PREPARING FOR COALITION COMMAND – THE THREE PS: PEOPLE, PROCESSES, AND PLANS

by Ian Wood

Introduction

I
n the decade before 11 September 2001, the Canadian Forces (CF) was mainly engaged in the contribution of selected tactical-level forces to larger non-Canadian led coalition formations, often operating in primarily low-intensity peacekeeping, peacemaking, and international humanitarian relief operations. As part of the new CF Vision that is guiding this period of unprecedented transformation, the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) directed that the CF should deliberately develop the capability to undertake greater leadership roles in international coalition operations. This commitment to international leadership has also been echoed by the last two federal governments. Now nearly six years after 9/11, Canada is deliberately involved in mid-to-high intensity stability operations while undertaking higher profile leadership roles in coalition and alliance task forces. As Canada becomes more engaged internationally, the CF must continue to advance the professional development of its officer corps so that its members may be more capable of undertaking command at higher levels in multinational coalition task forces.

Coalitions are always complex systems, involving frictional interaction between political and military leaders through the entire spectrum of operations spanning the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. To that end, this article is designed to add to the body of professional knowledge on the important issue of coalition warfare command. More specifically, it will be argued that a methodology is needed that future commanders may apply during the pre-deployment period to assess the competence and capabilities of coalition force contributions. A series of factors will be provided that are intended to assist commanders in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their assigned multinational forces. This article also, hopefully, will help prepare future Canadian commanders for success in areas such as leadership preparedness, force interoperability, and unity of effort.

My methodology focuses upon three main assessment factors – namely, People, Processes, and Plans. It does not suggest that the three factors are equally important, just distinct enough to deserve individual attention. Once the initial description of these factors has been given, I will then offer a broader context discussion of the potential influence of these factors upon the coalition task force operations. Lastly, I will respectfully offer as food for thought five suggested rules derived from the methodology, which commanders should observe when executing their duties in theatre.

A clear demonstration of the operational art today may well be how coalition commanders work within the various political and military restraints of their contingent forces to shape a culture of trust and commitment, and then subsequently, how the commanders apply these potentially dissimilar forces to achieve mission success.

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Beyond this *indirect* assessment, the commander must make a *direct* assessment by spending as much time as possible in personal interaction, and becoming acquainted with future coalition partners. Equally, the CTF commander must understand that the national contingent commanders will likely use this same first occasion to make their own assessment of the coalition task force commander, so the event must be well planned and managed with care. This initial assessment activity will give the task force commander both an analytical and professional intuitive feel for the abilities of his subordinate commanders. Most importantly, the CTF commander must attempt to determine if he will be able to rely upon the experience of subordinate commanders, and if they will have the ability to respond to the CTF commander’s direction, which may be given either explicitly or implicitly, during the deployed phase of the mission.

**Leadership Environment**

In addition to measuring the experience and skills of the multinational contingent commanders, the CTF commander must also be able to assess their willingness to cooperate with the mission goals of the task force. This assessment of the ‘followership’ or ‘cooperability’ will allow the task force commander to determine what degree of ‘mission command’ that may or may not be able to be applied when dealing with a subordinate commander.4 The CTF commander must also have both the *courage* and the *tact* to deal with any shortcomings that he assesses to be future mission-inhibitors. This must be done delicately, without embarrassing the individual or contributing nation.

An astute CTF commander should be able to recognize whether the shortfalls of the subordinate commanders are due to either their lack of training and experience, or, at worst, as a result of amateur, arrogant, and/or deliberate obfuscation. No matter the case, the CTF commander must react with acumen and professional tact to maintain mission continuity. A prudent coalition force commander must remember that some of these nations may well be called upon to contribute to future coalition forces, and so, professional relations must be maintained for strategic/diplomatic reasons.

**Influence of Military Culture/Language/Religion**

The CTF commander and his staff should also be aware of any socio-cultural factors that may detract from the coalition’s cohesion. This is particularly important, given that many of today’s coalitions are built outside traditional alliances, and frequently in a rapid and ad hoc fashion. As a result, any linguistic or cultural challenges that might detract from the coalition-building activities...
must be recognized quickly and mitigated early in the pre-deployment phase. Clear and persistent differences may well continue deep into the mission, due to national traditions, religion, and differing professional military cultures. Therefore, it is essential that all commanders be aware of cultural differences in their force. An appreciation of these issues, albeit potentially intangible and vague, must be mastered by the CTF commander and his advisors to ensure that the coalition is not subjected to internal friction.

