hoc planning resulted in the inability to focus on persistent problems and concerns.
- The inability to continuously assess and modify the campaign plan persisted (because no core staff element focused on the future operations horizon to supplement planning for current operations).

Compounding these observations was the realization that, although the headquarters would return to northern Iraq in less than 11 months, the dynamic nature of the operational and information environments mandated a fresh look at what to achieve and how to organize to achieve it. Specifically, we anticipated that—

- The mission involved an exceptionally complex environment with innumerable second- and third-order effects.
- Transitioning to "Iraqis out front" would be a priority and was a significant change from the last deployment.
- There would be increasing focus on nontraditional (and nonlethal) problems in governance and economics.
- There would be increased availability and speed of information.
- There was a constant potential for disastrous consequences stemming from the somewhat overlooked and often misunderstood tensions between Kurds and Arabs in Northern Iraq.
- This environment would require trust, decentralized command and control, and empowerment downward in the chain of command to exercise initiative.

Framing the problem. The purpose of a military staff is mainly to provide accurate, timely information that most efficiently and effectively facilitates sound command decisions.[2] Considered in this context, the results of our after action review in January 2008 yielded a simple problem statement:

> Determine the best alternative for organizing the division staff for combat that would allow it to prosecute the campaign plan most effectively by enhancing the commander's decision making process and enabling the brigade combat teams'(BCTs) abilities to execute his intent.

Recognizing the need to determine a suitable staff organization, we first sought to define what we wanted to achieve. This required that we educate ourselves about the environment, determine what we needed to do to achieve success, and then develop an approach to achieve it. Our efforts began with the development of a preliminary campaign framework that outlined our lines of effort, the short- to mid-term objectives within each, and then the longer-term enduring effects we wanted to

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Soldiers of Recon Platoon, 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, await pickup by helicopters in south Balad Ruz, Iraq, 22 March 2009.

achieve. In short, this framework formed the core of what we "valued" and what would define success for our deployment.

We considered three courses of action (COAs) for organizing the division staff for combat:

- **COA 1**—Align with doctrinal staff architecture: use the staff as organized according to Army doctrine.
- **COA 2**—Align to focus the staff on lethal versus nonlethal effects. Organize the staff into temporary cells and work groups that would meet routinely to develop operations to achieve effects synchronized through the 28-day targeting process.
- **COA 3**—Align to focus the staff on "enduring effects" in our campaign framework. Organize the staff into four work groups, each focused on one of the four enduring effects from the campaign plan framework. These groups would be a cross-section of the staff (personnel drawn from staff sections depending on the expertise required) and then operate as permanent elements in the headquarters. A "fusion cell" would synchronize the efforts of all four groups through a 28-day operations, targeting, and effects synchronization process.

Results

In February 2008, the division commander directed that we pursue COA 3 for organizing the staff for combat. In this course of action, we formed four "work groups" aligned with the four enduring effects identified within the campaign's operational framework:

- A self-sustaining secure environment.
- Self-reliant Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).
- A self-sustaining economic environment.
- Legitimate, capable, and effective governance.

This course of action would flatten the staff architecture and streamline the flow of information across knowledge networks, redefining how the staff would facilitate the analytical rigor for the operations, targeting, effects, synchronization, and assessment process.

There were two key changes for the division. The first was the creation of a robust future operations

nucleus to drive the bulk of staff operations and bridge the efforts of the current operations and future plans sections. The second was making the four work groups *permanent* staff elements rather than ad hoc teams. They would focus daily on achieving campaign plan objectives consistent with their particular enduring effect and synchronizing those efforts across the division's operational framework.

To build and operate the groups, the division chief of staff chaired a series of meetings with the staff primaries, facilitated by the G3 (Operations). The purpose of these meetings was to identify the skill sets each work group would require and then build the groups by putting names to spaces, identifying the right people with the right experiences, and putting them in the right job. We determined that a lieutenant colonel would lead the fusion cell and each work group. We outlined preferred skills and experience for each as dictated by the enduring effect on which they focused. We preferred—

- A Special Forces officer with a solid "foreign internal defense" background for the security work group.
- An officer with prior transition team experience (brigade or division level) or other experience in training Arab military personnel for the Iraqi Security Forces work group.
- The Division G9 (Civil-Military Affairs) for the governance work group, which focused on civic institutional capacity, essential services, and the rule of law.
- An officer with a background in economics for the economics work group.

