
TOMAHAWKS TAKE ON NTC: STRYKERS IN A COMPLEX FIGHT

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In August 2015, the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment (Tomahawks), 2-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), 7th Infantry Division, began preparations for its January 2016 rotation to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, Calif. While at NTC, the Tomahawks achieved success during urban operations in two of the population centers, Ujen and Razish. The battalion was able to secure both objectives while suffering minimal casualties during both operations. This article discusses some proven methods used to train Soldiers for NTC and how to fight Strykers in urban terrain. The discussion centers around the battalion's training, planning preparation for urban objectives, and the lessons learned from fighting in urban environments from a Stryker platform.

Setting the Team

To understand how the battalion fought at NTC, a description of the battalion's capabilities is required. As a standard Stryker Infantry battalion, 4-23 IN consists of three rifle companies, a headquarters and headquarters company (HHC), and a forward support company. Each company has 16 Strykers task-organized into three platoons with four Strykers each; two Strykers serve as the headquarters element providing mission command, and two more Strykers comprise the 120mm mortars section. Each Stryker has a mounted crew-served weapon, either a M2 machine gun or

a MK19 automatic grenade launcher. The battalion deployed with only 575 Soldiers for the January rotation due to manning shortfalls. This created a significant shortage of available Infantrymen to integrate with the mounted elements with each platoon fielding only one Infantry squad and one weapons squad on average.

The battalion executed a conventional progression of individual weapons qualification, Stryker gunnery, squad/platoon live-fire exercises (LFXs), and situational training exercises (STXs), culminating with company-level force-on-force LFXs. In addition to these training gates, each squad in the battalion refined its Battle Drill 6 skills with close quarters marksmanship (CQM) qualifications and a squad shoot house LFX. This not only certified the battalion to conduct urban LFX operations but also enabled the refinement and establishment of company and battalion standard operating procedures (SOPs) in preparation for NTC.

Getting to the Fight

Prior to departing for NTC, the battalion held a series of leader professional development (LPD) events focusing on topics such as indirect fires, maintenance operations, movement to contact, area defense, and urban operations. Various subject matter experts presented their material and participated in open forums to define battalion SOPs as well as train and certify leaders as part of the eight-step training

Strykers driven by Soldiers with the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment maneuver to the unit's next objective as part of Decisive Action Rotation 16-03 at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif.

Photo by PFC Deion McBride



model. During these LPDs, the battalion commander (LTC Dan Rayca) established expectations for mission command nodes, reporting requirements, mounted and dismounted maneuver, and SOP development focus areas. The battalion leadership at echelon successfully established effective SOPs on the highlighted focus areas and reinforced them throughout the entire training cycle and deployment to NTC.

During after action reviews (AARs) following the rotation, the senior officer and NCO leadership within the battalion were in agreement that company-level force-on-force training had the most value in preparing each company for the complex operational environment (OE) it experienced at NTC. For this event, 2-2 SBCT reserved approximately 60 square kilometers of training area at Yakima Training Center, Wash. Using Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement Systems (MILES), companies conducted iterations of movement to contact, area defense, and attack against a sister company. Both the battalion and brigade tactical operations centers (TOCs) assisted the companies with replication of fires and enabler support, which facilitated refinement of reporting SOPs at echelon. Additionally, it allowed for senior-level leadership to execute mission command in a decentralized environment. A sister battalion within the 7th ID (1st Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment) that had completed an NTC rotation three months earlier provided observer controller/trainer (OC/T) support and facilitated lessons learned from its rotation. Allowing commanders and subordinate leaders to conduct mounted maneuver in terrain similar to NTC and in a competitive environment proved critical. Soldiers were intrinsically motivated for this training because of inter-company/battalion rivalries and were invested in the overall success of their unit. Additionally, many of the commanders felt that this forced platoon leaders to face critical tactical decisions and gain a greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Many of the commanders believed that this was some of the best training for synchronizing battalion-, company-, and platoon-level leadership on mission command.

