

**Pre-Combat Inspections (PCIs)
Or
You Can't Shoot What You Don't Have,
But You Might Get Shot Wishing You Did!**

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It was a dark night with very little illumination when the order was received to assault the village. Intel told us there was a possible squad-sized element in the village and they had a gun vehicle. We set up our blocking positions, all according to standard, then noticed the enemy vehicle driving towards us. The platoon sergeant and platoon leader signaled to bring forward the AT weapon. At that time PVT Smith said, "I didn't bring it; did you, PVT Johnson?"

Pre-combat inspections (PCIs) are inspections performed by leaders prior to the execution of operations. Every soldier has heard of or taken part in PCIs, yet current Army doctrine does not clearly define or identify them. **FM 6-0, *Command and Control***, simply states unit preparation includes pre-combat checks and inspections to ensure units, soldiers, and systems are fully capable and ready to execute. **FM 7-10, *The Infantry Company***, states inspections must be used to supervise and refine troop-leading procedures, and gives a list of items to inspect to include weapons, equipment, soldiers' knowledge, and communications.

At the platoon level, **FM 3-21.8 (FM 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*)** states squad leaders should conduct initial inspections shortly after receipt of the warning order. It continues with the platoon sergeant conducting spot checks throughout the unit's preparation for combat, and the platoon leader and platoon sergeant making a final inspection. They should inspect:

- Weapons and ammunition
- Uniform and equipment
- Mission-essential equipment
- Soldiers' understanding of the mission and their specific responsibilities
- Communications
- Rations and water
- Camouflage
- Deficiencies noted during earlier inspections

Given this lack of definition and the clear importance of such inspections, the need to define a PCI is apparent.

How Information is Collected

Units normally deploy to JRTC with several focus areas they want to improve. When the task force (TF) SGM links up with the rotational CSM and receives focus items, PCIs and pre-combat checks (PCCs) are normally at the top of the list. The TF SGM will place the focus items on a document to be distributed to all TF observer/controllers (O/Cs). The tactical analysis feedback facility (TAFF) will analyze the feedback from the O/C teams, compile the collected data, and use that data as part of the company and TF after-action reviews (AARs). Normally, each rotational unit will take part in two AARs at the TF level. During the first AAR, the unit, with coaching from the senior O/C, will develop a list of “sustain” and “improve” items. During the second phase, all “improves” turn to “sustain,” and the unit moves on to improving other operations.

O/Cs observe each patrol from mission receipt to mission completion. This allows the O/C to observe PCIs and also the consequences of any deficiencies. The O/C will conduct an informal AAR at the completion of each patrol to discuss areas of improvement and areas to sustain. Improvements in PCIs almost teach themselves as the unit acknowledges problems that occurred during patrols, which resulted from a failure to check something.

As stated earlier, current doctrine does not specify a set "standard" for PCIs. So, what standard should be used to measure unit PCIs? Typically, the unit's own standard as detailed in their unit tactical standard operating procedures (TACSOP) is used. This allows O/Cs to provide feedback to the unit based on their own guidelines. In the absence of a unit standard, the following is used:

1. **Green** – Unit conducts PCI for each mission using a published checklist (either SOP or mission specific). All key personnel and equipment are present for the inspection.
2. **Amber** – Unit conducts PCI for each mission, but does not use a published checklist. Key personnel and equipment are missing.
3. **Red** – Unit does not conduct a PCI.
4. **Blue** – Unit conducts PCI, but is unobserved by the O/Cs.