We delineated work group composition along two lines: core and contributing members. Core members had expertise that the work group required on a daily basis (i.e., given the ISF's considerable logistical problems at the time of our deployment, we determined the ISF work group would require a full-time logistician). Contributing members had either staff expertise that a work group routinely required or came from a small staff section that could not support core membership (i.e., the staff judge advocate or information operations sections).These last staff sections were absolutely necessary, making them a limited resource in high demand and thereby requiring further synchronization to ensure work groups received the requisite inputs.

Whether selecting core or contributing members, we sought to staff the groups with the right personnel with the right skills and experience, which required we develop a deeper understanding of the experiences and/or professional background of personnel on the division staff. For example, we identified a senior first lieutenant who, although a signal officer by trade, had spent several years working for AT&T, which made him a prime candidate to work certain essential services problems in the governance work group. We also drafted statements of work to obtain contracted bicultural and bilingual advisors—persons with an Iraqi or Kurdish background who possessed unique expertise in the four broad areas on which we intended to focus.

Once manned each of these work groups focused on their respective enduring effect to perform the following functions:

- Conduct a detailed analysis of both lethal and nonlethal functional requirements needed for attainment (i.e., targets, maneuver, resources, nonstandard lines of influence, etc.).
- Conduct detailed assessments of actions taken and results/effects achieved, as well as the efficacy of the identified functions within the enduring effect.

The staff remained the primary source for expertise in particular areas. We realigned the operational functions of the G-staff to integrate its sections into the future operations horizon.

The G2 (Intelligence) section, while a contributor to work group efforts, primarily oversaw intelligence collection and fusion. It provided a "full spectrum" common intelligence and information picture to the work groups while at the same time responding to group-specific needs for analysis, assessment, and collection.

Work group analysis. The detailed analysis performed by each of the four work groups went to the fusion cell. This element synthesized and synchronized these analyses across the breadth of the campaign plan and presented its conclusions and recommendations to the commander for approval and codification into an executable order. This process is a particularly important component of our organizational construct. The fusion cell provided a critical means by which we fused disparate, though not mutually exclusive, planning efforts across time and space to ensure all were integrated, synchronized, nested, and mutually supporting.

The operations, targeting, and effects synchronization process. We originally built the operations, targeting, and effects synchronization process around a 28-day cycle that aligned with our division targeting process. The process focused on synchronizing the efforts and inputs of the four work groups each week over the four-week period to ensure a cohesive output in the form of a fragmentary order to brigade combat teams. Equally important, we developed the process to—

- Streamline and synchronize the division battle rhythm.
- Create more staff involvement by tying the entire staff to the future operations horizon.
- Crush traditional stovepipes that impede vertical and lateral communication.

Since each group had its own targeting officer, they developed their targeting and operations together. Targeting efforts would be synched each week in our division targeting meeting (which included BCTs), followed by an overarching meeting the next day to synchronize operations, targeting, and effects across all four lines of effort (i.e., the enduring effects).

Because data came into the fusion cell from disparate sources (BCTs, intelligence fusion center, or higher headquarters), the targeting, effects, and assessment cell sorted the data and sent it to the four work groups. They then analyzed the data in detail to ascertain the effects achieved and to assess the efficacy of the functional requirements and sub-objectives identified for each group. All groups shared the data because some of it applied to multiple work groups. Nested within the targeting process, the assessments drove campaign assessment and refinements and course adjustments.

Staff interoperability and synchronization. As previously mentioned, one of our objectives for staff reorganization was to create a future operations nucleus where there had previously been none. This would, in effect, allow the division staff to operate across all three time horizons by plugging their operational components into each.

Work groups and the fusion cell, with OTES as the driver, interoperated with the broader division staff, our higher headquarters, and the BCTs. The three time horizons and the associated proponents were—

- Current operations, managed by the division operations center, focused on the 0-72 hour timeframe.
- Future plans, managed by the G5 and the plans operational planning team, focused at 120 days and beyond.
- Future operations core, comprised of the fusion cell and four work groups, managed by the division effects coordinator, focused on the period in between 72 hours and 120 days.

