

# Zone Reconnaissance – Why Don't We Do It?

by MAJ Jeffrey W. Jennings

April 1, 2020: *You're a cavalry-troop commander deployed to the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, CA. Two enemy boyevaya razvedyvatelnaya dozornaya mashina (BRDMs), or Russian-made scout vehicles, have just destroyed your entire troop.*



**Figure 1. A “Donovian BRDM” engages friendly-force vehicles with its Hot-3 anti-tank guided-missile weapon system at NTC. (U.S. Army photo by PVT Austin Anyzeski)**

You received a fragmentary order (FRAGO) at 10 a.m. to execute zone reconnaissance west to provide freedom of maneuver for the brigade, expand the security area and establish a screen in the vicinity of Brown Pass (Phase Line (PL) Panther). At noon, you issued your own FRAGO to your platoon leaders, walked through a quick map rehearsal, and then you closed your eyes to sleep for the first time in two days.

You woke from your nap at 4 p.m. to participate in a commander's update brief, in which squadron ordered you to your line of departure (LD) at 6 p.m. and to make your reconnaissance pace rapid: "You need to move fast and establish your screen at PL Panther no later than 10 p.m. to avoid desynchronizing the brigade."

At 6 p.m., your troop executed LD and began its zone-reconnaissance mission, departing Columbia Wash and moving (in column) generally northwest toward Main Supply Route (MSR) Ia Drang. A little while later, as the sun set behind the Sawtooth, your night-vision goggles washed out, and you ducked down in your hatch to check your Joint Capabilities Release (JCR). You saw your troop's icons traveling west in close-column on MSR Ia Drang. You thought you should deploy – after all, the terrain to your south looked trafficable for your troop's vehicle platform.

*Where exactly was your troop boundary to the south, again?*

On your JCR, you could see there was not much dispersion between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> platoons. The phrase "ducks in a row" flashed across your mind.

*Where exactly was your probable line of contact, again?*

Just as you finished that thought, your gunner began to read to you a *flash, immediate, priority, routine* message from squadron that ordered you to increase your rate of march. The combined-arms battalion you were supporting needed you to hurry up so they could LD on time. You radioed 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon and told them to pick up the pace.

Then, as your vehicle (tucked safely between your 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> platoons, still traveling in column) passed the Pizza Hut on MSR Ia Drang, Red One burst onto the troop net.

*“Contact! Tanks! (but they weren’t tanks ...) North! 1,000 meters! Out!”*

Five minutes ago, your troop’s last surviving vehicle was destroyed. You reported with your dying breath to squadron, and you now sit in your vehicle staring at your map – studying a place called The Race Track. You scratch your head. What just happened?

## Common scenario

Scenarios like this are commonplace among cavalry troops at NTC. All too often, the enemy engages and destroys the cavalry troop as it travels down an MSR in a convoy or, slightly better, traveling while “deployed” in a very tight wedge or line with very little dispersion between vehicles. However, this painful learning experience can be avoided before your unit departs home station. This is a fight you can win before LD. Here’s how.

Understand the scout mission profile and the missions you will execute. Was the unit described in the opening narrative really executing zone reconnaissance?

Zone reconnaissance is the most common mission assigned to cavalry troops at NTC, yet it is almost never executed to standard. The troop commander, in conjunction with the squadron commander, determines the priority of tasks that best answer priority information requirements (PIRs) and then focuses the troop’s collection efforts against these requirements. In other words, they establish **reconnaissance objectives**. According to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.97, tasks associated with zone reconnaissance include:

- Find and report all enemy forces within the zone;
- Determine the trafficability of all terrain in the zone;
- Inspect and classify all bridges in the zone;
- Locate and report all mines, obstacles and barriers in the zone; and
- Locate bypasses around built-up areas, obstacles, etc.

These tasks are completed to answer PIR in named areas of interest (NAIs) and target areas of interest, or to identify and mitigate an enemy system on your high-payoff target list.

Did the unit described earlier accomplish any of those things? Did they even attempt to? Perhaps the unit in the opening narrative was unintentionally executing something more akin to a movement-to-contact. A movement-to-contact is a mission executed by armor and infantry formations to develop the situation and to establish or regain enemy contact when the tactical situation is not clear. It’s also used when the enemy has broken contact. A movement-to-contact, by design, may result in a meeting engagement or a transition into a deliberate attack. It usually does not adhere to the principle of making contact with the smallest element. The goal, once in contact, is to maneuver quickly to overcome enemy forces before they can react.

A movement-to-contact is **not** a doctrinal reconnaissance task; it does not adhere to the fundamentals of reconnaissance.

