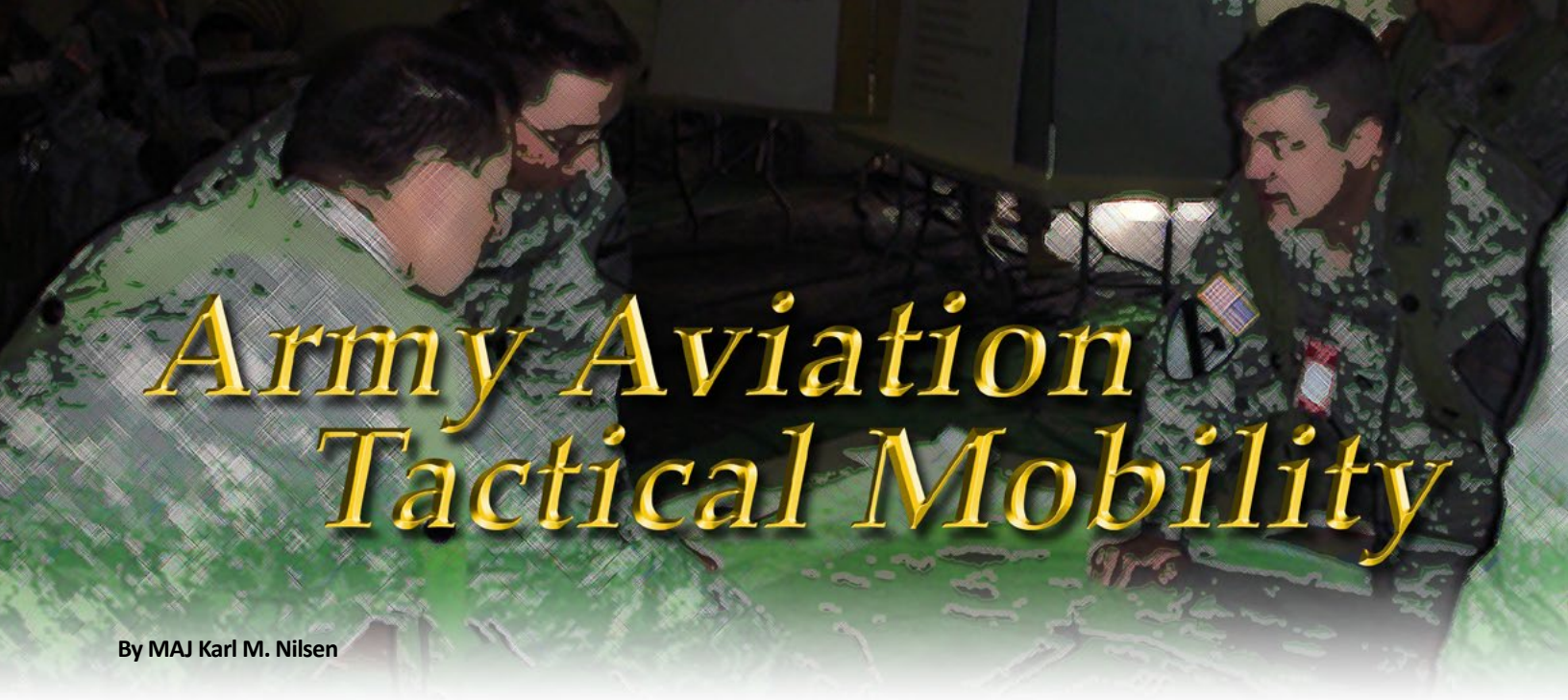


Army Aviation Tactical Mobility

By MAJ Karl M. Nilsen

Army Aviation enjoyed the luxury of maintaining an easily moveable force for decades. Power generation was needed only to supply the company and battalion with tactical lighting and basic communications. Archaic, analog methods served as the primary means to track the fight and provide command and control to advise leaders to make decisions and visualize the fight. Soldiers could quickly upload vital equipment such as radios, dry erase boards, trifolds, and easels into vehicles and/or aircraft, and transport the means to staff and command the fight from one tactical location to the next. The ability to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative remained inherent to the design of the unit which, therefore, mirrored doctrine. In contrast, modern aviation units possess equipment weighted heavy in automations, network support, and power requirements. These units are commanded by aviation leaders accustomed to conducting a static asymmetrical war in a digital environment, possessing high inertia in intellect, and highly sophisticated "field" gear.

The common tactical and operational objective has not changed over the last 20 years. Success against an adversary still necessitates the capability to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. Modern leaders would argue that commanders maintain an advantaged position on initiative through digitized situational awareness, Blue Force Tracker (BFT), and the maintenance of fluid, reproducible products through software that enable the commander to visualize the battle. Reliance on these tools, however, can detriment the staff and commander to the same extent that it benefits the operational decisionmaking process. Staff personnel can easily grow over reliant on digital aids that need the set up and dismantling of complex digital and electrical networks, are susceptible to the rigors of the field environment, and are potential early causalities to electronic warfare. Therefore, this assessment recommends techniques to enhance tactical flexibility in tactical aviation formations. These recommendations include practicing critical and creative thinking at the battalion/company level, employing and assessing analog systems with the same scrutiny as their digital counterparts, and practicing company through battalion scalable mission command functionality.