To develop urban operations capabilities, the battalion conducted simunition training at a local military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) site on Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), Wash.; this served as the culminating training event prior to the battalion deploying to NTC. Each company tailored its urban training to meet the training objectives that had been developed during the close quarters battle LFX. Units



Photo by PFC Kyle Edwards

Soldiers communicate over the radio during a mission at NTC on 18 January 2016.

conducted force-on-force missions and executed squad- and team-level operations to refine skills and establish SOPs.

Concurrently, company-level training occurred throughout the battalion and focused on repetition in order to build muscle memory; tactical physical training (PT) and “sergeants’ time” training focused on the urban fight in order to refine that skill set based on the planned threat. B Company took a unique approach to planned training and developed a training event at the Mission Training Complex on JBLM. Using the programs offered, the company commander war-gamed numerous scenarios with his leaders using tactical decision games around maps in the company conference room; this allowed his platoon leaders to understand his approach to fighting. He believed that this was critical in allowing his subordinates to understand his intent during the actual battle periods. The event also allowed him to evaluate the decision-making processes of his platoon leaders and platoon sergeants and assess their strengths and deficiencies. This allowed him to give broad limits to his subordinate leaders and be confident that they would understand his intent and also allowed him to pair subordinate leaders with missions that enabled disciplined initiative. Additionally, he was able to execute decentralized mission command among his different platoons, which was essential to commanding an urban fight.

Utilizing a 15-day recovery model, the battalion focused on recovery and maintenance during its last critical piece of preparation. In November, the battalion maintenance team executed shift work to facilitate 24-hour operations and brought the operational readiness (OR) rate up to 95 percent prior to departing for NTC. With command emphasis placed on maintenance, subordinate units, maintenance teams, battalion staff, and signal personnel had the opportunity

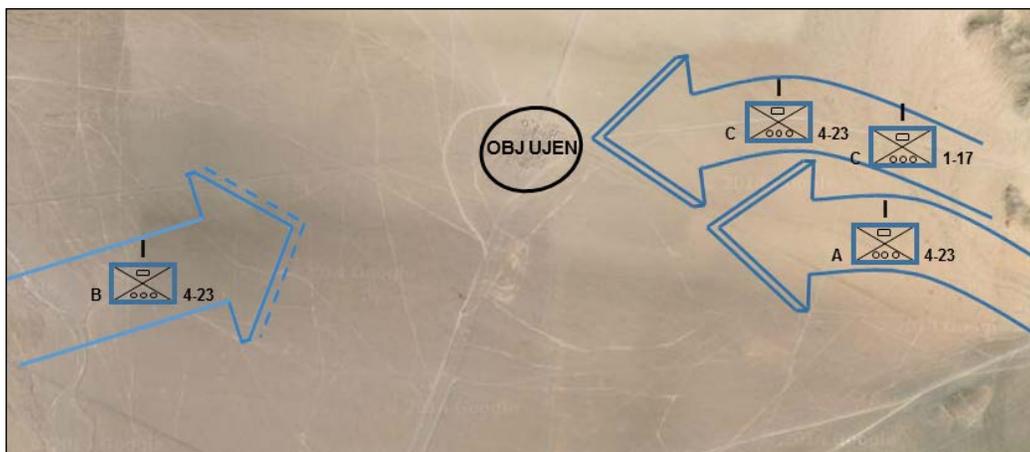


Figure 1

to focus on the details and solve problems that had been overlooked previously as well as leverage additional resources from across 2-2 SBCT and 7th ID. The OR rate of the Joint Capabilities Release (JCR) was critical as it was the most critical communications device in each Stryker. This preparation resulted in a significant reduction of maintenance and communication issues that affected the mission in previous NTC rotations.