Also, language used cannot be overstated as an important contributor or detractor to unity within the task force. When the CTF commander’s intent is drafted, and any other subsequent written direction is given, clear, concise, action-oriented words must be used that are first of all ‘translatable’ into the languages of the coalition, and, secondly, not susceptible to double meanings or uncertainty in any other task force linguistic context.

Degree of Readiness of Subordinate Forces

The task force commander and the staff also must rigorously assess the readiness and calibre of the forces that are being offered to the coalition. They must determine the degree of preparation that the national contribution to the coalition forces has undergone in advance of being offered to the task force. Are they formed units with international credibility, and have they operated recently and successfully with other coalition task force nations? If not, how can these perceived deficiencies be mitigated?

The key here is that the CTF commander must devote what limited time is available to ask very probing questions in an ‘eye-to-eye’ manner during the pre-deployment training period. It is also important that if a coalition member cannot attend the training, the task force commander must ensure that areas of possible future risk are addressed before entry into the operational theatre. It is essential that the CTF commander utilizes robust scenarios and/or pre-mission war-gaming serials to exercise the coalition contributors.

The CTF commander must constantly ensure that the readiness assessment remains as objective as possible. The commander may have national contingents join the force that lack any degree of reputation, but that ultimately perform at a high level. Equally, some units may come to the fight with a recent national reputation that exceeds their true skills and abilities. This situation may lead the CTF commander to commit them to operations for which they are not well equipped or prepared – possibly leading to national embarrassment, coalition cohesion challenges, and mission degradation. Clearly, competence and readiness must be demonstrated to the CTF commander, and not just as declared by the nations contributing the forces.

The CTF commander must also be on the lookout for any potential negative competition that may develop between units of differing national backgrounds. If the rivalry becomes excessive, it may well cause the national contingents involved to lose sight of the overall coalition mission, while they attempt to ‘show each other up.’ Past experience has also shown that some countries simply are not able to work together due to the legacy of previous operational incompatibility or, at worst, cultural incongruity or previous hostilities. Finally, it may be possible that units within a single national contribution are unwilling to cooperate with each other, ultimately degrading the effectiveness of the overall multinational force. The CTF commander must manage the interaction carefully between these dissimilar units, and, at all times, commit contingents to the fight, based upon their true skills and abilities. Clearly, this last aspect of readiness, along with all the other elements, must be considered carefully.

Processes

Discussions of military interoperability are often limited to technical aspects, such as compatibility of information and weapons systems, tactics, techniques and procedures, logistics support, and intelligence sharing limitations. I will now go beyond these classic considerations of interoperability and move into the more subtle and challenging realm...
of organizational or non-technical interoperability. Elements to be considered under the processes factor include the operational flexibility of the assigned forces, the trust that can be generated between the commander and the contingent leadership, the risk tolerance of each force, and coalition Rules of Engagement (ROE).

Operational Flexibility of Assigned Units

Even though this aspect of assessment may be very difficult to gauge prior to mission commencement, the CTF commander must always remain conscious of both the positive, and, more importantly, the negative effect that politics may have upon his coalition forces in theatre. The interaction between the national contingent commanders and their domestic leaders at the military-strategic level can have a compressing or limiting effect upon the flexibility of the coalition-contributed forces. As a result, the CTF commander must have a detailed understanding of the degrees of command authority that have been granted by each of the national entities. At a minimum, issues of Operational Command (OPCOM) and Operational Control (OPCON) must be discussed in detail to avoid any misinterpretation, subtleties, or national caveats that may well plague the coalition unity of command when it is later deployed. Individual national contingent commanders may find themselves in a position whereby they must decline certain missions due to national restrictions or political sentiments. This is particularly problematic if the CTF commander has been given the OPCOM necessary to designate these very same missions to the national contingents in question.

