

## [Rangers Lead the Way in LSCO](#)

# Applying the Principles of Patrolling to Large-Scale Combat Operations at NTC

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According to Training Circular (TC) 3-21.76, *Ranger Handbook*, all patrols are governed by five principles: planning, reconnaissance, security, control, and common sense. While each principle in concept is basic, and each one is codified within existing Army publications, not enough Soldiers and leaders use them in training for large-scale combat operations (LSCO) at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. It is our perspective that if our crews, squads, platoons, and companies are to be successful on the future battlefields for which we are training, the five principles of patrolling must be reinvigorated.

Citations from both TC 3-21.76 and Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.15, *Tank Platoon*, are useful for translating the observations of more than 30 Stryker infantry, mechanized infantry, and armored tank companies during their respective rotations at NTC into lessons learned. It is remarkable how principles derived from some of the nation's earliest Rangers facilitate the understanding and application of tactics and techniques found within ATP 3-20.15 and ATP 3-21.8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*. In this article, each principle is accompanied by a tactic or technique for practical application and a vignette observed during force-on-force operations at NTC. Units that plan, prepare, and execute using the five principles of patrolling tend to succeed, and those that don't tend to suffer defeat to varying extents.



A Soldier assigned to the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division scans for enemy targets during Decisive Action Rotation 23-10 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, on 17 September 2023. (Photo by PFC Nathaniel Garrett)

## Planning

*“Quickly make a simple plan and effectively communicate it to the lowest level. A great plan that takes forever to complete and is poorly disseminated isn’t a great plan. Plan and prepare to a realistic standard and rehearse everything.”*

— TC 3-21.76, 7-1

*“Planning is the art and science of understanding a situation, envisioning a desired future, and laying out effective ways of bringing that future about (ADP [Army Doctrine Publication] 5-0). A platoon leader/platoon commander receives a task and purpose from the company commander as a warning order (WARNORD) or operation order (OPORD) and begins the planning process.”*

— ATP 3-20.15, 2-3

Successful units plan and rehearse using a quality terrain model. A terrain model is a graphic depiction of the area of operations (AO) that displays the routes, key terrain, and critical graphic control measures for the operation. Both the tank platoon publication and the *Ranger Handbook* list elements to be included when building a terrain model. The terrain model should be large enough and detailed enough for the unit to rehearse by either physically walking or moving icons amidst the depicted terrain and graphic control measures. Gathering materials in a terrain model kit is paramount to ensuring a large, clear, usable model can be built at all echelons, including the company and platoon levels. The quality of the terrain model positively correlates to the depth of each Soldier’s understanding of the plan.

During one recent NTC rotation, a tank company from Fort Bliss, TX, provided maximum situational awareness to its individual tank commanders by utilizing a detailed company terrain model. As a result, a single tank crew was able to engage and destroy the single enemy main battle tank that had halted an entire brigade’s worth of reconnaissance elements from a well-covered and concealed position, restoring momentum for their brigade.

Conversely, units that do not rehearse using a terrain model suffer from a lack of detailed understanding of the plan at the lowest level. While company commanders or platoon leaders may be able to visualize the order they received, tank commanders and dismounted squad leaders have no such context with which to visualize. Despite receiving a clear task, purpose, and end state, NTC observer-coach/trainers (OC/Ts) observed another infantry company advance beyond its limit of advance and lose the entire company’s worth of Bradleys to two enemy anti-tank trucks. If vehicle commanders had been visually exposed to their AO through a terrain model, their situational awareness of the boundaries associated with their movement and maneuver would have increased, mitigating significant risk. Successful units plan and rehearse using a terrain model to maximize situational awareness to the lowest level.

## Reconnaissance

*“Your responsibility as a Ranger leader is to confirm what you think you know, and to learn that which you do not already know.”*

— TC 3-21.76, 7-1

Successful units conduct a leader’s reconnaissance with whatever means available. There are three types of reconnaissance capabilities available to every armored or Stryker brigade combat team (ABCT/SBCT) company formation: organic leaders, organic sensors, and adjacent units.

The leader’s reconnaissance is a significantly underutilized method of information gathering available to the ground force. Platoons and companies have strayed away from conducting ground reconnaissance organically due to the increase in technologically advanced sensors available. Oftentimes, units conduct missions without any confirmation of the assumptions they have made in planning with respect to templated obstacles, enemy forces, or objective composition. This makes lethality a much more significant challenge.



**A Soldier in the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division conducts reconnaissance during NTC Decisive Action Rotation 23-05 on 27 February 2023.  
(Photo by PVT Anastasiya Ludchenko)**

The composition of the leader's reconnaissance element, reconnaissance party, or quartering party varies based on the unit's progress within the troop leading procedures and leaders available to conduct the reconnaissance. According to both ATPs 3-21.8 and 3-20.15, all echelons of leaders are suitable to conduct reconnaissance, as long as they are provided with sufficient reconnaissance guidance and a timeline within which to operate.

