



# Training While Deployed: Lessons for a Garrison Environment

Figure 1. Soldiers of Nomad Troop, 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, begin movement on a section of the live-fire Nomad Multi-Purpose Range Complex (NMPRC) in northern Iraq in September 2018. (U.S. Army photo by CPT John Formica)

by CPT John Conrad and CPT John Formica

When junior Army leaders hear the word “training,” it often evokes painful images of bureaucratic obstacles such as range-control restrictions, unit-movement-operations requirements and Directorate of Training Management and Security updates. Conversely, the words “combat deployment” conjure thoughts of operational imperatives like mission requirements, lethality and readiness.

Unless there is an imminent deployment on the training calendar, junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) tend to fixate on bureaucratic restrictions instead of improving readiness. This results in a perceived divorce between garrison training and combat operations. We must do better as Army leaders. As an example, our troop’s overseas deployment provides some key takeaways on fighting these misconceptions while conducting garrison training.

We deployed to northern Iraq in 2018 during a time of transition. By the time our unit had arrived, the Iraqi coalition had retaken Mosul, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) strongholds had been shattered across the country. In response, U.S. forces dropped the “accompany” aspect of the advise-and-assist role, relegating our formations to fixed-site security. This consisted of manning perimeter towers, operating entry-control points and fulfilling quick-reaction-force requirements.

While this may sound exciting, for the average Soldier, it equated to eight- to 12-hour daily shifts performing the same important, albeit mundane, tasks. We as the troop leadership struggled to combat complacency within the ranks, so we turned to training.

Just as in garrison, three obstacles were immediately apparent: land, ammo and personnel. **Land:** The troop was stationed at a small airfield in northern Iraq. ISIS had destroyed the airbase, and as a result, Coalition Forces and

the Iraqis only occupied a fraction of it. On the east side of the airstrip, there were a few kilometers of open terrain, overgrown and filled with rubble.

This area provided a suitable amount of land to build a functional area for small-unit maneuver live-fires. We coordinated with the embedded combat engineers to clear the area of remnant unexploded ordnance and ISIS improvised explosive devices. After a few weeks of effort, a sizable piece of terrain was ready. We dubbed it Nomad Multi-Purpose Range Complex (NMPRC).

**Ammo:** Unlike in garrison, ammo was no issue. The airstrip had been a staging area for U.S. forces and Iraqi Security Forces before the attack on Mosul. It had a large ammunition holding area, filled with an abundance of training-dedicated munitions.

**Personnel:** Now that we had land and ammo, how could we maintain our security responsibilities while training squads? This required engaged leadership and motivated Soldiers. Platoons rotated security responsibilities monthly, so when they were serving as quick-reaction forces, they also executed training. This provided a 30-day dedicated training progression, graduating from completing individual-qualification ranges to day and night dismounted section live-fire lanes.

Accomplishing this required adaptation and innovation, but our Soldiers were up for the challenge. After returning to the States, we reflected on the three lessons-learned from our time spent training in Iraq.



**Figure 2. Soldiers of Nomad Troop's Section B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, establish a support-by-fire position at NMPRC in northern Iraq in September 2018. (U.S. Army photo by 1LT Jamie Douglas)**

## **Training shouldn't be paint-by-number**

In a garrison environment, range control is a necessary evil. It reduces risk, deconflicts organizational efforts and maintains infrastructure. However, it also caters to the lowest common denominator. Planning training has turned into a paint-by-numbers affair for leaders. Surface danger zones are already drawn, firing boxes are mandated, and Soldiers are at the mercy of range inspectors and target operators.

However, when we arrived in Iraq, there was no range control, let alone a range, so leaders were able to build our training exercises from the ground up. This provided some challenges, but it presented even more opportunities. By cutting out the bureaucracy, we were able to focus purely on honing lethality. Gone were the bureaucratic training distractors: the mandatory cold times, range sign-on and clearing processes, and coordination with the ammunition supply point. These were replaced with tough, realistic training scenarios, efficient use of time and leader development.

While this level of autonomy is not possible in a garrison environment, the lesson is still applicable. When developing training, leaders must not fixate on bureaucratic restrictions. We must be competent enough as professional officers and NCOs to safely plan and execute training within our formations. If range control did not exist, how would we safely plan and execute training events? This is our responsibility as Army leaders and professionals.

## Reinventing the wheel is OK

To realize our goal of maneuver live-fires, leaders had to innovate. Resources were ample, space was abundant and Soldiers were made available, but outside of berms and rubble, NMPRC was indistinguishable from a desert. Our greatest challenge was developing functional targetry and formulating a scheme of maneuver. Based on a shared understanding of the training objectives, the platoons worked together to develop solutions.

With a bit of ingenuity, static and dynamic targets were constructed. Single silhouettes took up positions in the rubble, two-silhouette machinegun teams were laid in bunkers, and three-silhouette teams were manually pulled up using detonation cord (desert mice had eaten away at 550 cord in previous trials). For the night iterations, chemical lights served as indicators of enemy positions. Out of a desert and rubble, we made a two-square-kilometer live-fire range that included a zone-reconnaissance lane, a screenline and indirect fires.