PCI Data From Prior JRTC Rotations

The following graphs show the percentage of PCIs conducted before each mission or patrol at JRTC during the course of seven prior rotations:

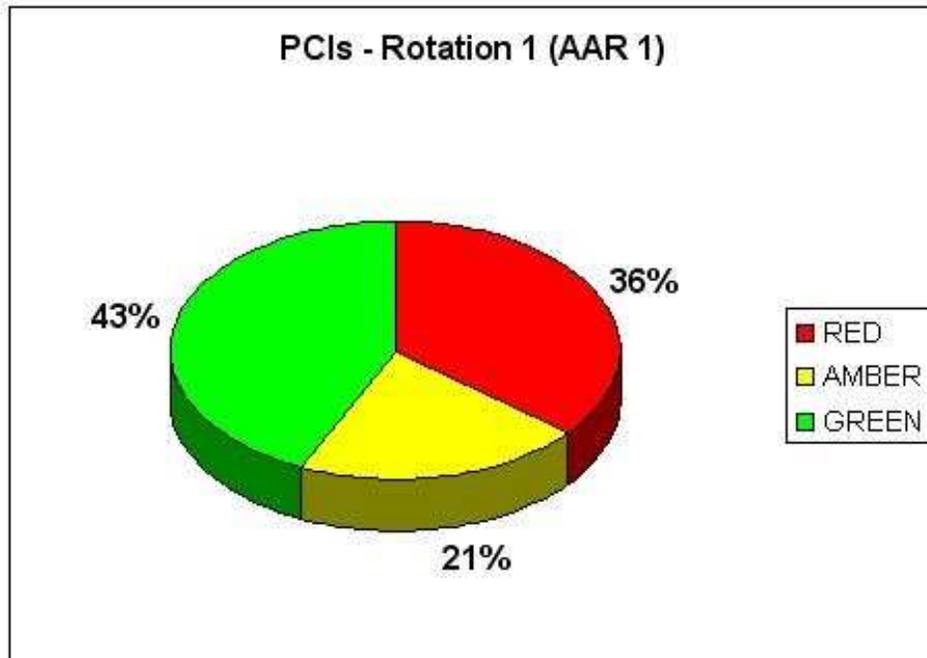


Figure 1 – Rotation 1, After-Action Review 1

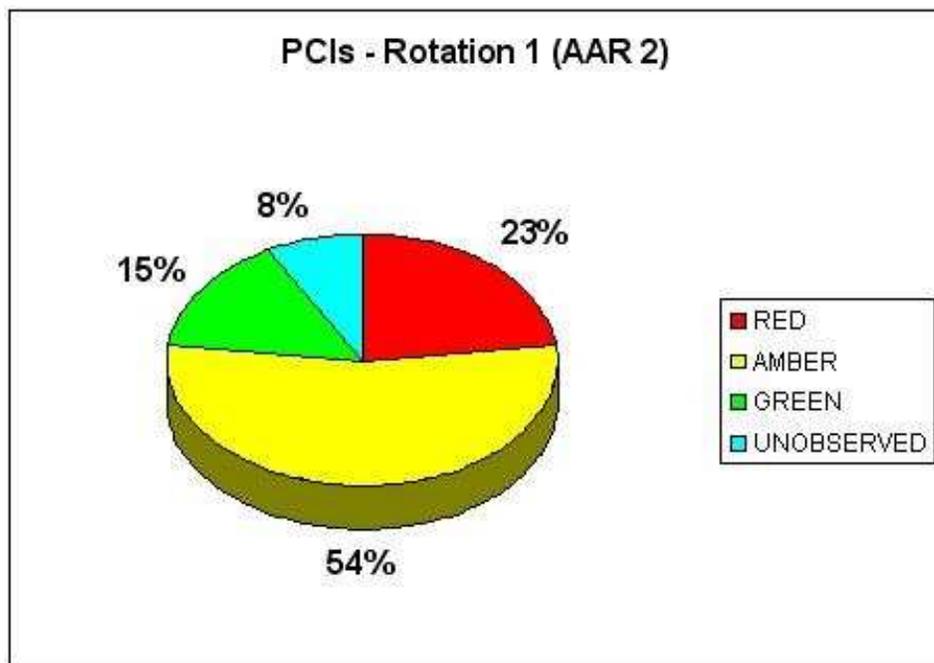


Figure 2 – Rotation 1, After-Action Review 2

Notes on Rotation 1 (Figures 1 and 2): The unit conducted PCIs to standard for almost half of the missions, and some sort of PCI for about 6 out of 10 missions. During the second half of the rotation, PCIs were conducted for almost 7 out of 10 missions, although the number conducted to

standard decreased. This unit typically accomplished all missions with little friction. Soldiers were well briefed and knowledgeable on the mission. Typical O/C observations provided for the amber rating were: no checklist used, backbriefs not conducted, and the PCIs conducted were not mission specific. O/C amber rated observations for AAR 2 consisted of: spot checks only, no checklist used, and only verbal PCIs.

