

Lessons Learned From an IBCT Weapons Company in Decisive Action at JRTC

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Rehearsing digging-in prior to JRTC will help develop SOPs for positions and camouflage; this will also establish a working relationship with the engineers. Due to limited blade hours with the High-Mobility Engineer Excavator (HMEE), not all TOW vehicles were fully dug-in. Consider which crew members will not dig personal positions due to remaining in the up-armored vehicle during the fight.

Photo courtesy of author

In September of 2012, my company (Delta Company 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division) deployed to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, La., as part of a rehearsal rotation in preparation for an upcoming decisive action training environment (DATE) rotation for the 82nd Airborne Division. My company had not done a decisive action rotation in years due to frequent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. This rotation provided an excellent opportunity for my Soldiers to learn/re-learn skills such as analog battle tracking, “digging in,” and battalion-level operations.

Prior to this event, my company had completed section-level gunnery with built-in TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missile scenarios (simulated) as well as multiple Virtual Battlespace 2 (VBS2)-simulated platoon-level engagements based on a decisive action scenario that I had written with the help of the VBS2 simulator staff. These engagements incorporated “Red Air” (enemy aviation), armored threats, and defensive operations. My platoons used FM 3-21.12, *The Infantry Weapons Company*, as their cornerstone document.

The decisive action rotation incorporated a defense situational training exercise (STX) lane against an armored threat, a company-level offensive operation on “Jetertown” (a JRTC village), a second defensive operation against Geronimo “jumping in” (mostly light Infantry based with the majority of my company attached to another company commander), and a battalion attack, which had the three light Infantry companies attacking with Delta Company (augmented by the brigade Military Police [MP] platoon with .50 cal machine gun trucks) and an attached engineer squad.

Orders Process

Following my orders drop on the previous day, I immediately began mission analysis. Having been stationed at JRTC (as an observer-controller-trainer [OCT] previously), I had a bit of a “home-field advantage” as I knew the terrain. A common-sense approach to what terrain is navigable by the opposing force (OPFOR) visual modification (VISMOD) vehicles (OPFOR surrogate vehicle [OSV] T-72s, BMPs, and BRDMs) will help leaders understand avenues of approach in the thick vegetation of Fort Polk. I used the same basic process I was taught at the Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) and briefed my plan off of a butcher block in the field. I tasked my fire support officer (FSO) to direct my headquarters section in constructing my terrain model along with planning fires.

Takeaways: Use simple troop leading procedures (TLPs) that are taught in the Infantry Basic Officer Leadership Course (IBOLC) and MCCC and you will do fine. Issue a complete order. Rehearse your order delivery prior to giving your operation order (OPORD). Consider having your executive officer (XO), first sergeant (1SG), or FSO watch a checklist of key points in the order during execution to avoid forgetting or skipping key points. I have seen a JRTC order that was meticulously constructed neglect to read the mission statement, even once. Also, the JRTC products are generally fairly simple. Look at the enemy situation template (SITTEMP) and plan your mission accordingly; don’t become so focused on the process that you forget to account for enemy weapons systems (e.g. putting your air assault helicopter landing zone [HLZ] next to a templated DShK heavy machine gun).

Defensive Positions (Mounted and Dismounted)

I spent a significant amount of my time in planning where to dig-in my mounted and dismounted assets. I knew that I would have limited “blade time” with my engineer attachments. I made an assumption that would prove to be problematic; I assumed my lieutenants and platoon sergeants would be reasonably familiar with standards for fighting positions. I found that Soldiers, NCOs, and my lieutenants did not know basic standards for positions despite having distributed cards from the Training Support Center with defensive position standards printed on them. One platoon was constructing a giant foxhole-type position, and some were putting the M240B in the center of the position rather than the corners as per doctrine to ensure flanking shots. Correcting these issues took significant time to correct. For mounted positions, the attached engineers with dig equipment had been instructed not to dig vehicle positions over fears of damaging their equipment. It took some finesse, but we talked them into digging some of our TOW trucks in to the wheels.