Even though these inter-contingent command relationships may have been carefully arranged with bilateral agreements, and backed up by written authorities, there still may be a great variance in the actual interpretation within the coalition. Further, the CTF commander must assess what degree of formality will be required when issuing the national commanders their orders – need they be written or will more-informal verbal relationships suffice? The CTF commander must determine whether national contingents will be sufficiently agile and autonomous to accept operational and tactical level branch and sequel plans and short notice orders without excessive oversight and potential delay due to military-strategic level review. A prudent CTF commander must always factor into the time-sensitive planning cycle how long it may take nations to respond when tasked to conduct out-of-sector coalition support operations, or, indeed, if they are actually even available or permitted to respond.

Trust

The CTF commander must also be conscious of the degree of trust that he can place in the various national level contingent commanders. This will rely heavily upon his assessment of the military ethos and teamwork that exists within the coalition members. Ethos is a representation of the values, beliefs, and imperatives that influence the spirit and professional conduct of a fighting force, whereas teamwork is a measure of cohesion, and a willingness to integrate individual national aspirations into the overall coalition mission. Ethos is also influenced by the degree of professional experience and national values of the contributing forces, and, as such, it is also a very nebulous and challenging attribute to measure. Occasionally, there may also be cultural factors that negatively influence the outward appearance of a national contingent’s ethos and work ethic; a CTF commander must be cautious not to assume superiority or inferiority, based up on subjective and or biased assessments.

Risk Tolerance

It may be very difficult for the CTF commander to get a clear determination, during the early pre-deployment phase, of the political will of the host nations of the various national contingents to undertake mid- to high-intensity operations. Nonetheless, the commander at least

Commodore (later Rear-Admiral) Roger Girouard aboard HMCS Iroquois during Operation Apollo. He acted as Commander of Coalition Task Force 151 from February to June 2003, and this task force made a significant contribution to the international campaign against terrorism.
must attempt to determine if there are any types of operations that a national commander may have been forbidden to undertake, due to national caveats. This determination should be made as soon as possible, so as not to inadvertently embarrass a national contingent that cannot commit to an operation later in a campaign. However, the CTF commander should be able, at all times, to call upon all coalition members to accept risks that are within their national control, as this will ensure that the maximum available combat power is applied continuously to the enemy in support of the mission goals.

Another aspect that may influence the risk tolerance within the force is the rotation length of each of the national contingent’s forces. Some nations may have very short deployment durations of less than three months, while others may extend up to and beyond 12 months. Forces with short duration tours are very hard to synchronize with more committed contingents. The complexity of the operations that coalition forces face today makes it difficult for short duration forces to acclimatize properly and be effective in any subsequent operations. This aspect of rotation tempo is particularly important in large ad hoc contingents, where the CTF commander must spend an inordinate amount of time integrating the various coalition members into a cohesive team.

Rules of Engagement (ROE)

The challenge of integration cannot be overemphasized when dealing with the multifaceted issue of coalition ROE. The ability of the CTF commander to implement coalition ROE development, dissemination, and oversight effectively may well be one of the most critical processes that he must undertake as he assesses his mission as an operational level commander. There are many different versions of national ROE, ranging from individual national rules to alliance-specific conventions – such as those existing within NATO – to even more complex international rule sets, such as those mandated by the United Nations.

As the CTF commander undertakes his input assessment of the various national contributions, he must be ready to allot a significant amount of personal and staff effort towards the review and subsequent synchronization of the individual ROE sets within the coalition forces. When reviewing the rules of the national contributions, the CTF commander must determine if they are robust enough to allow these forces potentially to use lethal force ‘as required’ to meet the full spectrum of operations that may be encountered during a mission. If a contingent has very limited authority to use force under their ROE, or, at worst, they have no semblance of ROE at all, this certainly will make that nation a liability to the flexibility and responsiveness of the coalition. A CTF commander will want to see whether the ROE that are provided to each nation by their national authorities allows them to apply force beyond their basic right of self-defence. His assessment will need to focus upon the ability of the national forces to pre-emptively respond to hostile intent, as opposed to having to wait for the first and any subsequent commissions of a hostile act.

Also, the CTF commander will need to determine if the national level ROE are sufficiently flexible to evolve with the mission. Coalition activities may well begin with low-to-mid-intensity operations, but could quickly escalate to potentially lethal, mid-to high-intensity operations in a short period of time. Thus, flexibility is an essential component of the ability to react to dangerous conditions. The CTF commander will also need to ensure that the national contingents have sufficiently robust staffs to allow them to adjust their ROE rapidly in response to changing theatre circumstances, and to any downstream commander’s direction.

