

From Blackhawk to Bradley: A Quick Story about Flexibility

by Christopher G. Hume

The versatility of the modern American infantryman is evident in almost every report coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan. As the platoon leader of 1st Platoon, C Company, 1-32 Cavalry, I was fortunate to witness one example. It did not necessarily happen during a firefight or on a specific day but over a period of several months in the full spectrum of operations indicative of the conflict.

On Christmas Day 2005, the Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, 1-32 Cavalry (Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition), 1-101st Airborne, were three months into their tour and adjusting to their new forward operating base in Muqdadiyah, Iraq. Muqdadiyah sat a few dozen kilometers from the provincial capital of Baqubah. The men from Fort Campbell, KY, had transformed from an infantry battalion to a RSTA squadron in less than six months. They adapted well to using armored trucks in daily operations and focused on the ever-shifting shape of the enemy. Everyone knew the evolving battlefield demanded flexibility and versatility, and that it did not look kindly upon those who resisted change in the name of tradition.

Despite the change that defined their short history, no one could have predicted the next challenge they would face. It did not come in the form of a new deadly enemy tactic, technique and procedure or a serious loss of leadership, but with the introduction of a new tool: the M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle. These air-assault infantrymen, accustomed to helicopter insertions and the occasional truck ride, soon learned to operate, maintain and fight in a fully tracked, armored vehicle typically found in mechanized infantry formations. Many greeted this painful transition with resistance and doubt, but it did not take long for everyone to realize the advantages of the protection and firepower the BFV brought to the table. The strengths could not be ignored, and all became disciples of this unfamiliar beast.

The platoon's story began a year and a half earlier on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Charlie Company had a tumultuous birth and history considering its short existence. Due to Army Transformation, the former 3rd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, was reduced to one infantry reconnaissance company consisting of two

platoons, a mortar section and a sniper section. The remaining two companies became cavalry troops composed entirely of cavalry scouts, military-occupation specialty 19D, of the Armor Branch. For various reasons, the infantrymen did not work well with the 19Ds, causing a huge training hurdle. The officers were more understanding, but friction defined the first several months. There was also a shortage of vehicles and equipment since the modified table of organization and equipment had changed. The platoons shared the few trucks the unit owned.

On a positive note, the mass downsizing of MOS 11B allowed Charlie Company to keep the best Soldiers from 3rd Battalion, so most of the men were physically fit and extremely competent in their technical and tactical expertise. Unfortunately, the importance of that infantry and reconnaissance expertise was debatable because the purpose and employment of Charlie's platoons were questions. They initially trained as a line-battalion scout platoon, focusing on dismounted reconnaissance and surveillance, hide sites and long-range movement by foot. This was fitting since many came from the now-disbanded 3-327 scouts. However, the battalion commander, LTC Arthur Kandarjian, who was acutely aware of his unit's reduced manpower, considered them as rifle platoons minus machineguns.

The debate only accelerated when battalion live-fire exercises began and all platoons in the battalion were expected to execute convoy operations. Finally, one month prior to deployment, the two platoons became three by detaching one team from each and placing the fire-support officer in the platoon-leader position. All platoons in the squadron, the battalion's new name following re-flagging, would be manned and equipped the same.

Satisfaction in finally having clear guidance overshadowed the infantrymen's expected resistance to more change. Of course, the nature of deployments made this comfort short-lived as change would once again define the experience of 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, and all members of 1-32nd Cavalry Squadron.

The first few months of the deployment found 1st Platoon in a small forward operating base near the Iranian border, temporarily attached to the squadron's A Troop. The men found comfort in the

leadership of A Troop's commander, CPT Sean Brown. Although a tanker, he took good care of his infantrymen and welcomed them into the fold. The enlisted men also learned to respect and work with the 19Ds, as their knowledge of vehicles exceeded the average rifleman's. Operations at the first FOB were routine and without great incident.

The fall elections of 2005 were the greatest priority, resulting in solid coordination with the local Iraqi Security Forces. Things were going so smoothly, in fact, that the troop handed operations over to the Iraqis, with military-transition-team supervision, and headed to their new home an hour's drive down the road in Muqdadiyah. What waited for its Soldiers surprised everyone, most of all the men of 1st Platoon. They would relieve a mechanized infantry battalion, the 1-30th Battle Boars of 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, and keep a few of their toys, the M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles.

After the jump from foot to trucks, the next leap to tracked vehicles was not totally out of the realm of possibilities. A rumor that the unit would have tracked vehicles had surfaced prior to deployment, and a few of the 19Ds who had Bradley experience conducted driver's training at Fort Campbell. Despite this now-obvious indicator, none of the men in 1st Platoon ever thought it would be them who mounted such a vehicle. Most of them did not know the difference between an M2 and an M1, referring to anything with tracks as a "tank." However, the battalion commander could not afford to exclude any of the small force currently posted in Muqdadiyah and demanded that each platoon of A Troop attend the train-up. Therefore, in between left-seat and right-seat rides for the area of operations orientation, the 101st boys went to Bradley school, courtesy of the Battle Boars.