Developing creative and critical thinking in young warfighters lacks the intuitive method of instruction of many areas of combat performance such as land navigation, weapons qualification, etc. Mastery of these thought methodologies assists the formation of organizations capable of making rapid and effective decisions. Regardless, commanders and staff leaders rarely receive a ready, cognitively adept formation upon assumption of command. Practicing troop leading procedures and the military decisionmaking process provides a logical method to cultivate critical thinking. Establishment and consistent evaluation of running estimates, identification and re-evaluation of valid metrics, consistent review of priority intelligence requirements and commander's critical information requirements tied to operational progress are doctrinal stipulations that provide excellent means to practice, assess, and learn critical thinking. Public assessment of these critically established metrics in company, staff, or battalion forums show the young leader what is behind the curtain and set a foundational basis for critical thought processes and linked decision making.

Creative thinking, however, requires the ingenuity indicative of its namesake. This thought methodology may prove most critical to teaching the young leader to see the battle and inevitably visualize it as a commander. Perhaps most importantly, that commander can, by extension, instill the staffing qualities and data collecting means and assessment consistent with a tactically mobile organization. Understanding and experiential correlation underpin the young aviator's ability to apply creative thinking. In the most elementary sense, utilization of course of action briefings applied in all operational and training decision cycles with associated decision matrices provide a method to force creative thinking. Substantial creative thinking development occurs when Army

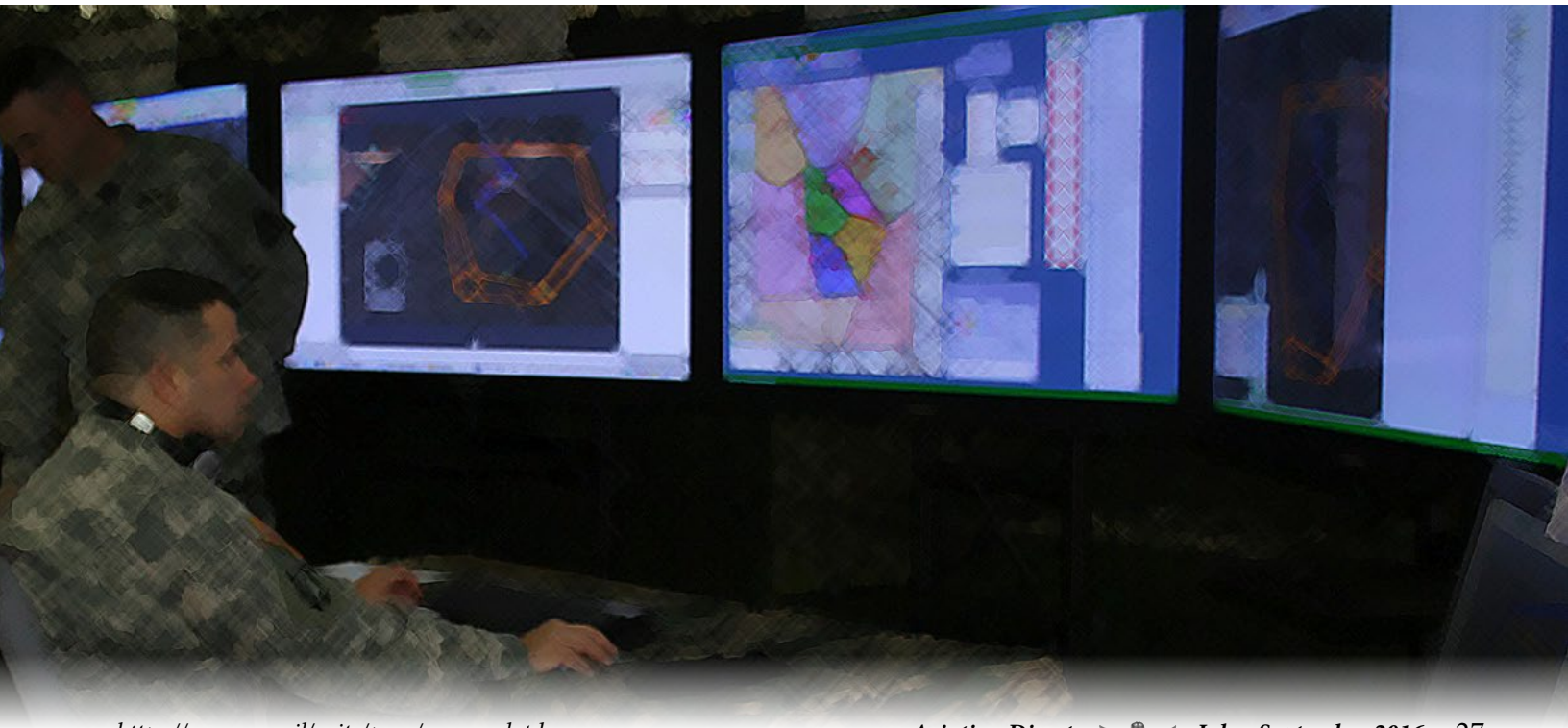
leaders can train in a well thought out vignette fashion partnered with sincere senior leader engagement.