A clear demonstration of the operational art today may well rest in how a coalition commander works within the various political and military restraints, force rotation rates, and the ROE of their national contingent forces to shape a culture of trust and commitment, and then, subsequently, how the commander decisively applies these potentially dissimilar forces to achieve mission success.

Plans

Issues to be considered under the plans factor include the commander’s requirement to synchronize the various multinational plans into one overarching coalition campaign plan, and the importance of the notion of ‘nested intent’ throughout the CTF command structure.

Synchronization of Coalition Plans

This activity involves the commander’s requirement to carefully assess and synchronize the various national campaign and/or operational plans within the coalition...
Coalition Operations

Task force into one overarching plan. The CTF commander must complete this activity before the force enters the theatre to avoid confusion once operations are underway. It is important to note that, in order to maintain unity of command and effort, there can only be one CTF campaign plan. Nations may retain their own planning instruments to organize their national contingents, but these must defer to the overall CTF plan.

In coalition warfare, a task force commander may have to contend with national contingents that have very different approaches to military planning. Some contingents may have completed a detailed mission analysis while others may have focused their planning only on their timely arrival in the theatre, with scant consideration for other factors. Along with this reality the CTF commander may find that the various national contingents will have planned for operations that are not in concert with the overall mission of the coalition, either by deliberate or mistaken interpretation of coalition stand-up directives.

Campaign Plan

Campaign planning is a deliberate and timely staff effort. Simply stated, this planning output should include a detailed assessment of the overall strategic guidance, the military situation (friend and foe), a clear statement of the mission, along with execution details, such as the commander’s intent, through to logistics and command and control.

As part of this synchronization effort, the commander may want to designate individuals to act as a ‘Red Team’ to aggressively analyze, and, thereafter, to challenge contingents on any aspects of their pre-deployment planning that may be confusing when trying to align their efforts to the ‘one and only’ CTF commander’s campaign plan. Further, the coalition-wide constraints, restraints, and overall commander’s intent, along with defined lines of operations and centres of gravity should also be in clear agreement across the entire coalition.

Lastly, a CTF commander must be aware that not all contingents may be conversant in the usage of these classic operational art terms, and will need to decipher the individual national intentions when the terminology is not used explicitly. The commander and his staff should also discern if the coalition intentions (both explicit and implicit) project an equal commitment to both the peace and war phases of the mission, ensuring that there is a consistent understanding of the end state, and, specifically, of those conditions that define end state and mission completion.

Nested Intent

The notion of the commander’s intent deserves further exploration, given that it is a core aspect of the operational art, and, in many ways, the proverbial ‘glue’ that if applied successfully, binds a coalition to a common purpose. One aspect of intent that is attracting more attention is the specific notion of ‘nested intent.’

Nesting usually suggests a commonality among the various echelons of a force, their purpose, intent, and end state. Specifically, a plan by a subordinate level of command is ‘nested’ within that of the next tier when it is convergent with the end state outlined by the commander. Even though this aspect of intent is subtle in nature, a task force commander must exercise great care and continuous attention when assessing the degree to which the contingents have properly understood and embedded the commander’s larger coalition-wide intent into their own planning products.
The discussion of the assessment methodology so far has considered three factors, namely, *People*, *Processes*, and *Plans*, that the CTF commander must assess carefully as part of his pre-deployment preparation. I will now offer a broader context discussion of the influence that the assessment results may have on the outcome of coalition operations once in theatre.

**People**

By carefully undertaking an assessment of the vital *People* factors, a commander will enhance his opportunity for mission success. Most importantly, a strong CTF commander will have ensured that every opportunity has been taken to meet early and often with the national contingent leadership and unit commanders. By undertaking this vital leadership initiative, the CTF commander will reinforce a spirit of synchronization and common mission intent that will be fundamental to the success of subsequent operations.

As discussed, cultural awareness and sensitivity are vital skills of the modern coalition commander. These talents will allow the CTF commander to execute his duties successfully within the diverse composition of today’s coalitions. More importantly, sensitivity and professional acumen will also permit him to deal with the demands of the host-nation officials and their respective cultural attributes.