ATP 3-20.15 advises the use of a leader's reconnaissance at several points in the operation, and ATP 3-21.8 lists the objectives of the reconnaissance.<sup>1</sup> Leaders should conduct reconnaissance of routes to and from assembly areas, start points and release points along routes, difficult or disorienting terrain, intervisibility lines, and last covered and concealed positions within the AO. When able, leaders should mark positions, checkpoints, or danger areas using predetermined marking techniques (considering daytime and limited visibility marking solutions) to ensure efficient movement into and out of pre-planned positions.

All ABCTs and SBCTs possess several organic sensors available to assist in reconnaissance, beginning with the company fire support element (FSE). Bradley fire support teams (BFISTs) and fire support vehicles (FSVs) are equipped with the Fire Support Sensor System (FS3) of the Long Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System capable of providing accurate military grid reference system (MGRS) locations at a range of over 10 kilometers. Company FSEs can also employ various models of dismounted laser target locator modules (LTLMs) effective at comparable accuracy and range to mounted systems. These tools make the company FSE the furthest ranging organic sensor in the company, and it should be deliberately employed at all phases of the operation. Additionally, the commander's independent thermal viewer (CITV) onboard the M1 Abrams and the remote weapon system (RWS) optics onboard the Stryker are also capable of observation. The employment of any of these sensors in concealed observation posts or battle positions can effectively answer information requirements the commander needs to succeed, all while positioned safely outside the enemy's maximum engagement line (MEL).

Coordination with adjacent units is a third reconnaissance capability available to ABCT and SBCT platoons and companies. By utilizing unit icons on the Joint Battle Command Platform (JBC-P) and a brigade communications card, any element can coordinate with an adjacent unit in the AO to better understand the environment.

Recently, NTC OC/Ts observed two tank companies prepare to attack the Iron Triangle from west to east through the Sawtooth Pass Complex. Both commanders conducted a leader's reconnaissance of their passage routes through the complex terrain. The first commander (Company A) took his tank and a wing tank slowly through his passage route (the Goat Trail) and marked a handrail with chem lights for his platoons that would traverse the route later that evening. The second, less-prepared commander (Company B) conducted only a map reconnaissance with his platoon leaders to identify his passage route (Brown Pass).

Soldiers in Company A, facilitated by their marked route, efficiently passed through the complex terrain and into their attack-by-fire positions on the far side in under 10 minutes, engaging the enemy before he could react. Conversely, Company B received several catastrophic kills from enemy BRDMs hidden in an unaccounted urban area immediately upon traversing the pass. This ultimately resulted in an 80-percent combat power loss enroute to pre-planned positions.

Successful units conduct reconnaissance using organic leaders and sensors to preserve their combat power out of contact for as long as possible, before concentrating on the decisive point.<sup>2</sup>

### **Security**

*"Preserve your force as a whole. Every Ranger and every rifle counts, either one could be the difference between victory and defeat."*

— TC 3-21.76, 7-1

Successful units achieve and maintain security throughout all types of operations by effectively utilizing hide sites to conceal their combat power until the pre-determined trigger to apply it. Hide sites, or hide positions, are naturally covered and concealed positions away from primary positions, intended to protect equipment from enemy contact while allowing employment of small arms and sensors for observation.<sup>3</sup>

Leaders plan for the use of hide sites throughout all phases of the operation, including but not limited to assault positions in the offense or hide sites during the defense. Intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), specifically with respect to enemy maximum engagement lines and observation capabilities, is critical to proper hide site selection.

The tank platoon publication discusses the use of cover and concealment, particularly with respect to vehicle characteristics and terrain backdrop to effectively hide. Crew members should consider the color of their vehicle and its contrast to what is directly behind them and below them, as seen from an observer on and above the ground. The prevalence of small unmanned aerial systems (sUAS) has expanded enemy observation capabilities from solely ground-based sensors. Vehicle crews should use all available operations security (OPSEC) measures to reduce their ability to be seen by the enemy while occupying hide positions.

Recently, OC/Ts observed a mounted infantry company conducting operations solely during periods of darkness in a "reverse-cycle" battle rhythm. Under concealment of darkness and terrain, the infantry company utilized multiple dispersed, platoon-sized hide sites to cache vehicles outside of enemy battle positions prior to actions on the objective. The company culminated all actions on the objective before morning nautical twilight, remounted their vehicles, and occupied preplanned, platoon-sized hide sites to conceal under camouflage nets nestled into complex terrain in wait for follow-on operations.

Units that employ effective camouflage and dispersion relevant to their operating environment tend to preserve their force longer during LSCO.





**Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division communicate and observe the battlefield during a live-fire exercise at NTC on 8 March 2023. (Photo by SPC Duke Edwards)**

## **Control**

*“Clarify the concept of the operation and commander’s intent, coupled with disciplined communications, to bring every Soldier and weapon available to overwhelm the enemy at the decisive point.”*

**— TC 3-21.76, 7-1**

Successful units plan and execute operations using thorough but flexible graphic control measures (GCMs). Granular detail in planning is how we simultaneously maximize safety and lethality. Units must maneuver all forces on the battlefield using GCMs from the assembly area to hasty battle position (BP) at the limit of advance (LOA), and everything in between.

Since unit staffs plan two levels down per Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, GCMs should account for that level of detail throughout all phases of the operation. That is, control measures should provide the requisite space to maneuver while maximizing safe adjacent unit influence against that terrain and enemy.

As time allows, GCMs can be published and disseminated in accordance with discussed branch plans, sequels, and other contingency plans. These GCMs can be published in a fragmentary order (FRAGORD) at a later date, but they should be as conclusive as possible. Higher headquarters and adjacent unit graphics are critical, as units could find themselves operating outside their intended AO and utilize them to quickly achieve situational awareness and coordinate for support.

One technique of effective GCMs that OC/Ts have recently observed is a map-board overlay of terrain-based target reference points (TRPs) covering the entirety of NTC. This technique enabled flexibility by allowing the company commander to quickly and accurately orient movement, fires, and other actions to precise locations on the ground by referencing the TRPs distributed to his entire element via this overlay.

When units do not employ effective GCMs, they severely limit their ability to mass direct fires against the enemy. OC/Ts all too frequently observe units’ self-inflicted confinement of movement and maneuver to roads and trails, with them often maintaining a column formation into direct fire contact. By not employ-

ing flexible GCMs such as an axis of advance or direction of attack, the unit is unable to safely engage the enemy due to the masking of every vehicle weapon system in trail. This often results in overwhelming losses to combat power and a lackluster live-fire exercise due to surface danger zone and gun-target-line violations from the trail vehicles.

Leaders who can trace their finger along a GCM from the assault position to the hasty BP past the LOA are consistently able to maintain tempo, situational awareness, and safety as opposed to their counterparts who employ incomplete GCMs. There is also a positive correlation between mission success and the dissemination of planned GCMs to leaders at the fire team and crew level. A well-thought-out plan that is not shared limits flexibility and tempo the unit could have had if GCMs were disseminated further down into the formation.

### **Common Sense**

*“Use all available information and good judgment to make sound, timely decisions.”*

— TC 3-21.76, 7-1

Common sense is the only principle that must be effectively taught and implemented prior to the rotation to NTC as it takes significant time and mentorship to develop. “Each leader-subordinate interaction is a development opportunity. They are inseparable from training, enforcing standards, providing feedback, and setting a personal example.”<sup>4</sup> The tenet of “supportive relationships and a culture of learning” is critical to “providing, accepting, and acting on candid assessment and feedback for self-awareness.”<sup>5</sup> It is through this support that leaders develop the ability to make common-sense decisions.

Successful units have developed prepared leaders. A prepared leader is disciplined, confident, mentally agile, and expresses good judgment — the example to follow. From our observations, prepared leaders are developed by focusing on the following competencies:<sup>6</sup>

- **Physical Fitness** (achieving goals through disciplined adherence to good fitness plans)
- **Mental and Emotional Resilience** (cultivating the ability to maintain focus while experiencing and recovering from adversity, tactical or otherwise)
- **Communication** (giving and receiving of feedback — message sent, received, and confirmed)
- **Farsightedness** (ability to anticipate, plan, execute, and adapt; leaders must be visionaries)
- **Military Bearing** (technical and tactical competence of your craft that inspires others to emulate your competence)

Prepared leaders who have developed these five attributes and competencies will find themselves able to apply common sense in training for LSCO. Common sense and good judgment allow future combat leaders to succeed in the complexity of LSCO.

### **Conclusion**

Maneuver leaders must refocus crews, squad, platoons, and companies at the point of contact on the basics during this time of transition back to LSCO. While planning and preparation efforts at the battalion and above are extensive, winning the first battle of the next war is wholly dependent on the Soldiers clearing, seizing, and holding the terrain deemed to be operationally and strategically important. The five principles of patrolling have existed through decades of all types of conflict and combat in various environments. They establish the fundamental skills and abilities that our warfighters must be proficient in to enable successful multidomain operations in LSCO.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.15, *Tank Platoon*, July 2019, Chapters 3 and 7; ATP 3-21.8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, January 2024, 7-15 and 7-16.

<sup>2</sup> ATP 3-20.15, 7-66.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 4-72.

<sup>4</sup> Field Manual 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, November 2022, 1-1.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, July 2019, Figure 1-3, Leadership Requirements Model.

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