Takeaways: Rehearse digging in before arriving at JRTC. What looks simple and briefs simple can be a mess in a hot, time-constrained environment with few digging assets. I recommend scheduling a week of defensive operations training that incorporates engineers, setting in obstacles, and digging infantry fighting obstacles. Additionally, this provides the opportunity to work with the engineers and establish relationships that will help ensure mission accomplishment and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) sharing. We employed mines in our scenario, which were resourced through the simulated Class V yard at Fort Polk. Check ahead of time if your scenario will incorporate mines as they are another device that will require rehearsals and training.

The new Fiscal Year (FY) 15 modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for Infantry brigade combat team (IBCT) weapons companies puts the Laser Target Locating Module down to the platoon level. This equipment can give you distance, direction, and grids to points in your engagement area. This can help you rapidly select and mark target reference points (TRPs) and build platoon sector sketches in support of the company defense plan. I made my defense plan on the hood of my command HMMWV with a red lens on a butcher block. It was ugly but functional. I briefed my platoon leaders using the product after having my FSO conduct a sanity check on it.

Counter Reconnaissance

The 1st Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry Regiment — the JRTC OPFOR — has excellent recon capabilities. Geronimo Soldiers practice recon on every rotation, and relatively junior leaders in their organization (i.e. E-4s) often have a lot of experience leading recon patrols. Given the large signature of a delta company, I knew that it was likely that we would be easily observed digging in positions. I rotated a platoon at a time for counter-reconnaissance patrols ahead of the engagement area during defensive preparations. I had my headquarters element set up the AN/PRS-9 Battlefield Anti-Intrusion System prior to JRTC, but I had a malfunctioning system. However, there is value in that equipment as it can provide early warning for approaching forces down specific avenues of approach. However, I used another resource as part of my counter-recon fight. I coordinated for expendable-unattended ground sensors (E-UGS) for my rotation through the contractors who run the program. While it did not provide the analysis of “what” the threat was, it provided me with situational awareness (SA) as to the location of Geronimo probing our position. I had my FSO manning the “Toughbook” laptop that monitors the sensors, and due to the decisive action rules of engagement (ROE), I was able to call for fire on the acquired E-UGS hits. In speaking with the OPFOR after the battle (one of the enemy recon leaders was my next door neighbor at Fort Polk), I was told that my Soldiers were easily seen digging in, and that there was a low standard in terms of my crews scanning for recon.

Takeaways: I recommend clearly identifying a rotation for scanning using the TOW Improved Target Acquisition System (ITAS) and digging in. My 1SG ensured that we rotated Soldiers through the air-conditioned ITAS trucks to prevent heat casualties, which can mount quickly at JRTC. I only had one minor heat casualty through the rotation, which was a testament to my NCO leader checks and monitoring the work-rest cycle during brutal heat and humidity during the day.

I also recommend rotating one of your four platoons at a given time to the counter-recon fight. Disseminating the location and composition of your forces ahead of the forward line of troops (FLOT) is key; I have frequently seen recon and counter-recon assets suffer fratricide at JRTC due to poorly disseminated recon and counter-recon plans. Use maps, overlays (printed products if possible) to ensure the location of friendly elements is known down to the lowest level. Counter-recon operations are another task that will be difficult to teach “on the job” during your defense; train them ahead of time.

Red Air (Enemy Rotary Wing) Threats

As a rotational unit in JRTC, there is both “blue air” (friendly rotary wing) and “red air” depending on the scenario. Reacting to air attack has not been a commonly discussed battle drill for Infantry units during the past several years. Thankfully, I had incorporated concepts involved in company-level air defense into a previous leader professional development (LPD) for the company and integrated red air (fixed and rotary wing) into my VBS2 scenarios. In this rotation, I was told that the OPFOR LH-72 Lakotas were simulating Mi-24 Hind-D helicopters. I instructed that no weapon system below .50 cal would engage enemy helicopters; and when they were engaged, that they would be fired on as “volley fire” on order. The OCTs adjudicated the helicopters as “damaged” due to our coordinated fires, thus limiting our losses to enemy red air.