**Processes**

The aspects that are assessed under this factor are also fundamental to the eventual output and success of the coalition. We are dealing here with multifaceted aspects of non-technical interoperability in key areas, such as flexibility, trust, risk tolerance, and ROE. The commander’s assessment of these factors is, arguably, a core practice in the operational art of coalition warfare, particularly given the dramatic influence that it can have over the continuity of the force.

For instance, if the CTF commander is faced with a time-sensitive situation, whereby one part of the force has been overrun or ambushed, and is experiencing severe casualties, he must be able to rely equally upon the other coalition members to intervene aggressively and rescue the overwhelmed contingent. A wise commander will maintain a thorough understanding of the degree of agility and autonomy within the coalition forces at all times, and, at every reasonable opportunity, reinforce the command authority so as to execute timely coalition reactions in dire situations.

Similarly, any variance in risk tolerance within the coalition will also undermine the collective strength of the force. For instance, if the opponent is able to determine that one national contingent is less likely to fight, due to it nearing the end of its rotation in theatre, or if it has an obvious lower tolerance for casualties, this will offer the enemy an opportunity to compromise the overall solidarity of the coalition. A lethal strike specifically directed against that coalition partner, and, thus, potentially leading to high casualties, may well fracture the resolve of the nation in question, possibly causing it to withdraw its support or participation.

This type of directed attack may be undertaken against the national military contingent in theatre, or against the civilian population residing in the affected country. To that end, a CTF commander who has addressed this vital issue of risk tolerance early on may deny such an opportunity to the enemy.

From the perspective of ROE, even though the consistent application of the use of force across the coalition may never be perfectly harmonized, the CTF commander must work tirelessly to ensure that the development, dissemination, oversight, and application of the rules are as closely synchronized as possible across the entire coalition. The output of his ROE efforts should be a coalition-wide ROE standard, well understood by the national contributions. Also, any delegation of authority for certain ROE should be explicitly defined and authoritatively backed up by official documentation, along with regular reinforcement and positive control during the CTF commander’s interaction with the coalition members.

Even though many of the variables raised as part of this *Processes* factor are beyond the immediate control of a CTF commander, they must attempt to mitigate any negative effects that these factors will have during the execution of military operations in theatre.
Plans

As previously discussed, in today’s larger coalition operations, a task force commander may be faced with the challenge of harmonizing dissimilar national interests, intentions, and military plans within his overall coalition campaign plan. This synchronization of intra-coalition military planning is a vital prerequisite to the CTF commander’s ability to align the coalition plans successfully with the national strategy of the host nation they are tasked with assisting. A good contemporary example of this challenge can be found in Afghanistan, where the various multinational coalition and NATO commanders have been required to align their military and security plans with the overarching Afghanistan National Development Strategy. This strategy is designed to guide Afghanistan as it develops its own national capacity for governance and security.

Clearly, a CTF commander in this type of strategic planning environment must synchronize his coalition and national contingent plans carefully with the host nation security framework, ultimately attempting to create an integrated plan. It is another key factor that a commander must assess in order to better execute his duties.

The Commander’s Five Rules

Lastly, this article will offer five rules that I have distilled out of the methodology, which I believe future CTF commanders should observe when planning and executing their operations.

- Plan, plan, and then plan again... but always know that not everything can be planned, given the complexity of a coalition.
- Trust your good judgment of character; language should not be allowed to serve as an inhibitor to the assessment of your coalition partners.
- One must always be culturally aware, or, if not, at least be wise enough to ask the right questions when operating with foreign nationals in a host nation.
- Competence and readiness must be earned in the eye of the commander – not just declared by the nations contributing the forces.
- Exercise 100 percent authority in the powers that you have been officially and legally granted as the commander; reinforce this authority regularly with your coalition members.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that, within the contemporary security environment, and perhaps well into the future, coalition warfare appears likely to be the norm. It has been shown that coalitions are complex systems involving frictional interaction between political and military leaders spanning the entire spectrum of war. Because of the complexity of contemporary and future coalitions, I have argued that the CF must continue to advance the professional development of its officer corps, so that its members may be more capable of undertaking command at higher levels in multinational coalition task forces. To that end, it is hoped the article will add to the growing body of professional knowledge on the important issue of coalition warfare.