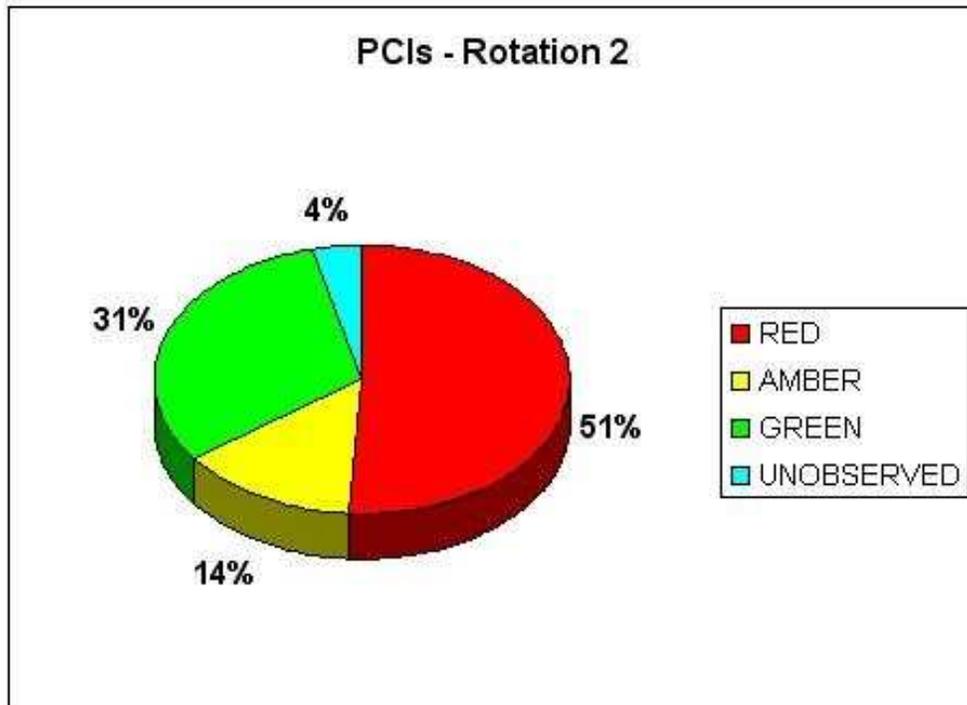


Figure 3 – PCIs Conducted During Rotation 2

Notes on Rotation 2 (Figure 3): PCIs were conducted for about half of the missions. The other half of the missions were conducted without PCIs and the results showed: mission execution was poor. Multiple problems led to significant friction throughout.