Takeaways: An LPD with all platoon leaders and NCOs before the rotation will ensure that eager leaders do not compromise positions or waste ammunition on ineffective fires. For passive aerial defense measures, we used the herringbone formation at a halt and used the cover of trees when possible. In training scenarios, I trained platoons to be familiar with other air defense threats such as Mi-28 Havok and Ka-50 Hokum as the Mi-24 Hind is becoming less utilized due to age and obsolescence throughout the world despite its frequent inclusion in training scenarios. The M2A1 .50 cal armed with the MK211 multipurpose round would have significant effects on even armored helicopter fuselages in actual combat. At very close ranges the MK19 could be effective as well, however, the MK19 is not represented in JRTC rotations. The TOW missile is capable of destroying a slow-moving, low-flying helicopter as well, as is the Javelin. However, the employment of these weapons must be done judiciously, weighing the limited amount of ammunition in the basic load, the likelihood of scoring a hit, and the potential of highlighting the locations of a key weapons system to the enemy against the possible destruction of an enemy helicopter, which is one of the deadliest threats faced on the battlefield for a delta company.

Communication

The dual power-amp capabilities of a delta company were instrumental in JRTC as units were widely separated at times. During the battalion attack, my company acted as a de-facto retrans for the battalion as man-pack radios lacked the range to communicate between the battalion tactical command post (TAC) and line companies as they approached their assault positions; the mounted radios helped maintain communication and synchronization. Joint capabilities receivers (JCR) will be your best means of communicating long distances. The terrain at Fort Polk leads to terrible FM comms in general and a lot of dead space. My comms rep attached an additional section of radio aerial to the middle of the antennae on my power-amp vehicles (we called it a “super whip”), and it was instrumental in our ability to maintain communications with the elements in the woodline. The organic Harris Falcon II high-frequency (HF) radio was not used; the organizational knowledge was no longer present in our company or the battalion S6 shop on how to use HF frequencies. This represents a possible means of communication if you are able to research and get training frequencies for this radio system. I did not successfully employ this radio in my time as a weapons company commander. However, it would be ideal for operations and long-distance communication with the battalion tactical operations center (TOC) if the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) commander employs his HF radio in the TOC as well.

Vehicle Markings

My company used a method of vehicle marking that, while somewhat unusual, allows for leaders and Soldiers to know at a glance which vehicle in the company that they are looking at. All vehicles are marked with 90-mile-per-hour tape. I utilized the Greek letter “delta” as the base symbol, which was represented by an equilateral triangle with 11-inch legs (chosen so a piece of copier paper could be used as a guide). The two “gun trucks” (M1025s) and TOW carriers (M1167s) had one to four vertical “tick” marks on the bottom of the triangle. Two ticks represent the section sergeant’s vehicle while four represented the platoon sergeant’s vehicle. Platoons were marked with one to four horizontal strips of tape on the rear doors, representing the four platoons. Just a technique, but it was easily identifiable on the battlefield. The company commander’s and platoon leaders’ vehicles were marked with Pink-side VS-17 panels on the roof with their call sign. The rest of the trucks were marked with orange-side VS-17 with call signs, with the XO’s vehicle having two VS-17s. This was to assist in “talking on” attack aviation. Consider creative ways of marking key vehicles with infrared chemlights and strobes; any visual cue to find your own vehicles in a swirling fight and possibly talk-on attack aviation can be key. If all of your vehicles have the same night markings, it may be difficult or impossible for aviators to figure out what you are trying to talk them on to. An LPD with your platoon leaders and NCOs with an actual pilot can help your subordinates understand

the five-line close combat attack (CCA) request or at least understand basic concepts like talking “big to small,” direction of attack, and the capabilities and limitations of aviation.

