



STAGE SETTING: THE MODERN THEATER ARMY

By Paul Mikolashek, Gregory Cantwell and Buck Haberichter January 7, 2020
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Buck Haberichter: Greetings from Carlisle and welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm **Colonel Buck Haberichter**, a member of the War Room editorial team and a faculty member here at the War College. I'm joined in the studio today by **Lieutenant General Paul T. Mikolashek**, U.S. Army retired. General Mikolashek was a career infantry man with 35 years of service in the Army. In addition to a Services Inspector General, he served as the Commanding General, Third United States Army, Army Forces Central Command and as Coalition Land Forces Component Commander, he commanded all ground forces in Afghanistan and the Middle East during Operation Enduring Freedom. Welcome, Sir.

Paul Mikolashek: Thanks, Buck. Really glad to be here and enjoy the opportunity to participate in the War Room.

BH: Good to have you, Sir.

BH: Also, in the studio is **Dr. Greg Cantwell**. Greg is currently the Director for The Joint Forces Land Component Commander Program and the Army War College Highly Qualified Expert Senior Mentor Program. He is also a retired army officer with 30 years of service as an Army Aviator. Welcome, Greg.

Greg Cantwell: Thank you, Buck. I appreciate the opportunity.

BH: These two gentlemen have joined me today to discuss large-scale ground combat. But we are not going to talk about the battles in the conflict phase that movies are made of, we are actually going to talk about the preparation of the theater that is ultimately far more important in the competition phase. So, I think the easiest way to start this off is ask the question first and foremost, what is a field army and what is it that it does?

GC: Okay, Buck. I appreciate the question. I'm going to jump on that one as a doctrinal guy here. You get back to, we've got geographic combatant commanders that have geographic areas of responsibility. Underneath each one of them, they have a service component command and that's where we get to the Army Service Component Command. There's also a Navy Service Component Command, Air Force, maritime, etc, for all of the services and they're the ones that provide the war fighting forces for the geographic combatant command to be able to do his job. Underneath the Army Service Component Command, we have the field army, and an example that we have right now is the Army in Korea. They've got a specific geographic focus where they become experts in it. They also have an operational requirement to face a near-peer competitor or a significant competitor that would require a multi-core kind of response, and in most cases, a multinational response.

PM: So, that is the field army, but I would like to talk about the theater army. One of the key things it does, as you alluded to, is it sets the theater for multi-domain operations. And perhaps the best way to describe is, a couple of examples of things a theater army can do. First, its presence by its sheer boots on the ground, an army presence, the physical, active, visible presence every day is an important asset that can give the geographic combatant commander. It facilitates access for others, for government, for non-government, for other aspects of our military and even commercial entities. It establishes credibility and the Army Force, as I've said with boots on the ground, a presence, regardless of the size is a powerful political statement and it tells our host nation that were willing to share the risks that they have. And then it provides practical, tactical, operational capabilities including command and control communications set up and established and working. It can become experts in intelligence and theater awareness bathed in an information and an intel environment. They're day-to-day experts living and breathing in the culture and environment in which they live. Perhaps the biggest, most powerful thing they can do is in the field of logistics. They can be prepared for the reception, staging onward movement integration of forces, set up the aerial and sea ports of embarkation, and as Greg said, provide all these requirements of army support to other services as executive agents, common user land transportation and humanitarian assistance. And then they can coordinate, facilitate and help on security and protection which will assure the host nation but include some practical matters like air missile defense, base defense and consequence management, and then maybe for the long-term, they develop a degree of knowledge and expertise in the theater and in the region that breeds a pool of experts in that area by its consistent presence and constant turnover and adding of new people and new experts.

BH: If I can, in the simplest of terms for our listeners, if we are talking about something like PACOM, Pacific Command, this is what the components of PACOM are doing on a day-to-day basis in a non-war scenario as we talk about setting the theater. All these things are their day-to-day jobs that they're doing a regular basis.

PM: Yeah, exactly. And as we get into discussion, it's what we are doing in the competitive phase is where they are. That's day-to-day conflict.

GC: I understand you've had experience, personal experience in having to do this starting from a flat-footed start so to speak as a commander. If you would tell us a little bit more about that.