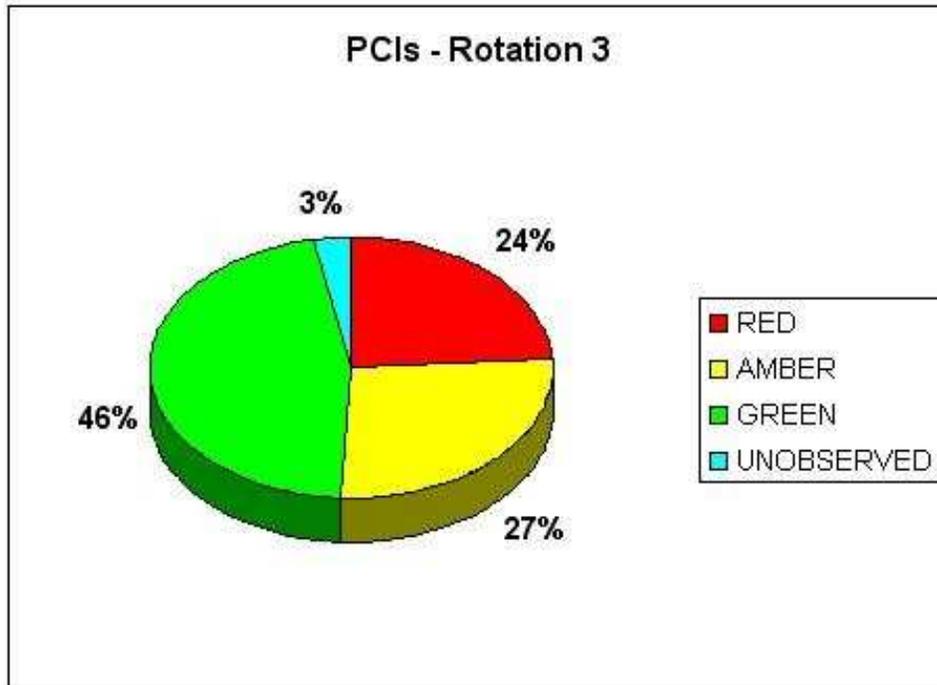


Figure 4 – PCIs Conducted During Rotation 3

Notes on Rotation 3 (Figure 4): Three out of four missions had some sort of PCI, with almost half conducted to standard. This unit demonstrated exceptional discipline and effectively accomplished all missions. Leaders took an active interest in mission accomplishment and demonstrated a high degree of initiative. O/C observations for amber assessments were: no checklist used, not in accordance with unit SOP, no specific format, missing details, and lack of coordination with key elements.

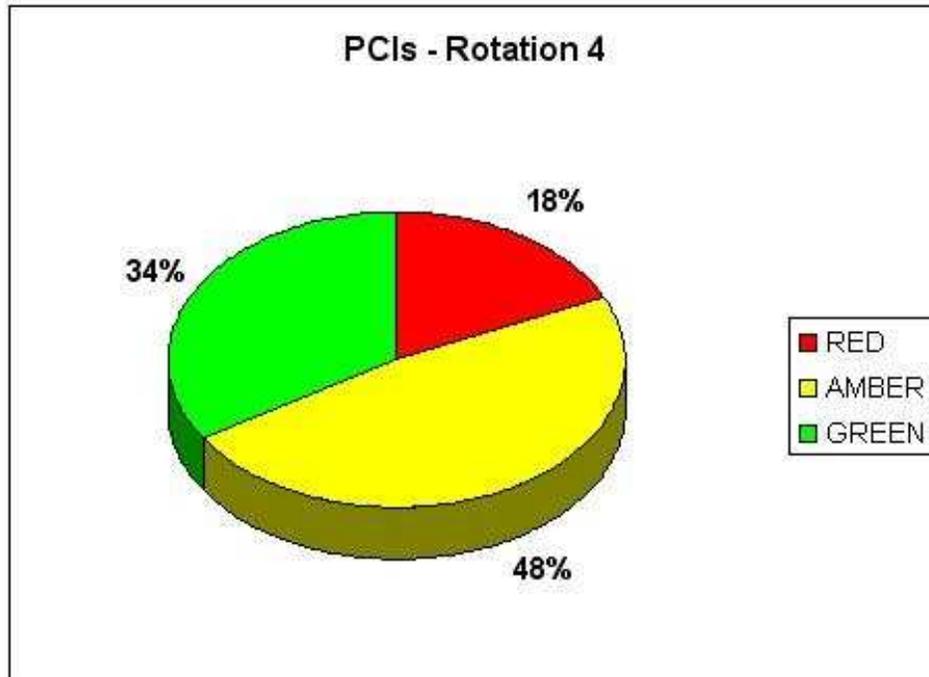


Figure 5 – PCIs Conducted During Rotation 4

Notes on Rotation 4 (Figure 5): A well-prepared and disciplined unit. PCIs conducted in 8 out of 10 missions. This unit experienced some friction during mission execution because not all key personnel and equipment were inspected during PCIs. O/C observations for amber assessments were: no use of PCI checklist, no action taken to correct deficiency, accountability vs. serviceability, and a lack of detail.

