

Preparing military units for their tasks, the challenge of measuring operational readiness

*An interview with Brigadier General R Verkerk (RNLMC) and
Commander HW Zwier (RNLN)*

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Introduction

Because armed forces are financed by taxpayer's money, it is necessary that they are operating in an effective and efficient way. To achieve this, good training is vital. New missions of the Dutch armed forces, for instance in Afghanistan, show that the operational preparedness for tasks is vital. As a result, the focus on measuring the readiness of military units has increased considerably. The main perspective for the interview is to establish how to achieve that troops are combat-ready and how their effectiveness and efficiency is ensured. The officers interviewed, Brigadier General Verkerk and Commander Zwier, works for the Netherlands Chief of Defence (CHOD). He is responsible for ordering and measuring operational readiness states of military units. The answers given provide a realistic insight into the process of unit preparation and performance measurement.

You were asked to tell us something about this subject. Could you first elaborate on your definition of "preparing military units"?

“First of all, when ordering and measuring operational readiness, military units are addressed at battalion level or its equivalents within the Navy and the Air Force. Military units are equipped with weapons and military personnel. Preparing those units for their tasks takes place in two stages. The first stage focuses on the preparation for conducting generic tasks. Individuals and their equipment are brought together and training at various levels is undertaken. The second stage optimizes units for conducting specific tasks, related to a specific mission. During this stage, situations that may be encountered are addressed and trained for. Attention is given to the potential threat as well as specific cultural and terrain conditions that are expected.”

Why is measuring of readiness while preparing military units, an important item at the moment?

“As representatives of the Ministry of Defence, we have a duty to scrutinize our own performance aiming at optimal effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness is increasingly important as we conduct more and more real world operations. Efficiency also attracts more attention than before; as a result of the reduction of the Defence budget over the past years and the increased focus of Parliament on the ways at which public money is spent.”

How do you measure the level of preparation?

“Measuring performance takes place at various levels within units. Performance measurement at sub-unit level mainly assists the unit commander in monitoring progress made by his unit. In a battalion, for example, sub-unit monitoring starts at platoon level. This, we feel, is the right size for to start measuring performances, because different platoons have different tasks. At sub-unit level, performance measurement is not conducted continuously, but at specific times, when they should be prepared for their generic tasks. But I have to stress that generic capabilities may (or will) have to be enhanced based on specific mission requirements. Performance measurement and reporting to the CHOD takes place at battalion level or Navy and Air Force unit equivalents.”

Why is it so difficult to measure effectiveness and efficiency of preparation?

“Basically, these are two separate questions. Effectiveness and efficiency cannot be mentioned in one breath. Generally, the effectiveness of a platoon is measured after completing the process of preparing for generic tasks. Because this is a standardized process, it is not possible to counter all possible (mission) circumstances. Therefore, it is difficult to declare a military unit ready other than for generic tasks. We are a process-based organization in which no clearly defined output can be measured. What we measure is the overall preparedness for generic tasks. Important is to determine how well a unit performs during a training period, and based on the results, we assess the unit’s ultimate effectiveness. A problem is that measuring a unit’s effectiveness is largely based on specific training situations. Therefore, the representativeness of the results regarding actual performance in action remains questionable.

There are examples of units testing to measure effectiveness in a different way. For example, the Dutch Air Force measures squadron effectiveness also by comparing them to similar squadrons of other countries within NATO.

The measurement of the efficiency of a unit is easier. Because the budget of a military unit (not only in money but also, for instance, the use of supplies) is related to unit tasks and programmes, measurements mainly consists of checking whether a unit has achieved its goals whilst remaining within the budget. As long as this is the case, it is considered efficient. On the longer term, efficiency has a different meaning. In order to prepare military units, a lot of supporting activities are produced “in house”. This may be inefficient, given the potential of sourcing out such services. Therefore, we should regularly ask ourselves whether internal services required for training should be provided by the armed forces or be outsourced in order to be more efficient.”

Are there differences in determining effectiveness and efficiency in this process between the Air force, the Navy and the Army?

“There is a difference in how and what the different services of the armed forces measure. In general, their aims and objectives are the same. Operational readiness is broken down into three parts: materiel and personnel readiness and the level of training achieved.

Materiel readiness is measured in amounts of equipment available, but also, for main systems, the equipments working order is measured. The ways in which the services measure material readiness vary because of the differences in nature of equipment. On account of this variation, transparency suffers, which poses a challenge for the Directing Staff, including the Defence Staff. Improvement is expected as new information systems are being introduced.

At present, personnel readiness measurement is largely based on measuring quantity assuming that individuals are well trained on an individual level. The output of the measurement is a percentage, which indicates the availability of personnel to perform unit generic tasks. A concern is the underlying assumption. We should not only measure quantity but also quality. By quality, I mean the level of individual training and the physical condition of individuals. The problem is that this is very difficult to measure objectively. The only way to judge this at present is to ask the unit commanding officer’s opinion. In the long run, an updated Personnel Information System may help the commander forming his opinion. In this way, measuring quality is likely to improve. Still, it will remain difficult to objectively measure the effectiveness of a unit, since there will always be immeasurable factors, such as crew moral.”