PM: Yeah, exactly. And probably the best example is the conditions we set for Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom at the same time as ARCENT and Third U.S. Army. So, we set conditions for one expected course of action which really was the defense of Kuwait is what we were all about up until September 11th, 2001. But then circumstances changed and ended up doing something entirely differently. Even though it was the wrong set so to speak, it did prove invaluable and essential to what we did in OEF and then OIF, Operation Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. So, we had to do a mission. One was as the theater army, the Army Service Component Command and also the Joint Forces Land Component Command at the coalition level. But what we did, we had four deployed forces, we had pre-positioned sets of equipment, we had our air missile defense set up, a rudimentary command and control system, and we had an active and enduring theater security cooperation plan with all the nations in the region particularly those in the Gulf, but elsewhere in the new dimensions then of CENTCOM in the so-called "Stan Lands," working on theater security cooperation. We had an aggressive exercise program. So, all of those things were there and then we had to shift gears to Afghanistan for Operation Enduring Freedom. So, we had our processes and procedures in place to become a Coalition Joint Force Land Component Command to synchronize the land operations and support humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. We deployed command and control to up-gun what we had on hand in theater. We changed our intel focus obviously from one theater to the other, had to shift the logistics node, the framework for which was already there. Most significantly, we stood up this joint civil-military operational task force to help enable NGOS, non-government organizations back into Afghanistan. We had to integrate a large coalition from all sorts of contributors, allies, partners, willing contributors to the operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere and we had to continue to coordinate with our regional partners, all the other agencies and then keep the security cooperation going in Horn of Africa, the other parts of Central Asia. So, all of that was enabled by having the theater set. Again, even though for the different mission, it was those kinds of things that made a difference.

GC: We talk about joint headquarters and we talk about joint task force and none of that exists prior to boom so to speak, so once something bad happens the only one who you can go to sounds like you and your position and it's quite a bit of responsibility that you got to take care of in the entire theater as well as manage whatever that crisis is that has just occurred. That sounds like you're wearing several hats there.

PM: That's true and it does become a big challenge to be able to do that although we were prepared both I think philosophically and through exercises to recognize the different sort of responsibilities. Of course nothing like a real world scenario focuses the effort and then makes you realize all the things that you wish you could have done or were resourced for and it requires an incredible amount of effort, and it takes a staff that can be adaptive and flexible enough and have the means to expand and integrate coalition partners, other services and provide them the expertise, the facility, the SOPs that need to be done. And all this can be done during your day-to-day operations as you described if you have the resources and the people and the mission focus.

GC: This gets back to, as we start talking about, I guess the concept that's out there now is this multi-domain operations, and it's not just a land problem anymore, it sounds like we're dealing with the cyber domain, we're dealing with issues with intelligence going on, we've got economic issues, we've got maritime issues, we've got air space issues, you got all of these things that have to be coordinated, and as our adversaries look at our strengths and our vulnerabilities, they become much better at trying to foil us if you will and keep us away from getting to our objectives of being able to do whatever it is. But that competition phase, the Theater Army sounds like they still have a lot of things that they've got to be able to do.

PM: Sure, yeah exactly and that's really an important capability that the theater army can't have and should have as you look at those. Of course all the things that I mentioned about the physical aspects of setting the theater is important, but if you look at the competition phase as you said and what's going on in there in terms of all of those things, the information warfare and information operations is one, I think that we really need to take a hard look at and enable the theater army to be able to participate in this. I think generally speaking in the competition phase we need to not be passive.

GC: You talk about the competition phase but that may not be familiar to everybody out there, so I think what we're talking about is some people call it that gray zone or any sort of conflict prior to actual armed conflict or physical shooting of things going back and forth, so this competition I guess used to be called phase zero for military folks, but it's just the day-to-day operations when we're not at war so to speak in the physical sense of people shooting at each other.

PM: Right, but I also think it recognizes that there are efforts going on, as you said, to disrupt what we're trying to do in a different form whether it's called grey zone warfare, hybrid warfare but it's an active operation being conducted by our adversaries.

GC: That's a good point. There're a lot of things that have to happen even if we're not at war and especially if we think that we may have to go to war by some of our contingency plans or

operational plans to meet the nation's objective. So, I guess some of the attendees that we have that come to the Joint Force Land Component Commander Course are aspiring land component commanders, and looking at all of the responsibilities that the Army is required by law or by U.S. code or by the service responsibility to other services, it's almost staggering to take a look at all that they're required to do. You've had experience in this and perhaps you can talk more about how you see those challenges and protection, things like that, that you've had to deal with.