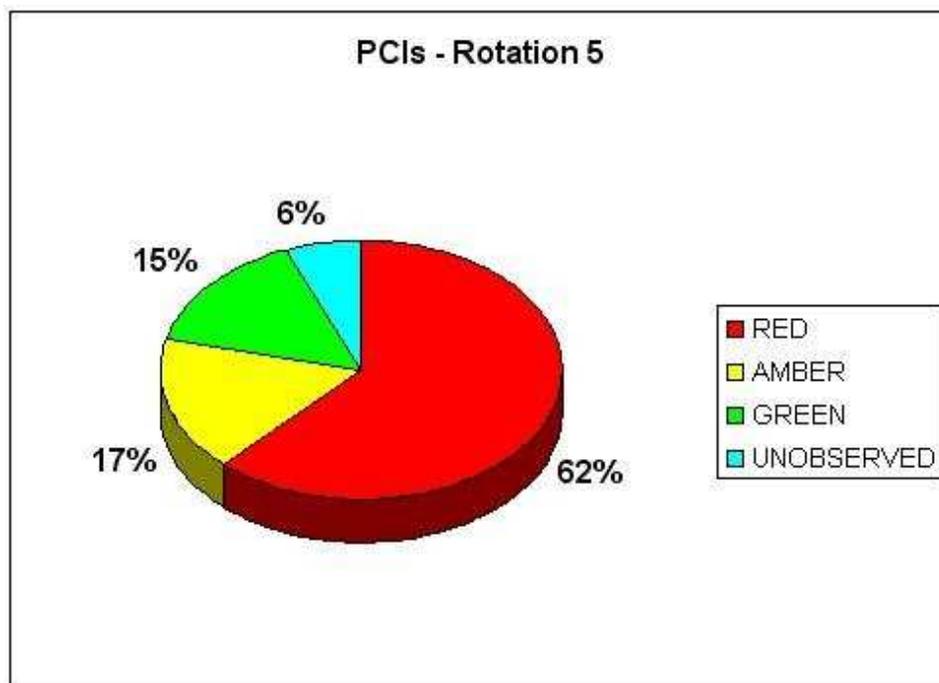


Figure 6 – PCIs Conducted During Rotation 5

Notes on Rotation 5 (Figure 6): This unit only completed PCIs in 1 out of 3 missions. The unit generally experienced significant friction and confusion during mission execution. This problem was identified as an area for the unit to focus on during post-rotation training.