An example of a vignette that may prove valid for developing creativity would be a lesson in terrain understanding. Terrain flight training in flight school and land navigation in the Aviation Basic Officer's Leadership Course do not logically link the creative and artistic approach to "fighting the terrain" needed by aviators in a high intensity conflict. A review of relevant aviation tactical tasks, followed by a brief of proposed enemy capabilities, coupled with a terrain walk following a map overlay build, and concluding with a collective helicopter flight over that very terrain can provide a correlational experience that can demonstrate the variety of methods to use the same terrain for different means to different degrees of success, i.e. variation associated with implementation of creativity. Vignettes that include pilot-in-command, air mission commander, and convoy commander duties create an experiential foundation that broaden the creative approaches and scope of thinking necessary to create tactical formations capable of higher order function in a mobile construct.

Another technique to develop an aviation unit capable of high performance in a transitional, advancing high intensity conflict environment is the incorporation of analog tracking devices. The current digital reality will remain a critical tool to share the common operating picture laterally and vertically across a command structure. Some units have elected to completely integrate and rely on the Command Post of the Future (CPOF), BFT, and the Advanced Battle Command Systems to develop and communicate staff estimates and implement/display the commander's vision. Rationale for that approach lies within leaders seeking staff efficiency, preventing duplicitous work for the staff in reporting and display, as well as limiting logic streams to flow through an application key to higher echelon battle tracking and meeting management. This logic is valid; however, the time involved in the break down and reassembly of these systems during the command post (CP) movement, equipment malfunctions and breakage, and simple system failures can significantly hamstring commanders and staff during the adjudication of a key decision in a fluid and hostile environment.

This necessitates the incorporation of analog tracking devices/tools, trackers, and displays that do not require network connection or power, but retain the exportability to function in any environment. Duplication must occur here, and through that process of duplication the staff sections can gain more situational awareness section-wide. Tracking friendly force movements across paper maps annotated with colored pins or placing significant activity markers on an area of interest on an acetate overlay provide a physical reminder to the young flight operations Soldier or battle non-commissioned officer of the unit tactical movements. Furthermore, regularly updated dry erase boards (that move easily, take up little space, and require no special handling instructions), at a glance, highlight the mission capability of unit aircraft, vehicles, or other key combat systems and improve the understanding of anyone questioning the status of unit equipment. Through that redundancy, sections can move from situational awareness towards understanding, while also retaining tracking means that survive the most careless equipment loader/unloader or inattentive generator refueler.

Lastly, effective aviation units demonstrate scalability in mission command and battle tracking. Frequent use of the company through brigade CP in the execution of all operations assists in the application of mission command scaling. Rotate the leaders in the CP to develop combinations of competence to expand and cultivate understanding from awareness. Few reduced command nodes employ a battalion S-4 or a company supply noncommissioned officer. More frequently, the CPs appear



as an exact duplication from doctrine or rely on a key senior personality or operations officer. Creative personnel application in this regard can expand the capability of a removed mission command node, reduce the quantity and size of operational seams, while keeping the commander ahead of the decision cycle, rather than reactionary to actions and reports misappropriated in analysis. Experimentation remains critical in this application, e.g. the establishment of a control group of desired outputs and capabilities through the rotation of personnel variables until the unit achieves the desired result.

High intensity conflict demands the flexibility and mobility of Army Aviation—units that currently exact mission command through digital systems requiring specific training that offer limited capability and remain highly reliant on network and electrical conditions to function (added battle field friction and organizational inertia). Recommendations to create or expand potential in a tactical/operational unit's ability to demonstrate mobility include the deliberate practice of encouraging critical and creative thinking at the company/battalion; employing and assessing analog systems with the same scrutiny as their digital counterparts; and third, practice company through battalion scalable mission command functionality. Through these methods, commanders can maintain a supporting cast that performs well under austere circumstances and build a staff with understanding built on shared awareness, and who are comfortable operating in the context of decentralized mission command. Near peer threats will conduct disruptive network and electrical attacks, destroy or disable equipment, and extinguish a percent of the force. Overreliance on sophisticated equipment and operating systems breeds failure when Army Aviation needs to perform with the utmost decision in the most rigorous circumstance. Furthermore, training in this method will better prepare a generation of young leaders comfortably accustomed to vying against an asymmetric threat in an evolving world of competitor states growing more and more equal in capability.

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Acronym Reference

BFT - Blue Force Tracker
CP - command post
CPOF - Command Post of the Future