

A Training Tour at CENTAC¹: Simulation at the Service of Combat Training

Warning: the author of this article participated in two training sessions at CENTAC as chief of the Battalion Task Force command post (CP) and in a third one as an observer. The following paper is thus to be regarded as a testimony by a user.

Military education and training, at any level, have only one objective: getting ready for combat, for engagement. The many actual operational deployments of combat units which occurred, at a high tempo, during the last fifteen years have reminded us of the imperious requirement to implement a consistent “education-training-evaluation” system which would allow **soldiers at all levels to be placed in conditions as close as possible to the combat realities**, that events could lead them to be confronted to. The major issue is to design an environment that would not be too artificial and which would allow the conduct of protracted actions. The CENTAC, located in Mailly-le-Camp meets these requirements.

The evaluation of one or several companies is, for many reasons, a very special moment in the busy schedule of a combat battalion: **thanks to the many opportunities offered by simulation, an evaluation conducted at CENTAC represents an excellent means to show the level reached by a unit** since the entire environment has been designed to realistically assess the results of the actions conducted at tactical level.

Even if the simulation system does not constitute a panacea since it does not integrate yet all the range of the actions that are likely to disturb tactical level operations, it nevertheless guarantees an environment close to the reality of high and medium intensity combat situations and appears, thus, to be a fundamental support for units training.

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The difficulty to represent combat or crisis situations specific aspects

The system that has been implemented to evaluate units **doesn't allow yet** to integrate **all maneuver aspects**: for instance and by construction the deployment area remains geographically limited. Since monitoring and simulation means are not yet deployable, it is not yet envisaged to use spaces of maneuver located in foreign countries. It can also be said that some

of the weapons systems cannot be used at their maximum capabilities although it is possible to respond that the rather mediocre observation, firing and movement possibilities should remind us that since the terrain commands the action, one should not look for an ideal zone of operation but rather for adapting the means to the effects to be achieved.

On the other hand, **the logistic part should still be improved**. The medical aspect is well integrated and if it is not taken into account in the organization of the platoons and company CSS element,

the unit will be penalized. The maintenance aspect is represented “de facto”, through natural losses caused by the movements, subsequently requiring the company commander to reorganize in order to be able to conduct his maneuver. On the other hand, the supply aspect, including logistic flows protection is neglected. A remedy could be found to that issue by playing real food and exercise ammunitions re-supply at night or during a stabilized combat phase, and this would give a real dimension to the logistic aspect in the eyes of the company commander.

And last, the “night” and “urban area” **combat phases** are **forgotten**, but it has to be kept in mind that the space-time framework of the evaluation imposes that priorities should be established.

In addition, simulation does give the possibility to act directly on the **control of the actions** which always **requires a human type of management**. In spite of the technical capabilities offered by the simulation systems for what regards firing weapons, certain aspects that are specific to the “fog of war” impose interventions by the exercise control team, which should act as an umpire in the course of the action. Evaluation is more than a mere dual action exercise: it has to permanently maintain a strong pedagogical objective which means that the OPFOR might have to be slowed down or re-oriented, since it is very familiar with the terrain and it masters perfectly infantry combat techniques which it practices permanently, in order to avoid putting the evaluated units in a situation of being systematically punished. Command and control constitutes also a major element that is hard to model: the combat stress caused by casualties, tiredness, human losses in the chain of command, these are scenario elements that can be played in response to specific orders given by either CENTAC CP or by the Battalion Task Force CP which, in that case, is provided with a very large degree of autonomy due to the very constructive contacts it entertains with the exercise developers team; however nothing will ever replace a live situation.

And last, a very important point: **simulation cannot always represent satisfactorily low intensity activities**: as a matter of fact, one could wonder how to model the contacts with local population, the control of displaced persons on the roads, the negotiations with militias? All attempts to represent that sort of events could rapidly prove to inadequate as our junior officers and NCOs, who are now accustomed to deploy to overseas theaters of operations where they sometimes find it hard to understand all the complexity of the operation, could be led to find the wargame to be too artificial; they might also replay straight off, or even worse, learn series of know how that

would not correspond to the reality of an actual engagement. Besides, it is important to emphasize the fact that company commanders and platoon leaders do not always master the execution of their units’ tactical know how: thus, instead of willing to do too much in a week, why not focusing the training on that high intensity combat which, whatever the type of expeditionary operation, will finally constitute the ultimate challenge and must thus have been faultlessly assimilated in order to guarantee a perfect control of the fires?