The Division G3 managed the synchronization of operational efforts across all three horizons, while the chief of staff retained oversight for staff synchronization in support of the commander.

Implementation

We recognized that, like any plan or standing operating procedure, the effectiveness of our staff organization and OTES process depended on the extent to which the staff understood them and exercised them. This applied also to the brigades in our task force. Accordingly, we developed a two-pronged approach to educating and training both groups. The first focused on staff proficiency and had a phased methodology. The second focused on indoctrinating the various stakeholders affected by our staff organization. This included the subordinate headquarters we would lead in combat, as well as the division headquarters we would replace, as this would help to reduce friction. We describe each of the prongs below.

Staff proficiency. Our predeployment preparations involved a comprehensive training plan spanning four and one-half months. This approach allowed the work groups and staff to ease into the OTES process. It did so by first developing each of the four focus areas, then by increasing the tempo while focusing on specific problem sets that cut across all four work groups. It thereby enabled us to exercise basic synchronization processes and to finally put it all together in the division's mission readiness exercise, which allowed us to identify gaps, inefficiencies, and areas requiring further attention.

We purposely avoided the typical mission readiness exercise construct focused on current operations. Doctrinally, the division headquarters functions at the operational level. Although "current operations" are a critically important feature

of division operations, they are not the nucleus. Instead, "future operations" form the nucleus, informed by current operations. To perform effectively, the division headquarters' main effort must focus on planning to shape future events in the near- to mid-terms and to enable its subordinate units to execute effectively. Accordingly, we focused our exercise on the future operations horizon, which allowed us to refine our OTES systems, processes, and products.

Our approach yielded a number of key enhancements as we prepared to deploy. Two are particularly noteworthy. First, the replication of simultaneous operations across all three time horizons helped us to identify, further define, and assign future operations "areas of responsibility" within the work groups and the fusion cell. For example, the management and stabilization of Kurd-Arab relations became a fusion cell responsibility, because it cut across all four work groups. Similarly, we assigned the planning and synchronization of division efforts to withdraw from Iraqi cities, villages, and locales in May and June of 2009 to the fusion cell midway through our deployment. This enhancement not only more clearly defined responsibilities within the OTES process, but also allowed our G5 plans section to remain "future focused," reinforcing our original intent.

Second, we also implemented a biweekly "fusion update" to the commander, which alternated with the traditional plans update, forcing the latter from a weekly to biweekly timetable and enabling us to inject a detailed future operations dialogue into the commander's battle rhythm. This dialogue became a small forum in which to think about the problem, exchange the commander's vision and concepts on the topic with the staff proponent, and provide detailed guidance to achieve the vision.

Indoctrinating and informing stakeholders. We used our battle command seminar with the command teams who would deploy with us, two predeployment site surveys with 1st AD, and our mission readiness exercise to inform both the BCTs in Task Force Lightning and the headquarters we

U.S. Army photo by SPC Bobby L. Allen, Jr.

Soldiers patrol near the Udaim River Valley, in Baqoubah, Iraq. The U.S. Army is partnering with the Iraqi Army to clear the Udaim River Valley and disrupt Al-Qaeda networks and weapons caches in the Diyala province of Iraq.

would relieve in place. The intent was to help the BCTs understand how we would operate as a staff and how and where they would plug in, as well as to inform 1st AD how we would operate so that we could develop a plan that would allow us to assume the reins with minimal disruption of operations.

Fusion cell. The fusion cell used OTES as the principal engine to focus and synchronize division efforts and resources in prosecuting objectives and effects. The fusion cell participated in and oversaw work group planning efforts by developing and disseminating weekly "OTES guidance," which served to drive synchronization of planning efforts, group operational planning teams, and fusion cell-led efforts, such as stabilizing Kurd-Arab relations. Each week the staff held a synchronization meeting, chaired by the commander. The choice of the word "meeting" rather than "brief" is important, as the venue was intended to be a working environment. We openly exchanged ideas with the commander to shape future events and solicited his guidance on operational concepts in development. We also sought and gained approval for plans ready for codification and execution.

