

Lead The Way

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Building the Combat Outpost Principles of Patrolling ^ Construction

Thousands of years ago, a leader on some distant battlefield yelled in frustration, “Somebody better figure out how to bust into this fortress, or I swear to the gods that heads will roll!” And while everyone near the leader felt the fear crawl up to their soon-to-be-severed necks, two young Soldiers look at each other knowingly, and with a slight nod to each other stepped forward and yelled, “Sire, Let Us Try!” And so began the field of military engineering...or something like that. That leader came to the realization that his Army needed Soldiers with the cunning and imagination combined with brute force and “ignoance” to defeat the machines of war. Whether it was breaching into a heavily fortified position or designing a fortress built to repel invaders, our roots to the military engineering profession have always been focused on figuring out how to either build something or how to blow it up. Not a lot has changed since those early years. The following is an attempt to imagine the thought process of yesterday’s engineer and apply it to today’s engineering using the principles of patrolling (Planning, Reconnaissance, Security, Control, and Common Sense) in building today’s version of the castle—the combat outpost (COP).

Planning. I think it was a person named Murphy who said that no plan survives first contact with the enemy. Well, Mr. Murphy, you must be a civilian, because that’s why we have leaders in our formation. Our leaders and their staff develop a plan and disseminate the information to all their Soldiers so that they act as one unit. Everything in the plan must support the commander’s vision of where to array platforms, like COPs, to project combat power in the most efficient manner. It takes an engineer with imagination to visualize the battlefield and identify areas that best support offense, defense, and stability operations. Our geospatial engineers give us an excellent view of the battlefield with most of the data we need to give the commander several options when deciding where, and when, to build a COP. But it still takes someone to get out on the ground and verify the terrain to the commander’s plan.



Reconnaissance. A good recon verifies the design and layout and allows the engineer to make modifications that will best support the commander’s plan for a COP. Today’s recon not only verifies the physical terrain but also verifies the human dimension of the battlefield. Are we building a COP that straddles tribal boundaries? Are we building in a flood plain or a previously mined area? In addition to observation, cover and concealment, obstacles, key terrain, and avenues of approach (OCOKA), we have to consider area, structure, capabilities, organizations, people, and events (ASCOPE) when conducting a recon (see Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Appendix B).

Then it’s time to move out and start building, once we’ve verified the plan.

Security. Pretty much self-explanatory, but it has huge implications for our maneuver brothers and sisters. Every consideration must be taken into account, from moving ourselves to the proposed COP in a secure manner, to the design and construction of the COP that will provide the best protection for its inhabitants. I personally think the most dangerous part of any mission is just getting to the objective. What are the engagement criteria (rules of engagement [ROE]) while moving to the objective? Are our battle drills detailed enough and rehearsed so that our unit can respond quickly to a fluid situation? What are the disengagement criteria? And once we get to the COP, what measures do we need to take to secure ourselves while we’re constructing the COP? What is the main threat to the Soldiers at the COP? Better yet, out of the seven forms of contact, which ones are most likely to be used by the enemy? Do we use sniper screens? What about the entry control point? The whole idea behind a COP is that it’s a secure place close to the civilian population that our maneuver brothers can use to launch continuous, 24-hour counterinsurgency (COIN) operations without having to go all the way back to a base camp to reset. It’s a castle in the countryside that demonstrates to the people that the government cares about its citizens and is willing to provide a secure and productive environment that will improve the quality of life. The castle was the precursor of today’s cities. A thousand years ago, people lived near the castle to either work on the construction of the castle or provide supplies to its inhabitants. It provided a secure area that fostered trade.

Control. Traditionally, this addresses the importance of controlling the movement of the unit while you move from one place to another and the actions of the unit on the objective. In this case, I think a leader should consider the management of the construction phases of the COP. Each COP should provide the basics of protection, health, and safety for the engineer; it starts from the ground up. There are lots of project management tools to help the engineer, but it takes someone on the ground to organize the construction effort to meet the commander's objectives.

Common Sense. An overused term nowadays is *expectation management*, but it does have applications in this case. The engineer cannot pour all of the precious construction resources of the brigade into one platoon-size COP. The commander and his engineer must clearly define the basic standards for security, functionality, and life support. It's up to the engineer to take a commonsense approach and ensure that the life support standards of construction aren't compromised just because a subordinate commander truly wants a castle for his COP. Remind leaders of the old saying of "improving your fighting position" but within reason. Tell them to stay away from those pieces of construction that will get a Soldier seriously injured or killed, such as electrical work. Leave it for the experts, the engineer.

Combat, construction, and geospatial engineers are all involved in the process of building a COP. The Regiment expects you to be an expert in your field and recognize that it's essential for today's engineer to embrace the three disciplines of engineering to solve the commander's most difficult problems. It's not rocket science, but it is a matter of physics. Whether it's building something or blowing stuff up, it's the brave Soldiers who have embraced their profession who step forward to say, "*Let Us Try, Sir!*"

Or you can stand in line and watch the heads roll... .