During those four days of training, the men and officers learned everything from loading and unloading the weapons systems to changing track. The designated drivers drove, the designated gunners fired and the platoon leadership soaked up as much as they could. The training culminated in a condensed gunnery and "road test" out in sector. Some in the platoon received extra training on their road test, thanks to a well-concealed 155mm

artillery shell that exploded off the right side of the platoon leader's vehicle. The scenario repeated another two dozen times in the platoon's eight-month relationship with the Bradley. Yet this first incident was the one most remembered for selling the infantrymen on the advantages of armor; the Bradley performed as advertised.

Once the Bandits of 1-32 took over their new battlespace, they lost no time in getting the Bradleys into the fight. Route clearance became an obsession of the commanders, and as a result, the men of A Troop, 1-C included, spent many long hours out on the roads. The vehicles also proved an excellent conveyance for sniper teams and other dismounted assets that needed insertion in sector. As the men's experience grew, and they became comfortable with the vehicles, the missions became more complex and coordinated.

Many times the Bradleys were used to support patrol bases in sector, dismounted surveillance platforms, raids and cordon-and-searches. The vehicles proved to be excellent for insertion of small dismounted patrols. The survivability and the carrying capacity allowed a complete element to ride together and get on the ground quickly without compromise. These techniques, of course, did not come right away, and the lessons learned by the men of 1st Platoon could fill volumes.

Maintenance was a vertical learning curve. As stated before, every man in 1st Platoon had a light-infantry background. Most had never even seen a Bradley. The few A Troop 19Ds with mechanized experience, which included a mechanic, helped tremendously. However, this did not prevent the inquisitive infantrymen from breaking, and then learning how to fix, just about everything that bolted onto the vehicle. The most comedic incident involved the lug nuts for the road wheels. The boys soon discovered that when the wheels came loose, they would shoot off the side of the vehicle at high velocity. Several wheels later, they finally learned that the lug nuts were to blame; problem solved.

Since each piece of equipment in the Army has its own specific characteristics, it requires its own standard operating procedures, load plans and crew drills. The platoon devised contingency plans for vehicle recovery, casualty evacuation, modified fuel loads and down-weapon drills. Also, the gunners learned how to implement the Integrated Sight Unit, which was

a very useful optic, and incorporate its thermal capabilities into route clearance. The drivers learned how to maneuver in restricted terrain, but not before learning several painful, yet amusing, lessons. For example, ground that looks dry is not necessarily so, bridges that support trucks don't always support Bradleys, and house walls make for tight turns.

Despite all the mistakes and challenges, the men of 1st Platoon, more than any, became masters of their new trade. In mission after mission, light-infantry skills were combined with the skills of the Bradley crewmen to accomplish tasks otherwise beyond the normal capabilities of either a purely mechanized force or a purely light force.

In late spring 2006, the rest of Charlie Company eventually linked up with 1st Platoon in Muqdadiyah. Thanks to a close relationship among its young leaders, due in part to the fact that many of the Soldiers were previously in 1st Platoon, 3rd Platoon was given some rudimentary instruction on Bradley operations and successfully implemented the vehicles into their own patrols.

The integration of mechanized and light-infantry operations came to a head during the last month of the deployment. Tireless intelligence-gathering through patrols, interrogations, surveillance and informants finally produced a mature target list for an improvised-explosive-device cell in a nearby village. The number of objectives demanded that all of Charlie Company would participate. The plan called for a mounted Bradley insertion followed by foot infiltration. Coordination among all the units was imperative to avoid compromise. If anyone in the village expected anything besides a normal route clearance mission, the targets would flee.

Once all three platoons settled in their respective assault positions, the Bradleys withdrew to the FOB for quick-reaction force duties. At H hour, all three dismounted elements moved across the large canal encircling the village and hit three objectives simultaneously. This caught local nationals by surprise, causing capture of the targets after only a brief fight. Once the initial assault occurred, the Bradleys returned to provide security and prisoner transport. The integration was flawless and the mission a success. The firepower and speed provided by the Bradleys, and the stealth and situational awareness of the dismounted Soldiers,

combined to form a lethal and versatile team.

Flexibility is a virtue of all Soldiers, especially infantrymen. Some units learn how to adapt early, and others drag their feet and resist the very mention of change. Initially, the men of 1st Platoon were reluctant to veer from their predestined path. Yet as their training and then their deployment progressed, versatility came to define the very nature of their identity. From dismounted infantry battle drills, reconnaissance work and foot patrols, to truck maneuver and finally mechanized operations, their willingness to learn and adapt was ever-present.

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ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle
FOB – forward operating base
MOS – military-occupation specialty
RSTA – reconnaissance, surveillance and target acquisition