



Photo by PFC Erick Warren

Soldiers with Ironhawk Troop, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, raid a tunnel during training at Fort Hood's underground training facility.

TROOP TAKES TRAINING UNDERGROUND

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As the U.S. Army begins its slow withdrawal from our current operations, the training focus in garrison has shifted to a decisive action mind-set, and with that mind-set comes new problem sets and new environments that need to be considered in training. One environment that conventional Army units should look at is subterranean complexes ranging from underground nuclear storage facilities, to chemical weapons depots, to an old salt mine that is now the home of an enemy element.

In late July 2013, Ironhawk Troop, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, conducted subterranean operations at the underground training facility at Fort Hood, Texas, and realized how much remains unknown to conventional units about operating below ground at the company and platoon levels. In order to better prepare conventional units for operations in subterranean or complex environments, Ironhawk Soldiers would like to pass on some lessons learned from this training event.

A body of interest was created in the months prior to this event, which allowed for a presence of interested parties outside of those in the typical observer role. Representatives from the Asymmetric Warfare Group and assisting agencies came to view the problem set that would befall a conventional unit fighting in this type of environment. Their input proved valuable both during operations and when conducting the after action review (AAR). In addition, the Fort Hood Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED) Integration Cell also provided Ironhawk with training aids inside the tunnels. This provided excellent training for Soldiers who had merely heard stories and never had to

deal with live IEDs in a real world, combat situation.

Ironhawk Troop received a squadron-level operation order (OPORD) that allowed for the notional security of the area up to the breach site of the complex, negating the need for outer security and allowing the two platoons to focus on actions inside the tunnel complex. Intelligence suggested a possible enemy force of no larger than a section armed with assorted small arms and explosives not to exceed the size of a claymore. Designated as the decisive operation, Ironhawk Troop was pushed engineer assets that included robots of varying sizes and capabilities and four breach teams of combat engineers for the initial entry and door breaching inside the tunnel complex.

Tensions ran high at the onset of the operation as all eyes settled on the platoons when they were given the word to breach the entrance to the complex and commence their assault. As the platoons began to flow into the tunnel system, confusion mounted as grenade simulators began to detonate and rifles started cracking. Radios are a pipe dream in a concrete tunnel, and the only means of command and control are either face to face or via runner. Spatial disorientation can set in due to lack of landmarks and the unfamiliar structure. These are only a few of the issues the platoons faced as they assaulted the underground training facility.

Perhaps the single biggest obstacle any platoon leader will have upon entrance into a subterranean environment is to control his platoon effectively and to not outrun his ability to fight in an extremely unforgiving battlespace. Traditionally, platoon leaders are taught violence of action is best, and this is stressed to the utmost, but the well worn adage of "slow is

smooth and smooth is fast” applies to movement of squads below the surface of the earth. Moving slowly and deliberately through a tunnel system is going to be tough on NCOs and Soldiers alike, but the platoon leader must have concrete situational awareness of the known factors (i.e. location of himself and all subordinates, location of friendly units inside the tunnels, enemy situation, friendly casualties) before he pushes the platoon forward into the unknown. Of all the things that cannot be controlled in a tunnel, the tempo of the fight is completely on the platoon leader and must be controlled with an iron fist. Speed in tunnels will get Soldiers killed.

Tunnel complexes are close quarters battle (CQB) engagements on steroids. During basic CQB and room-clearing exercises, Soldiers are taught of the “fatal funnel” and its inherent dangers. A tunnel or hallway can be 10 meters long or 100 meters long and can be defended by one enemy fighter with a single rifle and plenty of ammunition. Using weapons organic to the platoon, this risk can be mitigated. Movement techniques have to be retrained also. Ironhawk had the luxury of a walk-through to refine how movement down a long hallway should be conducted.

Assaulting a tunnel complex with a well-controlled tempo allows for greater situational awareness not only for the platoon leader on the ground, but to his fellow platoon leaders and also to the commander. As units move deliberately through the complex, tracking the path traveled is imperative. Since the radio-telephone operator (RTO) will be used mainly as a runner, he can also draw a map as the platoon moves through the complex by relying on a compass and pace count to accurately map and create the picture of where the platoon has been. Platoon leaders can then compare their RTO’s notes upon link up and create a common operating picture on the fly. These maps can also help the company commander make decisions on the ground faster as he will usually not have the situational awareness of the platoon leader who has been up front with one of his squads.

Spatial disorientation inside the tunnel can be a problem,

but there are ways to mitigate this. Within each squad, we have a dedicated individual carry a piece or two of large children’s chalk to mark directions inside of the tunnel. As the squad moves through the tunnel system, the individual marks only the left-hand walls at certain intervals. When the decision is made to exfiltrate the complex, Soldiers use the nautical system of “red right returning” and ensure the markers are on their right-hand side so they can find their way out of the tunnel.

The marking of rooms, casualties, danger areas, and enemy killed in action (KIAs) also has to be a well thought out and refined standard operating procedure (SOP) understood by all Soldiers entering the tunnel system. Each Soldier has to know, understand, and carry the necessary chem lights to mark any situation they encounter. If a marking was tossed inside the room and could not be seen, fire teams would have to re-clear the room, wasting energy. Marking danger areas, friendly casualties, and enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) are also important. Units may have their own SOPs for ways to mark rooms and casualties, but the key is to ensure that the lowest member in the operation understands and is able to execute the marking procedures by heart.

Control and effective utilization of all assets available to the platoon leader is also critical to mission success in a subterranean operation. The tempo dictated by the platoon leader will also determine what kind of assets he is able to utilize in the tunnel. During Ironhawk’s exercise, the 43rd Engineer Company brought two Talon robots and multiple packable robots that could be carried by Infantrymen. The Talon is a great asset to use, but often both platoons were outrunning the speed of the Talon and neglecting the effort required on the part of the operator to carry all of his gear and the control case for the Talon. The speed of the platoon maneuvering was not altogether fast, but progress had to be halted for the Talon to catch up and clear a few IEDs. The smaller robots can easily zip into a room and identify enemy combatants or IEDs. While the robot is in the room, a squad or team must be standing ready to clear the room if enemy is found dodging the robots.



Photo by SFC Paul Yoder

Soldiers with Ironhawk Troop, 3rd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment stack against a wall during a subterranean training exercise at Fort Hood.

Most of the ideas discussed during Ironhawk’s time at Fort Hood’s underground training facility are not new above ground, but in the microcosm of a subterranean environment any small errors in execution or communication can have larger consequences. As the Army pushes toward a decisive action training mindset, this should include at least a base familiarity in underground operations in order to better prepare our Soldiers for future conflicts. Leaders should look toward the future and start identifying gaps in our current training cycles and attempt to get in front of the game and train on tough, realistic problem sets that are certain to be seen by our Soldiers in the future.

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