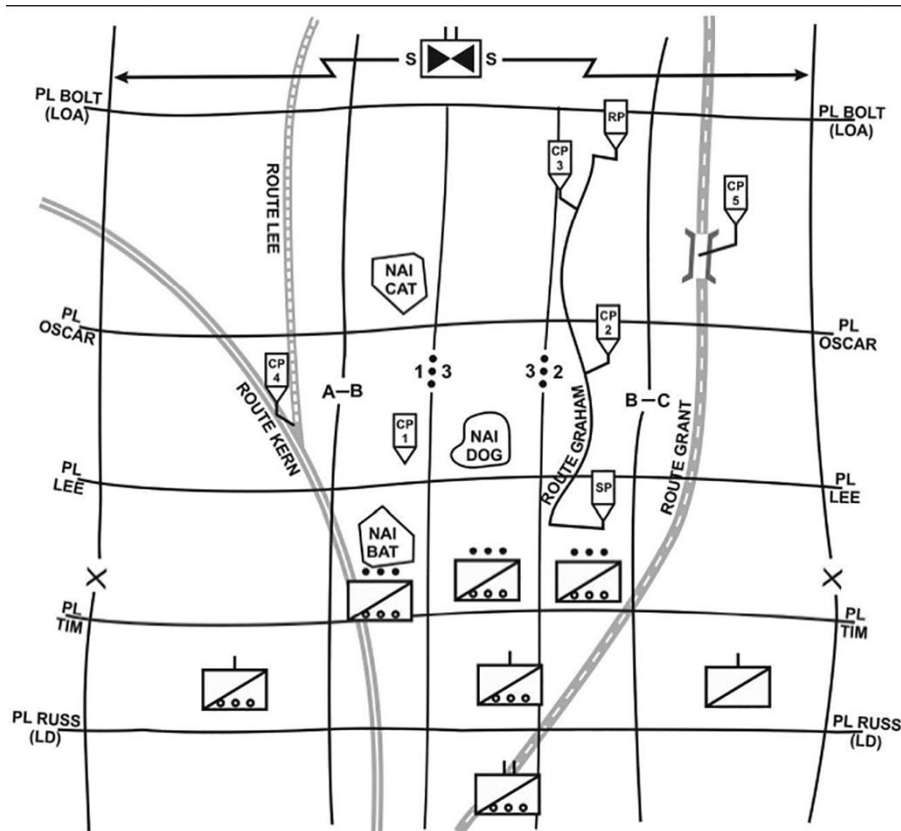


Figure 2. Cavalry-troop zone reconnaissance. (From Figure 3-1, ATP 3-20.97)

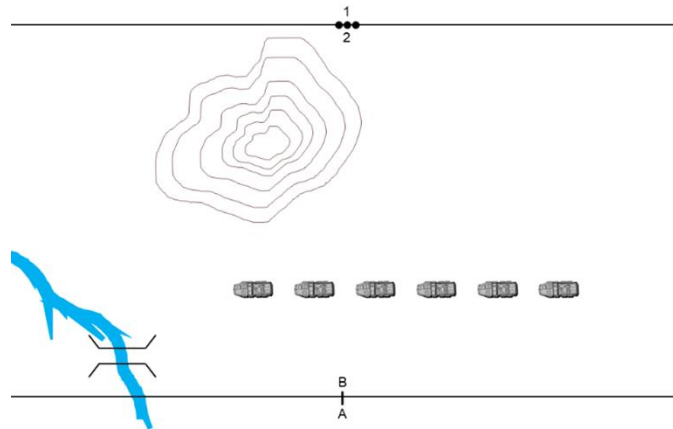
Often cavalry troops at NTC simply maneuver in a specific direction (toward a limit of advance) focused almost entirely on making enemy contact. Once contact is made, cavalry troops usually attempt to maneuver against the threat (becoming decisively engaged) and are often destroyed in the process. This occurrence constitutes zone-reconnaissance failure, is more similar to a movement-to-contact and does not achieve the squadron's requirement to collect and provide information to the customer unit.

To successfully conduct zone reconnaissance, troop commanders must develop a concept of operation (and a detailed scheme of maneuver) that clearly incorporates and delineates reconnaissance and security (R&S) guidance (focus, tempo, engagement criteria, disengagement criteria and displacement criteria) as described in Field Manual 3-98, **Reconnaissance and Security Operations**, Page 4-8, Paragraph 4-38. Commanders must consider the supported commander's PIR and the last time information is of value, and then shape maneuver accordingly. Commanders must integrate reconnaissance methods such as dismounted, mounted, aerial and reconnaissance by fire in conjunction with deployment methods and movement techniques that support the desired tempo of operations.

