

# A Scout Platoon Leader's Perspective on the Complex Threat

by 1LT Derek Wales

*(Editor's note: 1LT Derek Wales, Red Platoon leader, Assassin Troop, 3-1 Cavalry, participated in a National Training Center rotation where his parent unit, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, was the first unit to encounter a hybrid contemporary operating environment force threat, representative of the more complex threat the U.S. Army expects to face going forward.)*

A briefing explained that this rotation would play heavily in determining some of the future task organization and doctrinal decisions for the Army. Working as a scout platoon leader within an armored brigade combat team, armored reconnaissance squadron, I was one of the first Soldiers and leaders to get a glimpse of how the BCT structure would function in high-intensity combat in a complex threat environment.

Others of higher rank will write about the "big picture" of this rotation. However, my perspective is that of the platoon leader, and the victories and challenges I saw from my humvee. My intent is to assist future platoon leaders rotating through NTC or the next conflict.

The complex threat is the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects (Training Circular 7-100). At the NTC, this meant there was a regular army augmented with guerrilla forces. Also, there were insurgent and criminal groups in the area who could be swayed to work for either the United States or the COEFORs. In the scenario, U.S. forces were the guest of the host nation, so there were issues with working with the HN regular-army forces who had the same equipment as the enemy, which caused significant problems with positive identification.

## How long are your fangs?

The ARS has limited ability to fight for information. There are no M1s. We have Bradleys, which are a very capable platform, but still not a tank. My troop brings eight Bradleys to the fight, three of which are in Red Platoon, my command. Four humvees supplemented my three Bradleys, but they did not hold up too well under cannon fire. Therefore, stealth and surprising the enemy was at a premium. As far as teeth at the platoon level, we have 25mm chain-guns and tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles on the Bradleys, a couple Javelins and a choice of MK19s, M2s and M240s for the humvees.

The troop typically fought a mechanized infantry company, which had at least two T-80s and four or five BMP2s as well as a five or six BRDMs. Therefore, the enemy had superior firepower, and we had to tailor our task organization to survive.

## Task organization

Coming into the fight, I knew the enemy was always going to have superior firepower. My platoon sergeant and I discussed our options for task organization. We could go with two or three sections. Doctrinally, the platoon normally divided into three sections, each containing one Bradley and one humvee, with the platoon leader and platoon sergeant in a headquarters section. In theory, this gives the platoon the ability to cover a greater frontage.

We decided on a two-section layout. Our Alpha Section, where I was, acted as the lead element for scout operations and consisted of one Bradley containing the senior scout and three hum-





**U.S. Soldiers from the 1-14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, 3-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Fort Lewis, WA, capture a high-value target at a simulated Afghan village at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, Aug. 20, 2011. The soldiers will conduct a search and verification of the captured subject as training and preparation before deployment. (Photo by SPC Hanson Mendiola)**

vees (the two Javelins in the platoon increased our anti-armor capability). The platoon leader was in Alpha Section because of the superior surveillance systems – I better understood how the situation was developing.

Bravo Section had only one humvee (the platoon sergeant). The reasons I placed the platoon sergeant in Bravo Section were twofold. One, I had a senior individual there who could control direct fires, and two, he was in a position behind Alpha where he could effectively casualty-evacuate both sections.

We discovered the following benefits to the two-section structure:

- Although my span of control as the platoon leader did not change, the number of elements I was actively maneuvering did. Having to maneuver two sections meant I communicated with Red 2 (Alpha Section leader), Red 5 (Bravo Section leader) and Red 4 (platoon sergeant), making mission command much simpler. If I had three sections, I would have had to maneuver Red 7 (Charlie Section leader) as well. This left the net more clear and allowed guidance and reporting to travel seamlessly up and down the chain of command.
- Planning was simpler. Inherently our maneuver element was Alpha (three humvees and one Bradley), which was stealthier and had more pervasive surveillance devices (three Long-Range Acquisition Systems and Bradley optics). Bravo (two Bradleys and the platoon sergeant) was the natural choice for support because of its superior firepower.
- Formations became simpler. I typically used somewhere between a platoon line and an echelon right or left with Bravo (generally in a V with the Bradleys in front), staying a few hundred meters behind Alpha (typically operating in a wedge, which allowed me to control move-

ment and make contact with the smallest element). This formation would almost become a platoon, because it gave us a great deal of flexibility.

- Since Bravo worked behind Alpha, I had freedom to maneuver most of my combat power once we made contact with the enemy because Bravo Section had two of my Bradleys.
- Also, casualty evacuation and recovery was much easier to operate on a section level. For example, if you used the three-section concept from Field Manual 3-20.98, you would have sections that consisted of only a Bradley and a humvee. If a Bradley was destroyed, you would be in a situation where you had a humvee trying to fight against something capable of destroying a Bradley and no way to recover the vehicle or many of the wounded. With a two-section structure, the section leader had two or three vehicles to continue the fight and recover casualties and vehicles.

However, that does not mean two sections were without drawbacks.