A CTF commander operating with a realistic and pragmatic approach would acknowledge that he will seldom be able to choose coalition members and designated forces, so it is vital at the outset that he learns to effectively assess, and thus, better employ the national forces that have been contributed to the coalition mission. To that end, the commander must also recognize that the methodology presented herein is only a modest predictive tool, and so, even a positive assessment of the coalition-apportioned forces by no means will be a guarantee of success for the commander in future operations. In the end, the CTF commander may well be forced to accept and employ less capable contingents due to political considerations beyond the commander’s control. Some of these national contingents may well need to be included, simply to buttress the overall coalition; the commander will just have to be careful with respect to the manner in which he subsequently employs these forces in operations.

There are also larger political-military strategic considerations that remain outside the proposed methodology here. A CTF commander must...
learn to recognize the aspects of coalition command that the commander can control, while at the same time being very wary of those aspects that cannot be directly influenced. Clearly, further research is warranted in this area of coalition warfare to prepare future commanders for success in these complex situations.

A clear demonstration of the operational art today is how a coalition commander works within the various political and military restraints of the contingent forces to shape a culture of trust and commitment, and then subsequently, how that commander applies these potentially dissimilar forces in order to achieve mission success.

“The CTF commander must scrutinize carefully...”

NOTES

3. Recent examples of Canadian officers commanding large multinational forces are the naval command of CTF 150 during Operation Apollo in the Persian Gulf, and command of allied forces in Bosnia and Afghanistan.
4. Mission Command is a style of military command promoting decentralized command, freedom, speed of action, and initiative.
5. Lieutenant Colonel M.D. Makulowich, “To Clash or Not To Clash: Canadian and Islamic Values on Canadian Forces’ Deployed Operations” (Toronto: Canadian Forces College Advanced Military Studies Course Paper, 2005), p. 2.
6. The CTF commander must scrutinize carefully the processes that nations use when declaring their forces operationally ready for the mission (referred to as OPRREAD). Even though a national unit may have a reputation for excellence, it may or may not be as ready as ‘declared.’ It may also be very difficult for the CTF commander to develop some sort of a common yardstick to measure the calibre of the coalition forces. Interview Major-General Holmes, 17-18 October 2006.
7. In the new Iraqi armed forces’ construct, Iraqi indigenous land forces have been generated that have very distinct regional and cultural identities. In this situation, it may well be very difficult for a multinational coalition task force commander to ask Kurdish, Shiite, and or Sunni Iraqi units to operate together as one national contingent, given their cultural dissimilarity. Lieutenant-General W.J. Natynczyk, Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff of the Canadian Forces, “Coalition Warfare” (lecture, Canadian Forces College, Toronto, to the Advanced Military Studies Program 9, 27 September 2006), with permission.
12. See NATO’s AAP-6 for an alliance version of the definitions of OPCOM and OCON. There are differences between national and alliance terminology that may well affect mission unity of command.
13. When nations are unwilling to accept a designated mission, contemporary parlance refers to this as a ‘redcard’ call by the national element. An example of this confusion may be seen in that France’s definition of OPCOM, which constitutes “national command,” may not be transferred to alliance and/or foreign coalition commanders in any situation. Thomas Durell-Young, “Command in Coalition Operations,” in Marshall, Kaiser, and Kessmeire (eds.) (October 2004), pp. 23-48.
15. Natynczyk presentation.
19. Within the NATO ISAF coalition in Afghanistan, there exist clear differences in the degree of risk that national forces are allowed to accept. Natynczyk presentation.
21. This situation may be even more complicated when the CTF commander and the commander’s forces are called upon to work alongside other government departments and civilian players in a so-called ‘3D and C’ environment (Defence, Diplomacy, Development and Commerce). A continuous dissimilarity may prevail throughout these types of operations.
23. ‘Red Team’ is a commonly accepted term in military planning terminology; a function often executed by the Intelligence cell, and other members of the staff as designated by the commander.
27. Natynczyk presentation.
29. Natynczyk presentation.
31. This notion of ‘positive control’ is essential to ensure that ROE incidents do not occur. Recent examples of prisoner abuse by coalition forces in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq serve as a reminder of how important it is for the commander to ensure that the use of force is followed properly at all times, and that any incidents of unlawful use of force are dealt with promptly and thoroughly by the chain of command.