What made this possible? Leadership got creative. Live-fire training events are one of the few times when Soldiers truly feel like warriors. That instinctual fire burns low amid weeks of motorpool Mondays, inventory layouts and readiness tasks. However, the fire never burns brighter than during live-fire training with a rifle in hand. Repetitive and unoriginal training events can quickly disinterest Soldiers.

“Don’t reinvent the wheel” is the advice given to every young leader upon being told to plan and execute training. Most offices and computers are littered with binders and gigabytes of concepts of operations and operations orders, laying out how each training event has been conducted since the current battalion commander was a platoon leader. In choosing the safety of the familiar, junior officers and NCOs condemn their Soldiers to either outdated or mundane training.

As leaders we are told *what* to train, but we are not told *how* to train. A section live-fire can be conducted in innumerable ways using the same range and the same targets, so why do we typically do it the same way every time? It’s OK to reinvent the wheel if that results in safely trained Soldiers and better-developed leaders.



**Figure 3. Soldiers of Nomad Troop’s Section A, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, call for indirect fires from 60mm mortars at NMPRC in northern Iraq in September 2018. The training was intended to develop live-fire section proficiency. (U.S. Army photo by 1LT Jamie Douglas)**

## Grounded in doctrine

Leadership turnover seems to occur before any deployment. In our case, three of the four platoon leaders had been in position for less than a month before we arrived in Iraq. Nearly half the troop's junior officers and NCOs had not participated in any of the garrison train-up. Although we were all deployed together, the leadership had never trained together.

To begin moving in the right direction, we turned to Army doctrine. Leaders relied on Army Doctrine Publication 7-0, **Training**, to provide the concepts for how to train; Army Doctrine Reference Publication 7-0, **Training Units and Developing Leaders**; and the Army Training Network (ATN) to flesh out the details on these concepts.

We also hosted leadership-development sessions discussing unit-training management, navigating ATN and constructing small-arms ranges. Platoon leaders developed personalized individual and collective training schedules from scratch. Weekly training meetings were implemented with an emphasis on the Eight-Step Training Model.

With a small and achievable training plan, and no outside-resource dependencies, we were able to train sections and develop leaders to our standard and at our pace. Instead of drowning in a condensed and hectic training rotation, we had the opportunity to slow down the process. This allowed junior leaders to see the fruits of their labor and witness training management in action.

This effect had been lost in the train-up for our deployment. Often, we jumped from one training event to the next, checking the block and flying by the seat of our pants. We must do better in garrison. Leaders must provide and protect the time necessary to focus on executing training well instead of just going through the motions. This will provide better development and training for junior leaders and Soldiers, as well as making the process of training that much more satisfying.



**Figure 4. Soldiers of 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, encounter “enemy contact” during a zone-reconnaissance training lane at NMPRC in northern Iraq in October 2018. The training was intended to develop live-fire section proficiency. (U.S. Army photo by 1LT Jamie Douglas)**

## Final thoughts

We are entrusted as leaders to prepare our formations for combat to fight and win our nation's wars. Whether operating in a garrison or a deployed environment, planning and executing tough and realistic training poses unique challenges. Our overseas deployment provided clarity on mistakes we made during our train-up.

Oftentimes, “checking the block” or going through the motions provides the easiest route to managing the limited time and resources available in a garrison environment. However, this is a disservice to our Soldiers and our

profession. It is all too easy to become fixated on bureaucratic constraints or training distractors. We must remain committed as leaders to improving our Soldiers' lethality and readiness.

*CPT Jake Conrad is a Joint Chiefs of Staff intern in Washington, DC. Previous assignments include commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, Fort Hood, TX; commander, Troop N, 4-3 Cavalry, Fort Hood; squadron S-4, 4-3 Cavalry; and company executive officer, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 66<sup>th</sup> Armor Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO. CPT Conrad's military schools include Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course (ABOLC), Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Army Reconnaissance Course, Cavalry Leader's Course, Airborne School, Stryker Leader's Course and Maintenance Maneuver Leader's Course. He has a bachelor's of science degree in chemistry from Penn State University and a master's degree in policy management from Georgetown University. CPT Conrad's awards include the Meritorious Service Medal, the Bronze Star Medal and the Order of Saint George (Bronze Medallion).*

*CPT John Formica is the Patton lieutenant/assistant professor of military science, Spartan Army Reserve Officer Training Corps Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, U.S. Army Cadet Command, Norfolk State University, VA. His other assignments include squadron S-4, 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, Fort Hood, TX; executive officer, Quicksilver Heavy Weapons Troop, 4-3 Cavalry, Fort Hood; and reconnaissance-platoon leader, Troop N, 4-3 Cavalry, Operation Inherent Resolve, Iraq. CPT Formica's military schools include Air Assault, ABOLC, Army Reconnaissance Course, Stryker Leader's Course and Master Educator's Course. He has a bachelor's of science degree in international relations (with honors), with a double major in international law from the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY. CPT Formica also has a master's of arts degree in higher-education administration from the University of Louisville. His awards include the Order of Saint George (Black Medallion) and the Army and Cavalry ABOLC Leadership Award.*

## **Acronym Quick-Scan**

**ABOLC** – Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course

**ATN** – Army Training Network

**ISIS** – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

**NCO** – noncommissioned officer

**NMPRC** – Nomad Multi-Purpose Range Complex