The Ujen Fight

Planning and Preparation — The town of Ujen was the battalion’s objective during the third phase of NTC Rotation 16-03. The terrain around Ujen is extremely open in every direction, and there are five high-speed avenues of approach ranging out from the objective. The enemy situation template (SITEMP) consisted of 50-75 enemy fighters within the objective; these fighters were primarily armed with small arms and anti-tank (AT) capabilities. The opposing force’s (OPFOR’s) primary AT weapon was the AT-5 (Russian-made 9M113 Konkurs) with a top range of four kilometers. The S2 section determined that the enemy was familiar with the terrain and would aggressively defend Ujen. For this operation, the task force received an additional infantry company — C Company, 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment (Chosin).

The battalion was working on an extremely compressed timeline. The battalion commander brought in all of the company commanders and briefly sketched out a scheme of maneuver on a map. The company commanders collaborated and worked with the battalion commander and S3 to synchronize and refine the attack. At 2200, C Company Soldiers would leave their Strykers with a minimal force to secure their position and execute a 10-kilometer

dismounted movement to the objective for a 0300 time on target (TOT) in order to seize a linear foothold on the east side of Ujen. This would provide a “wall” of buildings to protect follow-on forces from AT fire. A Company and Chosin would follow, attacking mounted under the cover of C Company’s foothold. B Company would execute a mounted feint to the northwest of Ujen. Staying out of the range of the AT weapons systems to draw enemy forces west, the company would then

approach Ujen from the east and follow and assume behind C, A, and Chosin companies.

Once C Company secured its foothold on the objective, it would clear up to Phase Line (PL) Cherokee and hold for reinforcements to arrive. A Company Soldiers would dismount their Strykers at a vehicle dismount objective (VDO) north of the objective, conduct a battle handover with C Company, and maneuver to PL Aruaco, with Chosin Company providing the next follow-on forces. Finally, B Company would approach the objective in Strykers from the east, dismount at the VDO, and maneuver to PL Braves. Following this, all units would move to secure the objective and hold for a follow-on mission.

Execution — The companies had very little time to brief their subordinate units but were able to create shared understanding and conduct rapid planning through the simplicity of the operation and effective SOPs. They mitigated tactical risk by executing operations during limited visibility and within hours of arriving to the area of operations (AO), utilizing speed and surprise to full advantage. C Company initiated movement towards Ujen as planned at 2200. At approximately

Figure 2



0245, B Company initiated its feint and successfully drew enemy forces north and west. It was critical that C Company not be identified while maneuvering dismounted towards the objective to prevent heavy casualties from emplaced machine guns. To ensure they were not detected, C Company moved slowly and deliberately with strict noise and light discipline, taking six hours to move the 10 kilometers. Due to B Company's successful feint, C Company surprised the enemy and established a foothold in multiple buildings along the eastern side of the objective. Enemy elements that remained in position then attempted to counterattack C Company's position, and as C Company's forces were culminating in vicinity of PL Cherokee, A Company arrived under the cover of 155mm smoke to follow and assume the advance west.



Photo by PFC Kyle Edwards

Soldiers with 4-23 IN pull security during a mission as part of NTC Rotation 16-03 on 18 January 2016.

A Company cleared to PL Aruaco and held its position until directed to advance further to support operations. Chosin was the next company to arrive and conducted its forward passage of lines with A Company. B Company then moved into Ujen, conducted a battle handover with Chosin and A Company, and cleared the remainder of the objective. Once Ujen had been cleared, the NTC OC/Ts initiated suspension of battlefield effects (SOBE), and the task force prepared for follow-on operations in the town of Razish — the largest population center in the BCT area of operations.

Strykers were used within Ujen as dismounted elements assessed a decreased AT threat on the objective. During this operation, the majority of the Strykers remained in the VDO to the north of Ujen and provided isolation of the objective area non-standard medical evacuation. The Strykers were critical in allowing the three companies to move rapidly into the fight and mass infantry on the objective while providing additional protection and firepower during the fight.