Adaptation. As is often the case in warfare, the realities on the ground waylay even the best-laid plans. However, we anticipated this eventuality. We established three requirements to drive a continual re-evaluation of our staff alignment and the supporting processes:

- *Adapting to the environment*. We adjusted our processes to address the environment in terms of the operational planning team, the timing and types of problem sets, and the interactions with and requirements of subordinate and higher headquarters.
- *Adapting to the commander*. We adjusted our processes to better support the commander's "fighting horizon" and the information cycle required to impart guidance and shape actions and decisions.
- *Adapting to the command*. We adjusted processes to account for decentralized division command and control nodes in Command Post North (Mosul), Command Post South (Baqubah), and Command Post East (Kirkuk), as well as unique unit requirements for participation. The result was a modified battle rhythm based on disparate information requirements, varying desires for involvement, and unique areas of responsibility.

Over the course of our deployment, our re-evaluation process led to three key modifications that ultimately enhanced staff effectiveness and the commander's ability to make decisions.

First, we modified our 28-day cycle to a one-week cycle based on simultaneity of efforts. While the 28-day cycle worked, it applied to each problem, which meant that we had a number of such cycles occurring simultaneously and at different stages. We needed more frequent touch points with the commander to address and seek guidance on problems we faced on the future operations horizon. Within several weeks of our transfer of authority, we modified the OTES process to facilitate more interaction between the commander and staff. We held a synchronization meeting at the end of each week. This meeting became the only forum in which the commander and his entire staff could come together to discuss operations, share concepts, generate guidance, and finalize operations by obtaining the commander's approval.

Next, we decreased the number of meetings and consolidated some forums to give the BCTs more time and to maximize the benefits of and outputs from the meetings we retained. While these modifications were the result of the unique styles and needs of our commanding general and deputy commanding generals, they remain important for a broader audience nonetheless. The importance of the modifications, from our perspective, lay in—

- Flattening the knowledge network to facilitate information sharing, transfer, and availability.
- Enabling BCT efforts and abilities to execute.
- Facilitating a more effective integration of subordinate commanders in the planning process to better support the commander's decision process.

Finally, we combined the security and ISF development work groups into a single entity focused on development and operations. The security agreement implemented between the U.S. and Iraq had a significant impact on our counterinsurgency operations and led to this particular adjustment. In the months preceding the security agreement, many of our operations were unilaterally developed and executed with the idea of producing effects. However, in January 2009, the security agreement required bilateral efforts, and on 30 June 2009, it mandated our withdrawal from population centers, so we found ourselves clearly in

a supporting role. Thus, the evolution of our relationship with the ISF led us to modify our organization and combine these two work groups.

Assessment

Ultimately, the staff alignment worked well on a number of levels. First, it allowed for continuous prosecution of our objectives and facilitated the synchronization of staff planning efforts. It helped inform the commander's decision process, ultimately enabling him to make timely and effective decisions toward his desired end state. Equally important, it allowed the headquarters to more effectively and efficiently enable the BCTs by continuously focusing staff planning efforts on division lines of effort. This enabling drove the allocation of division resources and priorities.

In addition, we realized the following key enhancements:

- We tailored our organization to prosecute an idiosyncratic campaign plan, which focused the staff continuously on what the commander had deemed important.
- A robust future operations nucleus that allowed us to manage a very dynamic operational environment more effectively, stay in front of the BCTs, and prevent future plans from being pulled too far in (toward the current operations horizon) at the expense of maintaining a longer-term focus on campaign plan refinement and emerging branches and sequels.
- The power of permanent versus temporary groups allowed for focus on campaign objectives and planning priorities. This power cannot be overstated. Not only did it provide our subordinate units a continuously functioning means to plug into the division, it also facilitated a much simpler interface with our higher headquarters, which also operated under the Joint "boards, bureaus, centers, cells, and work groups" doctrine. Thus, the overarching effect of our permanent work groups was to streamline the knowledge networks up, down, and laterally.
- We allowed for multiple, routine touch points with the commander.
- We enabled predictability, synchronization, and staff awareness.
- We drove stability in the division main command post battle rhythm and the outpost command and control nodes.
- We avoided overwhelming staff sections by consolidating the operational components of each section. This mitigation allowed the G-staff sections to focus on their doctrinal Title X functions (e.g., G1: casualty reports and notification, awards, evaluations, etc.) while plugging them into the future operations horizon, which helped to inform those day-to-day operations.

Despite the success of our staff organization and supporting processes, there were a number of things we could have done better, and lessons future deployed units can apply.