PM: Well, as I said clearly, you need a staff of expertise maybe it doesn't need to be a huge number of people, but it's a matter of having the experts who can manage and plan these things and then you have to make decisions on how you're going to prioritize what you can do and what you want to or need to defer and so that's an everyday struggle in terms of prioritization but I think if you keep your focus on the overall broad case of setting the conditions in the theater in terms of exercise program, integration with the host nation with other countries that may participate, it will go a long way to help settle those things. And it's a constant struggle for resources. As a commander in the staff because it's limited and that's not going to change on any, whether it's budget, equipment, people, most primarily opportunities that you see that you just can't afford to do for one reason or another, but it's a matter of balancing all of those and trying to get at the core mission that you have. And it's an everyday thing, and that's why I think having an active headquarters of some size, the Army Service Component theater army on the ground enables all those things for the good of the Joint Force and for our operations we may conduct.

BH: If I could break it for just a minute, you've mentioned three times now, talking about exercises and the importance of them. To anybody who hasn't participated in a large-scale military exercise, I don't think people necessarily, I mean they obviously understand that we need to practice, our skills are perishable and more often than not we are thinking of the warfighter, but I think it's important to point out that in a place of limited resources and personnel, often what happens in a wartime scenario is forces deploy in and fall in on that staff and then that staff and their planning, they made all kinds of assumptions. Exercise is the first time we're able to try and figure out which of those assumptions are correct, which are incorrect quite often there's logistics and communications issues that are pointed out that no one's ever thought of before. You find best practices, you find worst practices and shortcomings. Obviously, exercises are crucial to a Component Commander as well as the Combatant Commander for the entire theater as to how they're going to eventually, if called upon, exercise those forces.

PM: Exactly. You hit all the buttons on why you do exercises. And it doesn't have to—well it would be nice to—equate to a huge number of people and equipment, things running around in different countries. You can gain an awful lot by war games and command post-exercise type events that we have done. I think the CENTCOM series of exercises they used to do called Internal Look really helped get at all those things that you talked about—the integration of the

staff, the SOPs and procedures, so that becomes somewhat routine, and then you just modify them for the circumstance. That I think is really important.

BH: Greg, you started off with the Korean theater. The Korean theater is infamous for command post and staffing exercises, that more often than not, don't involve any operational forces, it's just simply a look at how we can actually control this whole process should it happen and resupply it at the time?

GC: You're absolutely right and there's additional focus now going back to—you know history is repeating itself so to speak. We used to be very active in Europe and we used to do these re-forged kinds of exercises where you take a large force from the United States and project them forward as if we were responding to a Soviet threat at the time. Now, we've gone past having the Soviet Union out there but we've assumed some risk in our theater army structures then all of the resources and all the expertise that we used to have not just in the military but our coordination with civilian counterparts that would run the ports, that would accept the inflow of a massive amount of new military equipment and people, a lot of those relationships and a lot of those practices have atrophied on the military side as well as on the civilian side. So, rebuilding those structures takes time, takes effort and that's the theater army's job to do all of that on a daily basis. So, we have assumed risk by reducing the theater army headquarters because many people think, headquarters, that's a bad thing and it must be unnecessary overhead. As military professionals, we got to get beyond that and we've got to talk to what is it that's the science as well as the art of moving masses amounts of people and establishing the relationships, getting the authorities and getting the resources in place so that we have operational, credible plans to be able to enact if the nation calls on us to do them. Otherwise some would say that if bad things happen within a near-peer competitor and they decide to do something, our only options are do nothing and watch, or go to global nuclear war, and you got to ask yourself what's the role of the Army if that's what relevance do we have. You can have an army of two people if that's the answer, guys to push buttons I guess. But you know what is the role of the Army then if we're going to be credible and give options to our national decision-makers?