It is thus obvious that **simulation** doesn’t allow to cover the entire spectrum of an operational engagement which proves to be almost impossible to model. It remains however, by certain aspects, a **fundamental assistance thanks to the realism of the combat situations it generates**.

CENTAC represents a unique opportunity to operate within an operational environment very close to the real world

Infantry or armored units can operate with **all their organic means reinforced by combined arms elements**, which remains an exception in the every day life. Within the framework of the initial training in the branch schools, theoretical courses or simulation exercises describe what combined arms cooperation actually is. But CENTAC is the only place where a relatively large array of combat assets can be concretely deployed in the field to support a major effect to be achieved. Some factors that seem obvious when in a training classroom change totally when you don’t know the neighboring unit’s procedures. Thus, if on the one hand it might be

true that often the infantry or the armored soldier does not master well enough all the capabilities offered by artillery or engineers, on the other hand these last two often ignore as well how the supported unit operates and what its capabilities are. They may also have it difficult to move on the field and operate within a combined arms organization. This results into a minimum use of the combat support means which are themselves destabilized by an environment which is not well mastered. The notion of combat support, which is often discredited and replaced by autonomous actions, should take back its place in the training of the junior artillery and engineer officers, who, although they might be excellent technically speaking, have it difficult to find their place in a combined arms operation and to provide the supported captain with all the intelligence and action means that are at their disposal. At CENTAC, the well modeled fire



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support assets prove to be very efficient when they are activated as a consequence of a successful **combined arms dialog**.

In addition, CENTAC offers to the trained units combat situations that are made difficult by of the **lack of knowledge of the terrain and the very high level of OPFOR reactivity**. For the players, evaluations represent opportunities to put into perspective the study of the terrain and the one of an enemy which maneuvers smartly, far away from the classical schemes that are being taught to junior officers and NCOs only to give them the opportunity to master the combat basics. Well monitored and guided by the exercise preparation and conduct team who knows - thanks to the CENTAURE system - the position of all elements, the OPFOR acts in consistency with the tactical objectives it has received and that are known by the trained unit (Enemy COA). OPFOR implements simple, realistic and common sense tactical schemes of maneuver. The trained unit captain who does not achieve his mission cannot in most cases accuse a “dishonest OPFOR” to justify his failure but rather his too superficial study of the enemy (i.e. adjusting the theoretical maneuver to the terrain realities).

There is indeed one element that makes the evaluation get a lot closer to the operational engagement realities: it is the real time casualties assessment systems which equip most personnel and equipment and allow to evaluate what would actually be **the effects of fire**. As a matter of fact, units discover at CENTAC, and on a large scale, that fire kills. The STCAL² type systems that have already been equipping several units for years, provide each shooter with the results of his fire; furthermore, they remind the junior leaders of the imperious necessity to think in depth when drafting the “friendly positions” and “coordination” paragraphs of their orders because at CENTAC, as it would be in the real world, friendly fires are far from being anecdotal. In addition, that fire which kills has many implications in the maneuver: management of casualties, leaders being put out of action, etc.

Simulation, as it is implemented at CENTAC generally succeeds in **reproducing combat engagement conditions** similar to those that our units could be confronted to in operation, lifting thus many limitations relative to peace time. Simulation is thus a tool which is particularly well adapted to combat unit instruction and training.

One of CENTAC major assets is its capability to initiate or to orientate combat instruction and training

In addition, one of the CENTAC major assets is its capability to initiate or orientate, through simulation, combat instruction and training, be it by developing guidance or specific objectives, by validating know how or by improving engagement conditions for CPs and units in a combined arms environment.

Since a training period at CENTAC is basically defined as a session intended **to evaluate and not to grade** the concerned unit, it is thus tackled by the battalions without too much pressure and just like a real training. As a matter of fact, it could be easy for a battalion S3, who would know well evaluation process and exercise animation scenario, who could even monitor and control the exercise from the battalion TF CP, it would be easy for this officer to distort player units actions and reactions by over interfering in the development of the orders as well as in the conduct of the maneuver. The evaluation would then loose all its relevance since the evaluated unit would not have sufficient autonomy anymore, nor would it have the possibility to make mistakes, an opportunity which is often a source of very relevant experience. Units are thus in a logic of progress.