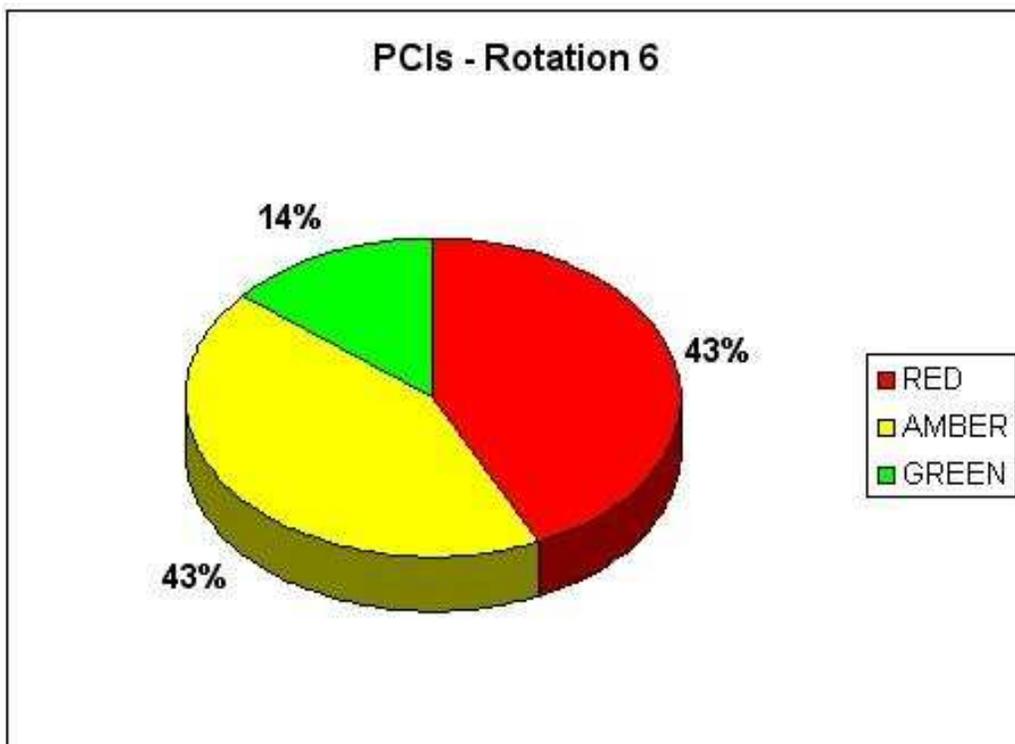


Figure 7 - PCIs Conducted During Rotation 6

Notes on Rotation 6 (Figure 7): This unit completed PCIs in about half of its missions. The unit experienced moderate amounts of friction during the rotation, and had difficulty at the soldier level with problems like multiple weapons malfunctions.