PM: Well, there is one thing I think and I've thought about: what we can do in this competition phase realizing that our adversaries or potential adversaries or competitors or whatever you want to call them at this point is that they're actively engaged. They are doing things to disrupt whatever they think we might want to do, set conditions to enable whatever they are headed towards or want to do and they are. They're active in unconventional warfare, information warfare, disinformation, misinformation, manipulation of the media, this is going on every day and certainly in the cyber domain they're very active. I think that we, the U.S. Army, will figure out how to counter and deter a large-scale ground combat operation as you described. We are good. Nobody does it better, really, and we'll get there, and they need to be fearful of us being able to do that and should. But it could be a long time coming and they could have an influence

on us as a nation and our partners and our allies and effect a macro-strategic outcome if they're successful in winning in the competition phase without ever going to the conflict phase. So, what are some of the things we can do and what role would a theater army play in doing this? And I think the information operation is an ideal one where we can develop the tools, the techniques. It will take a national level campaign, strategic campaign to do this that counters our adversaries' efforts to manipulate us.

GC: You talked about, Sir, that information operations that may mean something that everybody's not familiar with, but I think you're talking about the power of information if you will or the power of public opinion that gets back to and what people believe and what people understand and where they get their information and once they have that set in their beliefs and their values, it's very hard to overcome any of that and if we yield that I guess to our adversary you're saying...

PM: Right. It puts us at a disadvantage.

GC: So, talk to me more about the theater army's role in providing information. It almost sounds like a psychological operations kind of event, but I know it's not that so...

PM: And again, it needs to be, and this is not something the Army would do on its own and it would not be an independent operator. This is a very sophisticated, complex world and certainly has to be, as I said, a national level information campaign that lasts a long time. The results and the output of these are difficult to measure, but I think we need to not just sit and watch it unfold. So, I think the first step is to recognize what we need to discredit on the part of these adversaries. We need to be able to have the means to understand what their disinformation and misinformation efforts are and the effect of them and expend effort to disrupt that thought, the things that they are they are doing. So, again, that's why it's very sophisticated, delicate, and has to be centrally, pretty well controlled, but I think having an organization on the ground who has those capabilities that I talked about with people who have the knowledge and expertise of the environment which is not just a geographic terrain but also the political, social, economic environment that is taking place in a country and is linked in with the key U.S. national interest either for the State Department or others, the commercial entities that can see and understand what's going on and help facilitate. It would be a means, the theater army would be just like it is for a military operation, there's a role to play, you have certain tasks that you have, and you execute them and follow up and assess their effects. So, I think a theater army is ideally suited to support that and within the authorities that it has, and it might, because of its presence on the ground, could be sensitive to some of the effects of these disinformation and misinformation efforts that it could become aware of that much more quickly than otherwise waiting to see something. It's something that I think requires an awful lot of discussion and debate, but I think the theater army is a key element in providing the Army capabilities to defeat this.

GC: And it gets back to, we were talking about, we've assumed some risk in reducing headquarters. Some of those capabilities require intelligence that's persistent, that stays there and learns these things year after year after year to understand what an action by the government or what an action by the military actually means, as opposed to we just observe something happening, we understand what the implications of that are. And I guess you're saying the military has to accept they have an awareness of the power of information and be cognizant of that as opposed to information can be just as deadly as...

PM: Right, and we don't want to wait until we get in the conflict zone to start executing information...

GC: Absolutely.

PM: ...operations there. As I said are our adversaries are very aggressive at doing this and we should not just give them by.

GC: And that sounds like what we started talking about with the field army and why you would need a field army because the theater army, we'll just take Europe for an example or the Pacific for an example, that they have a huge area responsibility and it's not a homogeneous environment either. So, having field armies in place, that further helps out the theater army having someone that has a specific geographic focus and can understand these things much better and it gives us, as you talked about, you going to have a lot of staff that are trained and qualified, that gives you an additional operational headquarters that perhaps additional forces from the United States or from wherever can come and fill in on that at least gives you a core element to start with.

BH: Well, gentlemen, unfortunately we are running out of time, but this has been an excellent discussion of what we probably take for granted on many occasions as to what's going on in any of the theaters that we're involved in, but is actually obviously an incredibly complicated, incredibly sophisticated and multi-layered approach and we're simply looking, at this point, at the Army's input to it in particular without stepping back for further look at what the Joint Community does and what the Combatant Commander does. Obviously, this gets more and more complex the more players you add to it. So, thank you very much for your time here today. I appreciated this. I'm sure that the listeners have enjoyed this, and we look forward to talking to you again sometime soon.

PM: Great, thank you.

GC: Thank you very much, Buck.