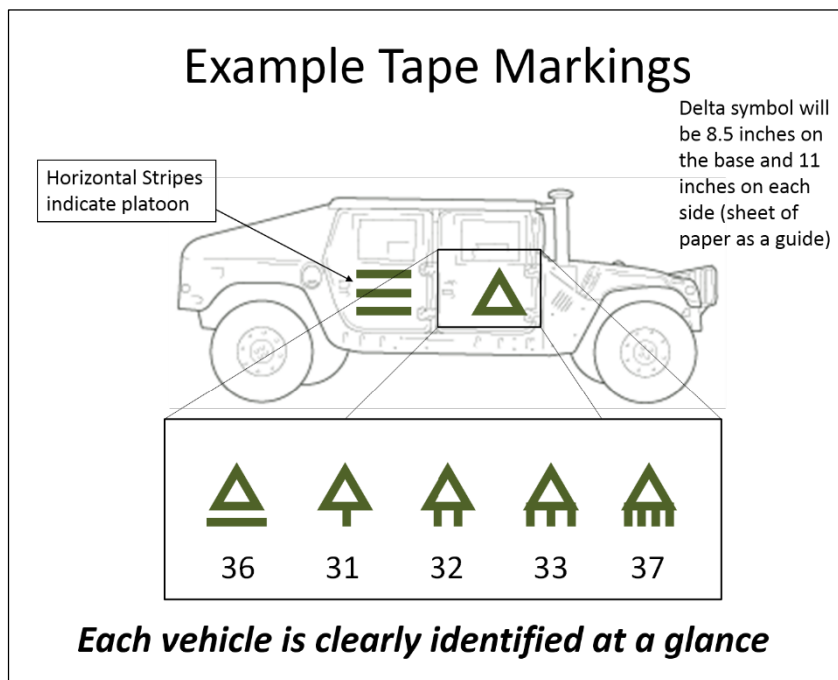


Figure 1 — Example Tape Markings

Company Attack

The company attack was slated to be conducted at night. I employed six phase lines, each with an easy to remember progression (red, white, blue and purple, green, and gold, the last three being Mardi Gras colors). While I questioned if I had too many graphic control measures, it helped me maintain an accurate picture of my FLOT and coordinate with my platoons as the situation at night on the objective got hectic to say the least. I believe the new CS-15 communication (end-user device, which is like a “cell phone with a map”) would have been great in this scenario, as maintaining SA of my elements (to include small fragments of surviving squads) was difficult at best. During the company attack, the OCTs had the majority of the company notionally “air assault” into a position south of the objective village. It was here that I saw that while we had trained well in mounted operations, our ability to move dismounted at night was poor. Formations were extremely close, and movement was noisy. I had to personally guide several elements in the direction of the attack despite the fact that we were along a linear roadway in the woodline. From this point forward, I utilized opportunities to train the platoons on night dismounted maneuver; for example, following a land navigation course, I would have the platoon practice moving through the woods with night optic devices (NODs) prior to bedding down. While mounted maneuver (day and night) is clearly the priority in a delta company (my battalion commander had told me “make sure Delta Company is good at driving and shooting”), it’s good to take opportunities to ensure that they understand at least the basics of fighting as light Infantry, especially at night. This attack also highlighted the need for realistic TOW ITAS training. One ITAS gunner mistook a JRTC “hulk” vehicle on the battlefield for a tank even though the signature from a mildly-warm hulk vehicle and an operating tracked vehicle are quite different. Having TOW crews conduct “field tracking” training with actual vehicles (VISMOD OPFOR vehicles, ideally) will help build that proficiency. The Recognition Of Combat Vehicles (ROC-V) trainer available online is also a great resource for teaching crews what thermal signatures look like for friendly and enemy wheeled and tracked vehicles.