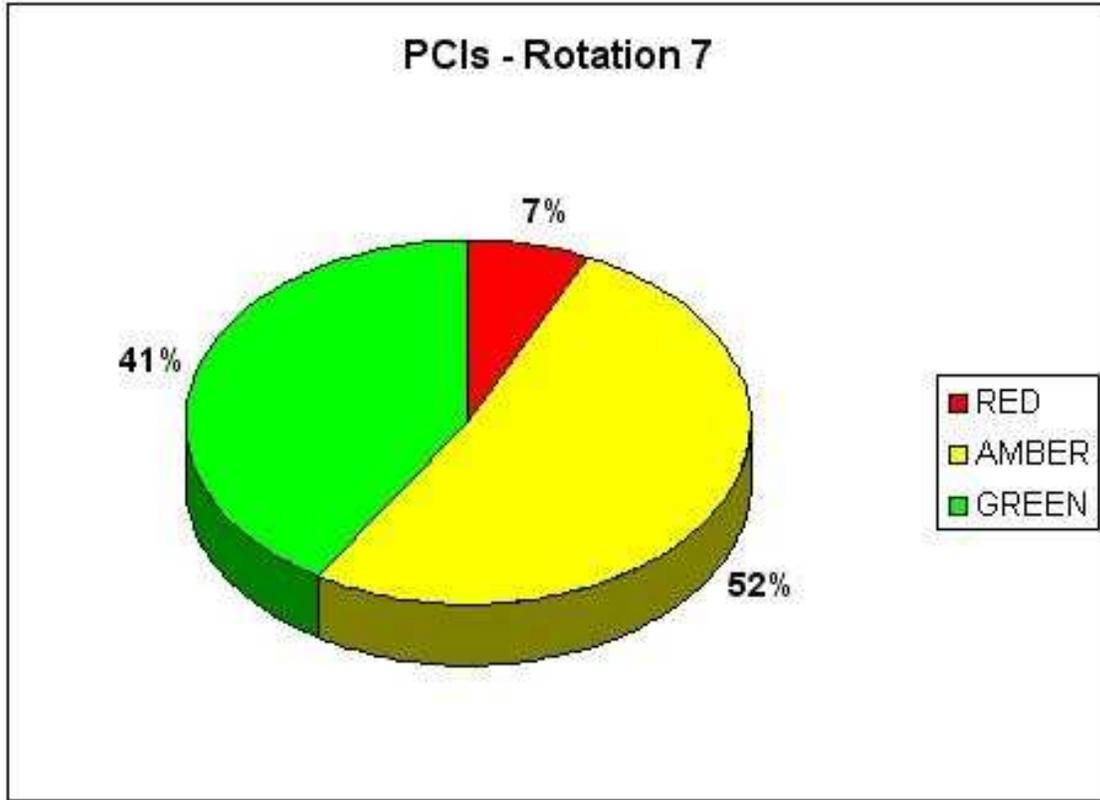


Figure 8 – PCIs Conducted During Rotation 7

Notes on Rotation 7 (Figure 8): This unit prepared for the rotation with a significant pre-rotation train up. The unit SOP was established and disseminated. The unit effectively planned its use of time and incorporated PCIs in nearly all missions.

Before the reader concludes that a high red assessment signifies a poorly disciplined, lazy unit, we should point out there are several factors that can lead to a lack of PCIs. Most common is the lack of time to conduct PCIs. Often, the unit received a mission to execute almost immediately. The second most common reason is a failure to follow up or supervise. After specifying PCIs during the order, company commanders typically left PCIs to be conducted and supervised at the platoon level and then failed to check that they were conducted. Finally, some units with adequate time simply chose not to conduct PCIs.

As stated previously, the most common reason for an amber rating is the lack of a published PCI checklist. A checklist ensures that the PCI is uniform and thorough. It allows the leader to focus on checking the right equipment for the mission, even when time is short or he is fatigued. The mission may also be new to the unit, as was the case for several units in Iraq. Special equipment not commonly used gets left behind, or the soldier brings it without ever being trained in its use. The next most common shortcoming in PCIs is missing personnel or equipment. Proper PCIs would prevent these mishaps.

Not surprisingly, units that conduct PCIs to standard have greater success during mission execution. Common sense tells us that if key personnel are prepared and key equipment is functioning, the chance for mishaps and the related friction are greatly reduced. This alone demonstrates the importance of PCIs.

Improving PCIs

At the company level, failure to complete PCIs most often stems from a lack of time. This situation can be avoided by establishing a company timeline upon receipt of the mission, commonly referred to as the reverse planning timeline. This ensures time is budgeted for company-level PCIs. Company-level PCIs should not be an all-inclusive, exhaustive inspection. The commander and/or first sergeant should check mission critical items to verify/reinforce platoon inspections. Ideally, the first sergeant and commander can perform the company PCI in conjunction with the platoon PCIs.

During the fast-paced actions required in the contemporary operating environment (COE), commanders and leaders have a tendency to shorten or even eliminate the time to complete PCIs. Units at the JRTC have had some success by doing a recovery PCC in addition to the PCI conducted during mission preparation. By conducting weapons maintenance, equipment inspections, communications exercises (commix), and resupply during post-operations recovery, units can devote the limited time available for PCIs in mission preparation to checking soldier knowledge, checking mission-specific equipment, and ensuring deficiencies noted in earlier inspections are corrected.

Another trend noticed at JRTC is that the PCI checklist becomes a list that includes every item in the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). Some small unit leaders get a checklist with no less than 30 line items per soldier and as many as 50 line items for key leaders. A PCI checklist intended as a tool for combat preparation becomes burdensome; soldiers discard such burdens quickly. Commanders need to be confident in knowing their soldiers are prepared. And leaders must prepare their soldiers. The solution is well known: develop a combat critical checklist tailored to current operations. Check other items during lulls in the battle or “down time.”

Remember: Not Inspected, Oft Neglected

Pre-combat inspections are an important tool to help ensure mission success. Current doctrine does not specify the format, time allocated, or content of PCIs. Those units that do not conduct PCIs have problems during mission execution. Some even risk mission failure. Units that have developed SOPs for PCIs and actually use those SOPs enjoy the most success during mission execution at JRTC. These inspections are best when short, concise, and mission focused.