Commanders must clearly understand (and coordinate with adjacent units) boundaries identifying the troop's and platoon's area of operations to ensure effective reconnaissance. Commanders must also ensure that subordinate leaders (at the team, section and platoon level) understand the indicators that will allow them to answer PIRs in a timely fashion. Commanders must fully understand and incorporate higher headquarters' reconnaissance objectives and R&S guidance, and must engage in commander-to-commander dialogue to confirm that understanding. Commanders must leverage the squadron S-2's intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to assist with mission analysis. **These** are the elements that constitute effective zone reconnaissance (ATP 3-20.97).

Leaders must understand their formation's doctrinal missions. Build checklists into your standing operating procedure (SOP) to ensure you accomplish the tasks necessary for each mission. Plan your scheme of maneuver accordingly.

To execute effective zone reconnaissance, you must first understand what it requires.



**Figure 3. A scout platoon traveling in column with 20 meters of dispersion between vehicles cannot effectively execute zone reconnaissance and is vulnerable to enemy direct- or indirect-fire engagement.**

### **Execute proper maneuver, dispersion**

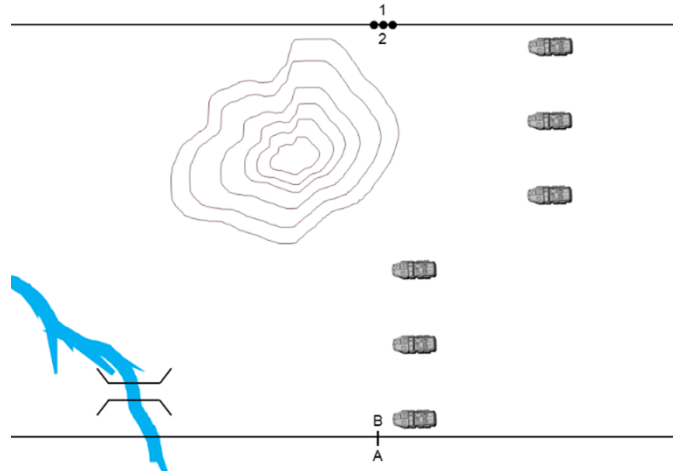
Was the unit in the opening narrative using the correct formations, movement techniques and operating distances (dispersion) for effective zone reconnaissance?

No. The troop in the opening narrative was traveling in close columns while tasked to execute zone reconnaissance (a common occurrence at NTC). In doing so, the troop simultaneously failed to operate at proper dispersion distances, to use the appropriate formation(s) and to employ the correct movement technique(s). These failures not only reduce the troop's ability to execute its zone-reconnaissance mission but also provide the enemy with easy direct-fire engagement opportunities.

To effectively perform zone reconnaissance, cavalry troops must operate at their maximum achievable dispersement. They must also transition between movement techniques and formations as appropriate, based on probable lines of enemy contact (by weapon system / capability) and the commander's reconnaissance guidance (tempo and focus).

Properly dispersed, a Stryker brigade combat team's scout platoon, for example, can achieve a "frontage" of up to four kilometers. This is calculated (and adjusted) based on enemy-fires capability, friendly-fires coverage, mutual direct-fire support between vehicles, unit boundaries, terrain and other mission considerations. References for developing operating distances specific to particular missions is at Appendix B of ATP 3-20.97, **Cavalry Troop**.

In the opening narrative, the troop commander wondered "where is my probable line of contact?" Knowing where the enemy will likely begin to engage you, and with what weapon system, is essential to transitioning between movement techniques. Therefore, commanders must conduct IPB (and leverage the squadron S-2 to assist) to determine the probable line of contact to determine the probable line of deployment.



**Figure 4. A scout platoon bounding by section with 1,000 feet between vehicles can effectively reconnoiter a zone and is less vulnerable to enemy direct- or indirect-fire engagement.**

If enemy contact is unlikely, traveling may be appropriate. When enemy contact becomes likely, scout troops/platoons must transition to bounding Overwatch. When a squadron wants a quicker pace/speed, the cavalry troop must adjust its movement technique rather than its formation. In any case, one truth remains constant: regardless of the likelihood of enemy contact, a scout formation traveling in a column cannot properly execute zone reconnaissance.

**Tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP):** At NTC during reception, staging, onward-movement and integration week, platoons and troops can execute drivers' training/terrain familiarization, incorporating movement techniques and formations. This sort of training should also be executed as a part of all training at home station.