Indoctrination effort with BCTs and newly arriving staff. We spent a considerable amount of time briefing persons and agencies outside the staff and task force on how OTES worked, while spending comparatively little time on those who would implement it. The unintended consequences of this misplaced effort were two-fold. First, we encountered pushback from staff primaries who misunderstood the intent and concept of operation and perceived it as a threat to their authority and staff functionality. Second, the fewer briefings to implementers led to a lack of detailed understanding among the staff, particularly staff members assigned to the work groups and the fusion cell. This slowed process development prior to our deployment.

Work groups as *the* operational planning teams. Upon arriving in theater, we reverted to standing up numerous operational planning teams to address problems, as we had done in the previous deployment. We formed these operational planning teams by pulling apart the work groups to fill them, which was precisely the situation we had designed our staff organization to prevent. Recognizing that our work groups were the planning teams was important. They were cross-functionally manned to tackle multiple problem sets within their lines of effort. The only addition required was work group-to-work group coordination and communication to ensure synthesis across lines of effort.

Integration of the "Iraqi perspective." We needed to think about the Iraqi perspective earlier in our predeployment preparations and in the deployment itself. Although we worked very hard to educate ourselves on the environment and to develop appropriate and meaningful objectives, our work and, by default, our product was coalition- or U.S. forces-centric. Along the way, we learned the

importance of integrating our efforts and objectives with those of the Iraqis, provincial reconstruction teams, and others. We did this integration aggressively through key leader engagements, integrated command and control structures, and a division-level unified common plan that linked efforts more tightly to Iraqi objectives. Ultimately, regardless of the extent of our efforts or our best intentions to develop measurable and achievable objectives for success, our focus and results would be neither complete nor correct without the infusion of Iraqi objectives to guide them. This relationship would be true in any counterinsurgency environment, particularly in the transition phase of operations.

The "de-flattening" effect of internal work group hierarchies. Our work group "leads" became work group leaders, thereby complicating the dynamic by which we intended to operate, i.e., as a flat, matrix-style organization. Simply stated, the creation (and title) of work group leaders induced corresponding work group structures (i.e., a lead's work group became his "mini staff") that put pressure on the system to "de-flatten." The effect was a system of work group hierarchies that ran counter to the principle of flatness we wanted to achieve. In reality, we intended the work group leads to be analysis directors.

In the Final Analysis

Just as Roman military reforms increased their ability to adapt to new enemies and an evolving environment, operational foresight and willingness to adapt can help propel U.S. forces to military successes. Applied prudently, structural reorganization can enhance our own modern-day efforts to adapt to an evolving environment and to achieve our operational and strategic goals.

The staff organization and the OTES process we adopted and executed significantly enhanced our ability to operate as a division headquarters in Multinational Division-North. It is a tested alternative that can and should benefit other headquarters wrestling with a similar conundrum. For us, it facilitated staff communication and awareness; more effectively focused and synchronized staff and BCT efforts toward achieving campaign plan objectives and effects; enabled the commander to make timely, informed, and effective decisions; and facilitated more effective interface with our higher headquarters. The combined effect of these enhancements led to BCTs that were better enabled to execute operations and achieve the division commander's intent.

Nevertheless, despite the successes we enjoyed, the solution we employed only reflects *one way* among myriad possibilities. Whichever solution a commander and staff elect to pursue, we believe that there are five keys to success:

- Education about the deployment environment.
- The development of a framework that lays out what to do and to achieve to be successful.
- The formulation of a staff organization that enables the staff to most effectively support the commander in the prosecution of that plan.
- The development of a training plan for supporting systems and processes.
- The ability to objectively assess the environment as it evolves, identify changes that will require modifying organizational constructs and processes, and then modify desired enduring effects. (For example, we learned that we had to support our Iraqi partners' objectives).

Thereafter, it is a matter of having viable systems in place to facilitate review, refinement, and adaptation. These address those changes in the environment and how the commander "fights" once on the ground, enabling units to reframe desired end states and then modify their staff organization and processes accordingly. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of the History of Rome from Its Foundation,* translated by Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988) 386-402. The Gallic occupation of Rome created shock waves of self-examination in the Latin Confederation, of which Rome was the senior member.
2. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, February 2008), para. 5-3.