



BACK TO BASICS FOR HQ PLANNING STAFF

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“A logical sequence of cognitive processes and associated procedures undertaken by commanders and staffs to analyse a situation, deduce mission requirements and determine the best method for accomplishing assigned tasks and a desired military end-state.”

(The Operational Planning Process, SHAPE GOP Jun 2005)

On a crisp autumnal morning in October, the beating heart of the headquarters' Operational Planning Group (OPG) eagerly convened; forty multi-national staff officers, all with a wealth of experience and each with particular expertise in the oft considered 'black art' of Operational Planning. With pencils sharpened and notebooks under arms, so began the first day of a two week Operational Planning Course (OPC) which was planned and organized by G5 NRDC-ITA and facilitated by a Mobile Education and Training Team (METT) from the NATO School in Oberammergau. Under the watchful eye of the senior mentor Lieutenant General Oerding who recently retired from the Germany Army, the OPC aimed to "... prepare operational plan-

ners for roles as members of the JOPG... within a NATO military headquarters.”

As ACOS G5, Colonel Maurizio Riccò, explained, “The OPP is the fundamental headquarters activity. Irrespective of an individual's experience, it is essential to seize every opportunity to improve ones individual and collective professional skills. This is to be achieved by means of a common understanding on how NATO as such plan its operations”.

Despite the OPG having so recently conducted a full cycle of planning in September for Exercise EAGLE BLADE 09, the OPC was to afford another vital opportunity to practice the logic of the planning process and cement its framework in the mind. Many officers were called upon to work outside their comfort zone for the first time and tackle areas of



the Military Estimate beyond their immediate realm of knowledge. This was to prove a steep learning curve.

The course was set in the context of a thorough and extremely plausible fictional crisis in the North Zoran Sea region: a political power play between two of the dominant state actors in the Zoran Sea region (Aquila and Vulpecula) showed signs of spilling over into newly independent neighbouring republics of Auriga and Perseus; two states geographically situated between the aggressors. As regional tensions flared, and the failing Aurigan state looked as if it may leave a destabilising power vacuum, the United Nations intervened in an attempt to avert conflict.



Such was the richness of this scenario that all aspects of the Operational Planning Process (OPP) would soon be comprehensively tested. The pressure to deliver began to quickly build. Syndicates were formed and work allocated. Timelines were drafted and deadlines set. Before long, there was a frenzy of activity



amidst a hubbub of heated discussion. Planning products began to appear on the syndicate classroom walls: abstract depictions of thought processes and the accompanying logic. The teaching staff and SMEs guided, prompted and cajoled the syndicates to meet their deadlines and “accept the 80% solution on time” rather than let “perfection be the enemy of the good.” Never more was this axiom difficult to adhere to than when briefing the senior mentor.

“Fortune favours the prepared mind.”

(Louis Pasteur)

General Oerding presided over the syndicate set piece presentations and naturally acted as the Joint Force Commander; a role he fulfilled in the real world during his time as Commander II (GE/US) Corps and Response Forces Operational Command during the period 2004 - 2008. Rarely can a Corps HQ staff call upon the expertise and experience of a three star general for such an extended period of time, moreover in an environment where learning through mistakes is encouraged. It proved to be an invaluable learning experience for all.

“Bitter experience in war has taught the maxim that the art of war is the art of the logistically feasible.”

(ADM Hyman Rickover, USN, 2008)

As the OPP developed, the complexity of deploying a NATO force into a hostile theatre became all too evident. Chief amongst factors affecting the development of a feasible plan was *logistics*. The simplest of force deployments soon be-



came untenable in the light of what was logistically feasible to support. Yet no respite was offered once the intricacies of logistics were embraced. Time lines got longer, reconnaissance times earlier, whilst the need for strategic lift increased exponentially. Every course of action (CoA) seemed to teeter on a knife edge where factors as simple as tidal swells could cause critical delays to an entire Carrier Group, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

It was not long before syndicates brought all the elements of mission analysis, factor analysis, operational art and design together to test their plans in a war-game; a platform for syndicate leaders to lay bare their plans before an arena of their peers. Whilst a valuable opportunity to test the theory underpinning a course of action, the war game process feels to many like trial by jury. By midway through the second week of the course, the intellectual rigours of the war game had taken its toll. Yet somewhere amidst the confusion and confront-

ation emerged a plan: a meticulously researched, ruthlessly analysed and rigorously tested plan that could be delivered to the Commander for approval and development.

The Operational Plans Process is fundamental to the core business of HQ NRDC Italy. As a vehicle to present this, the NATO School's two week Operational Planning Course brought to life the complexity of multi-national, joint combined, geo-political interventions, thereby giving the OPG an invaluable opportunity to further hone its skills in anticipation of Exercise EAGLE BLADE in late November 2009 and ultimately our reaction force commitments.

Success on operations is built on the moral, physical and conceptual components of fighting power and as such the Operational Planning Course has ensured that HQ NRDC Italy is conceptually well prepared for whatever the future holds.

Ubique. Celere. ■