## Prepare, rehearse, build playbook now

*It's Training Day 5 in your NTC rotation; you've been awake for close to 40 hours. You've just received a FRAGO to execute a zone reconnaissance. Would you rather ...*

- *Put on your thinking cap, pull out a sketchpad and develop your plan from scratch; or*
- *Refer to the "playbook" (SOP) your team developed together, discussed, implemented and trained at home station?*

Have you ever watched a National Football League game in which the coach and quarterback huddled on the sideline to design every play from scratch immediately before they executed it? Unlikely. Develop your "playbook" **now** when you are rested, have time, can plan collaboratively and can practice (rehearse) your plays (SOPs). Figuratively, know that in a given situation you are going to execute "56 Trap Right" or "88 Y-Option Wheel."

**TTP:** Using maps and micromachines on a conference room table, your team can collaboratively design what zone reconnaissance (and other missions) looks like in garrison. You can establish which platoon/section is responsible for which tasks, and you can make those enduring assignments. You can rehearse (have the executive officer play the enemy) those "plays" to work out points of friction early. Then, once you're executing in the field, you simply adjust your "play" (SOP) for terrain and enemy, adapt and execute. It is much quicker than designing your play on the spot when time counts and you're in contact.

Endeavor to reach a point of shared competency so well developed that when you tell your team, "We're executing zone reconnaissance to establish a screen at PL Panther" at NTC, everyone knows exactly what that means and the part he/she will play in it. Battle drills are only well rehearsed and effective once the whole team understands and incorporates the associated pre-combat checks and pre-combat inspections associated with each R&S mission in your unit's profile. That's why these items must be codified into SOP checklists. Well-rehearsed and

fluidly executed battle drills enable your unit to achieve the quick pace and effectiveness higher headquarters demands.

Before departing home station, strive to achieve a level of core mission-essential task-list proficiency so high that everyone in your formation could do zone reconnaissance in his/her sleep. This will require you to be creative with your training opportunities – you don't need to be in the field to practice zone reconnaissance. You can do it on a map (of NTC, preferably) with miniature vehicles. You can do it during physical training. You can do it during brownbag lunches with your team. Wargame and rehearse now.

Refer to Chapter 5 (specifically Page 5-22) of ATP 3-20.97 for a zone-reconnaissance vignette (which includes a full operations order and graphics) that you can use for planning and rehearsing. If you prepare now, you'll simply be executing well-rehearsed battle drills at NTC. Simply put, if you wait until Training Day 4 to sketch what you think your (insert mission here) will look like, you may find yourself in the same position as the troop commander in our introductory narrative.

## Conclusion

If you are a cavalry-troop commander or platoon leader, you can rest assured that most of your missions at NTC will brief a lot like this: "Comanche Troop executes zone reconnaissance of Area of Operations Carolina, clears Objective Falcon and establishes a screen at PL Panther no later than [time/date group] to provide freedom of maneuver and early warning to the brigade. ..." Units (leaders) that execute zone reconnaissance (and other missions) to standard come prepared.

- They develop, rehearse and execute SOPs at home station (they come with a playbook).
- They know, understand and use proper dispersion, movement techniques and formations.
- They know, understand and abide by their commander's reconnaissance guidance.
- They follow the zone-reconnaissance task list and understand the priority of tasks.
- They reconnoiter.
- They develop and refine NAIs to answer PIRs.
- They use smoke and suppressive fires to facilitate maneuver (both mortars and field artillery).
- They fly their Raven.
- They use their enablers and attachments.
- They report accurately and with timeliness, based on observation of NAIs to answer brigade PIRs.
- They expand the general themes of this article beyond zone reconnaissance and practice the same TTPs when executing security missions as well.

In short, units that are successful at NTC do all these things routinely. They adhere to R&S fundamentals. Units that do none of these things simply learn the hard way. Start now. Come prepared. The BRDMs in the vicinity of The Race Track are waiting for you.

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## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ATP** – Army techniques publication

**BRDM** – *boyevaya razvedyvatelnaya dozornaya mashina* (Russian scout vehicle)

**CP** – checkpoint (Figure 2)

**FRAGO** – fragmentary order

**IPB** – intelligence preparation of the battlefield

**JBLM** – Joint Base Lewis-McChord

**JCR** – Joint Capabilities Release

**LD** – line of departure  
**LoA** – limit of advance (Figure 2)  
**MSR** – main supply route  
**NAI** – named area of interest  
**NTC** – National Training Center  
**PIR** – priority information requirement  
**PL** – phase line  
**R&S** – reconnaissance and security  
**RP** – release point (Figure 2)  
**S** – screen (Figure 2)  
**SOP** – standard operating procedures  
**SP** – start point (Figure 2)  
**TTP** – tactics, techniques and procedures