The Razish Fight

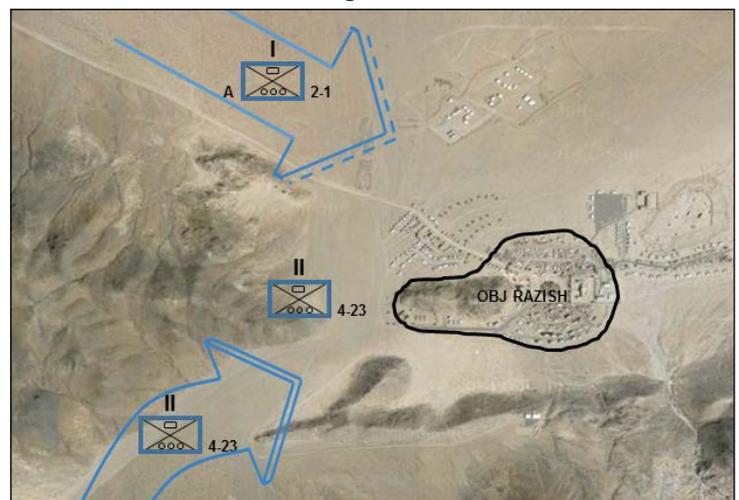
Planning and Preparation — The timeline for Objective Razish allowed for a longer and more deliberate military decision-making process (MDMP) at echelon. The terrain around Razish is different than Ujen, with Razish having canalizing terrain and limited visibility on three sides because of large ridgelines surrounding most of the objective. There is also a large hill mass called the “rock pile” located in the center of Razish which offers clear visibility over the entire objective. The task force identified the rock pile as decisive terrain as it provided any unit that occupied it dominance over the entire objective. Located to the south of the rock pile, the S2 second designated a small prison complex as key terrain as it controlled the main avenue of approach

from the south. Razish had a similar enemy force composition to Ujen with 55-75 OPFOR expected on the objective with AT capabilities. The S2 section predicted that the enemy also had mounted capabilities with 1-3 BRDMs (lightly armored Russian armored personnel carriers) expected in Razish.

As a BCT mission, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment would be first in the order of movement to conduct an attack from the northwest while the main attack would come from the southwest. B Company would maneuver into Razish from the south, clear the prison, and secure the rock pile. It would then lay down suppressive fire on Objective Aruaco from that location. Once B Company had seized the rock pile, A Company would maneuver to secure Objective Aruaco. Once A Company had secured this objective, C Company would conduct a battle handover and maneuver to clear Objective Aruaco II.