Another focus item during the company attack was the breach of a wire obstacle. The JRTC products showed a wire obstacle at both the north and south ends of the village. Identify a primary breach element but ensure all platoon conduct breach rehearsals. For suppression, we used a mounted element with gun trucks and a TOW ITAS truck to destroy armored elements. For obscuration, we used hand-thrown smoke. Securing and reduction were conducted by my second platoon with wire cutters (the obstacle was wire and angle iron and easily defeated). Use real wire and the equipment (i.e. wire cutters, smoke, etc.) you will use to breach with during your rehearsals. Due to the chaos of an attack, your breach element may be attrited and you will have to re-task another platoon to open a lane. Ensure that all elements know the breaching fundamentals (suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, and assault — SOSRA). I ensured that I was close enough to the breach point to see the progress of the breach element but not get myself killed in the breach. Due to the intensity of the OPFOR fire and realistic pyrotechnics, my breach elements became timid. Being at the point of friction allowed me to direct them to continue with violence of action and pass platoons through the breach. Finding the point at which you are far enough forward but not bogged down in the 50-meter fight takes some finesse and patience.

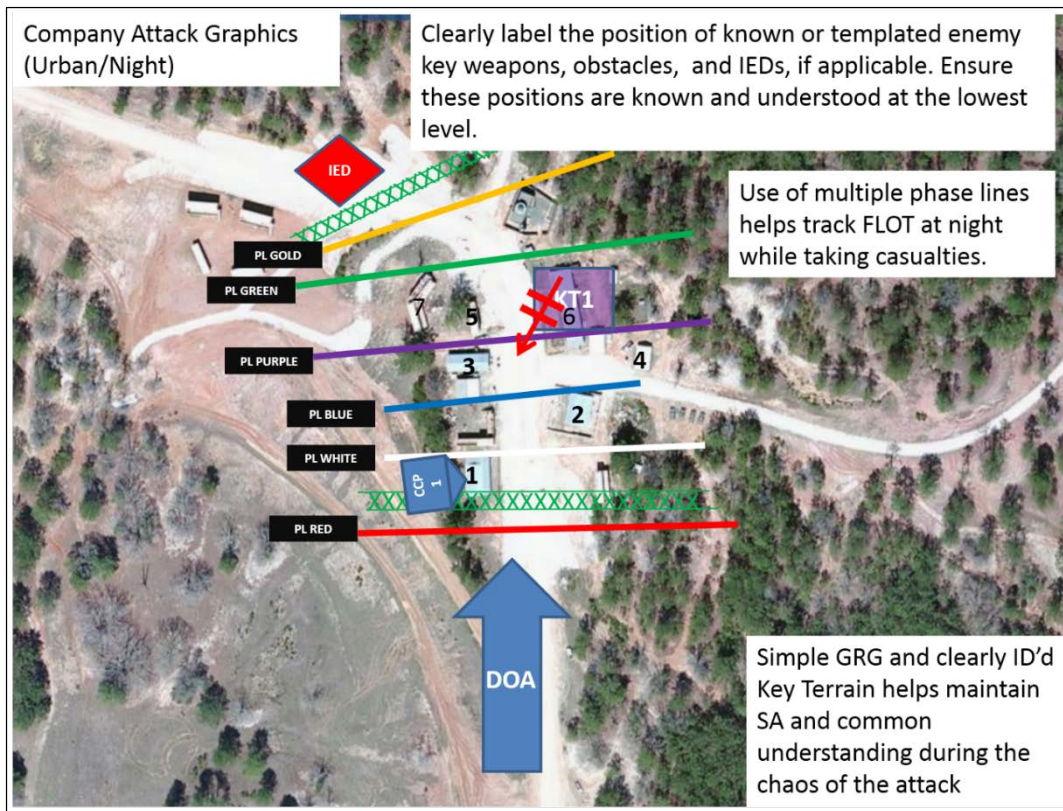


Figure 2 — Company Attack Graphic

Attack

The battalion attack was a particularly interesting training event, as I had never conducted a battalion-level offensive operation previously. Prior to the operation, my battalion commander conducted a reduced force rehearsal on Geronimo Drop Zone that incorporated phase lines, operation schedules (OPSKEDs) being called over the radio for all key events (i.e. A/B/C companies securing their assault positions), and fires. Delta Company headquarters drove several HMMWVs from phase line to phase line, helping the leaders at all levels visualize the attack. Having a full rehearsal like this really helped synchronize the operation. The attached MP company, while motivated, did not have a lot of familiarity with mounted operations. Unless you have an existing relationship with non-combat arms attachments