- Alpha Section only had one Bradley, and it was impossible to recover if it was destroyed without having the other section come in and support. Alpha and Bravo had to remain within supporting distance of each other.
- The platoon could observe fewer named areas of interest simultaneously.
- Also, it was hard to do any form of envelopment with only two working sections. I did not have enough elements to block all avenues of escape for the enemy.

## How to work it

When using two sections, it is crucial for the platoon leader to understand how the various enablers can help maintain support-

ing range and distance, and the time it will take to satisfy various priority information requirements because of limited frontage. All these things are considered during troop-leading procedures. For example, a scout weapons team working with the platoon's Kiowa Warrior helicopters could have them maneuver between the two sections and cover a greater area, so even if the sections were not within supporting range and distance, the platoon was.

## STX and FSE

The 10 situational-training exercises and three full-spectrum engagements were a voyage of discovery into the world of the COEFOR and friction within friendly systems.

## Getting poked in the eye by the inter-visible man

A scout likes nothing better than to find a great observation point that provides a commanding view of the battlespace. It allows us to maintain standoff and develop the situation. Many commanding pieces of terrain allow a scout to see for miles at the NTC. This is true especially with the LRAS. However, an enemy mechanized infantry company could maneuver within a few hundred meters away, perfectly concealed from view in one of the hundreds of wadis that crisscross the NTC. These lines of inter-visibility are a maddening component of the terrain, and it is the COEFOR's home turf, so they know where they are and how to use them. This duplicates the real world, where insurgents will be more familiar with the terrain.

The COEFOR used this inter-visibility to attempt to poke us in the eye. As scouts, we found that good terrain analysis, movement techniques and formations helped, but only to a certain degree. Knowing how to use terrain is crucial to success on the battlefield and at the NTC.

As a platoon, we found the most impactful way to use terrain was actually on the crew level. Sagger and berm drills greatly increased the crew's survivability (there were several occasions when a crew of mine would have double-digit near misses because of hiding behind the terrain). Also, slow and deliberate movement as the platoon approached the areas of potential enemy contact allowed us to make contact on our terms.

## Ravenous desire for information

One of the best ways to develop the situation and observe enemy movement is aerial surveillance. My troop was the only unit in the brigade to put up an RQ-11 (Raven) unmanned aerial vehicle, and that aerial view makes the enemy think twice about having a permissive maneuver environment. However, it took five hours and 37 minutes after the air was cleared to launch the Raven in an already approved restricted air zone (the whole time we were waiting for brigade to give us a launch code). This might be something that higher-level staffs would want to put in their command-post exercise battle rhythm for practice to rehearse the systems prior to the rotation.

## LRAS-zle dazzle

The LRAS and thermals on the Bradley were truly amazing force multipliers. In one instance, one of my scouts correctly identified an enemy vehicle parked on a hilltop 13 kilometers away as being an anti-aircraft gun system. The COEFOR misjudged how much concealment the darkness gave them. The built-in target location module in the LRAS was indispensable in calling in rapid indirect fire.

## Steel rain – make it pour

The precise grid coordinates provided by the LRAS allowed mortar rounds on target within five minutes of spotting the enemy, all without revealing the scout team position. That is one advantage of having the mortars within your troop. Also, it is much easier to communicate effects to them.

On any stationary vehicles we engaged with indirect fire on the mortar section, the sergeant would often drop four rounds instead of the typical one high explosive for an adjust-fire. That way, we were very likely to destroy or disable it. However, since the mechanized enemy was often on the move, mortars were effective at disrupting but rarely destroyed him – especially BMPs and T-80s. If he was moving, the best thing to do was to drop rounds in front of him, causing him to displace laterally. This would at least delay the time before the enemy was within direct-fire range. Although the troop did become very proficient with its 120mm mortars, they were only effective at disrupting the enemy and shaping the battlefield.

The mortar situation caused me to stumble onto another potential modified table of organization and equipment deficiency: the troop has only four 13Fs, which the Bradley fire-support team typically uses. It would have been useful to have one within each platoon, either by having more 13Fs or by having scouts help crew the Bradley fire-support team.

## Coming out of the box

After Training Day 14, I was more than eager to come out of the box. We had been there for 15 days (we sped to live-fire during reception, staging, onward movement and integration), and it turned out to be a fantastic learning experience. These were all tactics, techniques and procedures we discovered were effective at the platoon level across a breadth of mission types. I hope my observations alleviate some of the growing pains for many lieutenants rotating through NTC and wherever the U.S. Army finds itself next.



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### ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

- ARS** – armored reconnaissance squadron
- BCT** – brigade combat team
- BMP** – Boyeva Mashina Pekhoty (Russian fighting vehicle)
- BRDM** – Boyevaya Razvedyvatelnaya Dozornaya Mashina (Russian scout vehicle)
- COEFOR** – contemporary operating environment force
- FSE** – full-spectrum engagement
- HN** – host nation
- LRAS** – Long-Range Acquisition System
- NTC** – National Training Center
- STX** – situational-training exercise