While 4-23 IN cleared the southern half of Razish, 2-1 IN

Figure 3



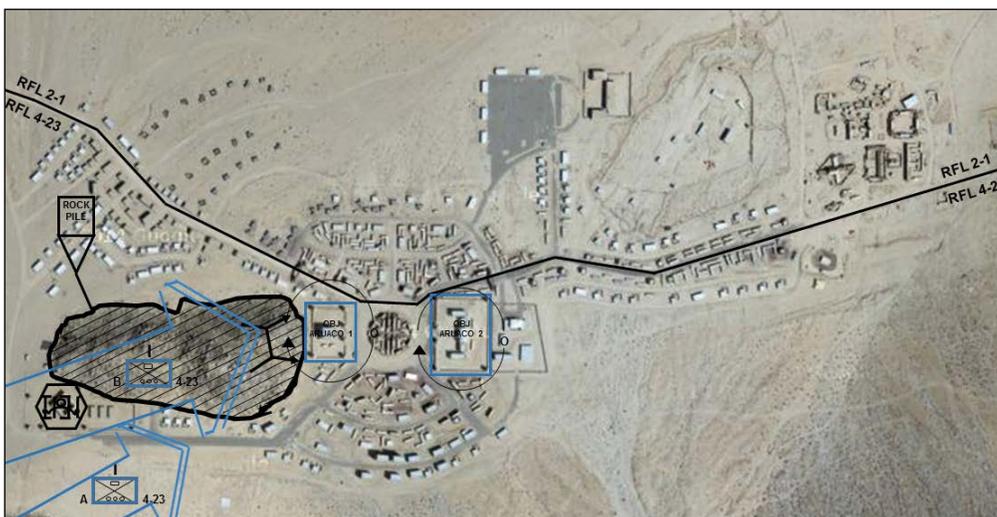


Figure 4

cleared the northern half of the objective. The BCT created a restricted firing line (RFL) dividing Razish into northern and southern halves, allowing both battalions to operate simultaneously throughout the objective.

Execution — 2-1 IN initiated its attack with the majority of the OPFOR in Razish oriented to the northwest when the operation began. B Company maneuvered towards Razish and, using dismounted infantry, cleared through the prison and established a support-by-fire position on the rock pile. B Company identified a BRDM from the rock pile and monitored its movement throughout the mission. A Company then maneuvered to Razish and dismounted its Strykers adjacent to the prison. It was immediately fixed by enemy fire while maneuvering towards Objective Aruaco. Advancing one Stryker up the main avenue of approach, A Company suppressed the enemy and allowed freedom of maneuver for the company. During the fight, the B Company fire support officer employed a Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GLMRS) round on the central building in Objective Aruaco, enabling A Company to occupy the complex with minimal casualties. A Company then began suppressing the remainder of Razish, firing below the RFL on the core of city. A Company and C Company commanders conducted a battle handover and began clearing towards Objective Aruaco II. Once C Company had begun maneuvering towards Objective Aruaco II, the NTC OC/Ts initiated SOBE as all enemy fighters were killed or captured.

Enemy indirect fires were effective at destroying some Strykers after the infantry had dismounted. The battalion also lost several Strykers to an anti-aircraft gun mounted on a technical vehicle but overall suffered minimal losses of Strykers. During this operation, Strykers were critical in providing protection and firepower as squads maneuvered through buildings to clear the enemy AT threats ahead.

Lessons Learned

One of the key tactical lessons from both of these phases at NTC was a focus on setting the conditions to allow for

the proper implementation of Strykers. In both of these fights, Strykers were not maneuvered out of cover and concealment until dismounts or enablers had minimized the risk from an AT threat. Examples of this include C Company securing a foothold in Ujen and B Company providing suppressive fire on Razish from the rock pile. In both Ujen and Razish operations, A Company rapidly approached the objective while mounted and engaged the enemy because conditions were set to mitigate the AT threat. This also required time-distance

analysis during planning and tactical patience on the part of commanders during execution (for example, allowing C Company six hours to approach Ujen undetected). This is a drastic change in tempo from what is typically expected in a mounted unit, but it was necessary to allow for the task force to leverage infantry on the objective. By focusing on setting conditions, it allowed the battalion to execute using organic elements and external enablers with an end result of mission accomplishment with minimal casualties.

Another major takeaway involved the unit's focus on the enemy AT capability. Because of the nature of Stryker units, a successful AT attack on a Stryker can make a platoon-sized element combat ineffective; it is up to commanders to understand enemy capabilities and work to mitigate tactical risk. The task force created conditions that allowed it to exploit the inherent advantages of the Stryker, primarily speed and mobility in approaching objectives. By commanders focusing at all levels on understanding and mitigating the enemy's capabilities, successful units are able to exploit the initiative.

The battalion was successful not because of unconventional tactics but because it understood the Stryker and its capabilities and limitations. The Tomahawks did not fight as a heavy armored unit, and they did not function as a light unit; they operated as a Stryker unit. At all levels, the command team understood the strengths and weaknesses of the Stryker platform and tailored training and tactics to capitalize on those capabilities. Therefore, the successes of the battalion can be credited not only to the tactical abilities of its Soldiers but also to the in-depth knowledge leaders had of their own formation.

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