The schedule which is established in full coherence between CENTAC and the battalion is thus **perfectly integrated within the unit training guidance** thanks to the choice of the missions: the evaluation session will never be an exercise detached from unit's realities but rather a particularly well adapted opportunity to evaluate the level reached by the company. At the end of

the session, the battalion commander has enough elements to initiate, re-evaluate, re-orientate or confirm the actions that have to be undertaken, since he is the only one able to replace this evaluation results within the perspective of the unit's realities, i.e. level of instruction and training, operational background, as well as human resources available.

In addition, the two weeks of training and evaluation enable the battalion and even the brigade to **validate or initiate specific know how** within a realistic environment. The battalion is thus free, within sensible limits, to integrate specific modules within the evaluated units in accordance with own operational objectives. It is thus frequent to associate to the evaluated unit all or part of the “SRR”³, “STE”⁴ or any other element (“SAED”⁵). This integration enables the battalion S3 to validate know how and specific task organizations, in the perspective of future engagements or additional studies.

Lastly, evaluation offers a remarkable possibility: it allows to **associate reflection to action** during the periods of time dedicated to pedagogy and orders development.

As a matter of fact, although the execution aspect is important - and often poorly mastered by officers and NCOs - it results of the future maneuver development phase. During both rotations as a TF CP, the scheme applied by the battalion, in agreement with CENTAC has been the following⁶ :

- dissemination of the battalion task force orders to the units;
- command group meeting: presentation of the battalion task force major effect, reminder of the missions given to the subordinates (theoretical and applied to the on going action) and of the coordination points. Presentation by the units commanders of how they understood the mission;
- following an initial study of the mission (MEDO⁷), presentation by the company commanders of the mission and a first approach of the major effect to their subordinates while insisting on

lessons learned



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the combined arms aspect (what can the artillery and the engineers do to multiply my effects on the enemy?);

- formal development of the orders and dissemination to the subordinates. Should time permit, rehearsal with study of possible contingencies.

CENTAC **evaluation program** follows a progression whose relevance is **validated in the field**. It is linked to an after action review conducted by CENTAC personnel with an active participation of the players; it has an invaluable pedagogical value for the company commanders since they have had in the field the demonstration of the quality and/or deficiencies of their preparatory tactical reflections.

1 French Army Force on Force Training Center.

2 Light weapon combat simulator.

3 Section de reconnaissance régimentaire: Battalion Reconnaissance platoon.

4 Section de tireurs d'élite : Marksmen platoon.

5 Section d'aide à l'engagement débarqué: a new experimental type of infantry platoon that could be entrusted with missions usually fulfilled by special forces units (intelligence and protection).

6 On both occasions the author participated in the evaluation as the chief of a TF CP.

7 Méthode d'élaboration d'une décision opérationnelle : Operational decision-making method.

As a conclusion, it is necessary to recognize that an evaluation at CENTAC constitutes a time very rich of learning for a unit which, during five days, operates within an environment that has been designed to assess realistically the actions conducted at tactical level. This can only be made possible thanks to the capabilities offered by a type of **simulation**, the different, well controlled and mastered aspects of which are **almost transparent** for the players who can thus concentrate only on the mission to be achieved. This can be demonstrated by the fact that contestations about technical (equipment) or tactical (OPFOR) aspects do not resist to a precise analysis of the friendly maneuver preparation or execution.

CENTAC can, of course, be improved and the center proves to be listening to the trained units' suggestions. **However the objective is achieved, i.e. the representation of a combat engagement as close as possible to the reality.**

Lessons learned from these evaluations have still to be integrated down to the lowest levels, not only within the combat units but **also into the development of the junior officers and NCOs' training programs**. A CENTAC evaluation should also be included in the schedule of the **four months training period that precedes any unit operational deployment**. Should that last point be implemented, CENTAC evaluation would thus take a very special dimension since it would enable the company commanders to maneuver, in very hard conditions, with that unit which they will have the honor to command a few weeks later for a real operation.