and a thorough understanding of their capabilities, consider A) using them to plus-up your platoons (i.e. divvy them out) or B) maintain them as a reserve. I gave them specific tactical tasks during the operation; it would have been better maintaining them as a reserve than using them as a fifth platoon. Another key component of the battalion attack for a delta company was the breach of a wire obstacle on the road leading into the town. My attached engineer (sapper) squad made a simulated improvised Bangalore torpedo that was OC-approved (the charges need to be made to a certain standard to “work” in JRTC; they are depicted in the exercise ROE), and the squad rehearsed emplacing the charge and cutting the wire with wire cutters. Their extensive rehearsals and smoke from Field Artillery smoke missions at the north end of the town allowed them to open the breach and pass the company through. Your scenario may have mines “in play;” think through your reduction plan if that is a factor in achieving a successful breach.

My company was the last remaining element in Jetertown, which was unexpected. Although we had war-gamed many possibilities, we had not discussed the possibility of Delta Company occupying the town in depth following the destruction of the light Infantry companies. A 30-second contingency plan addressing this possibility would have helped my subordinates visualize dismounting and seizing the high-ground better.

Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES)

Prior to JRTC, ensure that you have an adequate supply of M240B blank firing adapters (BFAs) and discriminators. They are in short supply at Fort Polk, and you will likely just be down a crew-served weapon without it. Also, M2A1 .50 cal mounts the BFA differently as well; talk to the Training Support Center about getting a long term loan on them and mount them well in advance of JRTC to ensure there are no issues. **Learn the MILES AT-4s and Javelins before JRTC.** OCTs are generally unhelpful in resolving your MILES issues, and the 1-509th PIR uses that stuff all of the time. If your Soldiers do not have the AT-4s and Javelins mated to the harness properly, they will not work, and you will be down more valuable anti-armor weapons. Also, ensuring you have adequate Anti-Tank Weapons Effect Signature Simulator (ATWESS) rounds for your TOWs is key also. TOW MILES installation is an involved process; research it prior to your arrival in the box, as it is your most important weapon system.

Recommendations

1. The delta company has six vehicles in the company which do not have crew-served weapons. Unless the admin vehicles are filled with Soldiers able to dismount with AT-4s or Javelins, the company and platoon HQ vehicles (minus the LMTV with an M66 ring mount) do not bring additional firepower to the point of friction. The addition of a Common Remotely Operated Weapons Stations (CROWS) equipment would greatly increase company firepower, as there would be an additional six machine guns (M240L at the least) to bring to the fight, along with additional optics capabilities. Literally, there is no recourse for the platoon leader to get into the fight without having to dismount, or even more illogically, fire from his vehicle with his personal weapon, in the close fight. The current mismatch of unarmored M1025 HMMWVs with M1167s creates a mismatch of protection and vehicle capabilities, as the M1025 can go in many places the 1167 cannot.

2. FM 3-21.12 does not address engineer planning in-depth. While it does provide a conceptual overview of the process required to dig-in a weapons company, along with a warning to the limitation of the pre-brigade engineer battalion (BEB) engineer company ability to dig in without augmentation, it does not provide the commander with any planning factors, example positions, or other resources to assist him in his defensive preparations. While tables for blade hours and other engineer considerations are easily found for tanks and Infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), they are absent for TOW and heavy weapons

vehicles. This would only require an additional page or so added to the manual and be of great help in disseminating a standard that can be incorporated into a tactical SOP (TACSOP).

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