
NTC 14-03 LESSONS LEARNED:

STRYKER SMALL UNIT TRAINING TO DEFEAT A CONVENTIONAL MECHANIZED FORCE

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Sitting under the constant heat of the California sun, out of water and food, two out of my four Strykers destroyed, seven Soldiers dead, and surrounded by four battalions of an enemy mechanized unit, I sat in a wadi unable to move my platoon due to the threat of an enemy T80 or BMP tank near our defensive battle positions. I sensed and saw defeat in my Soldiers' faces, many struggling with the heat's effects in our mission-oriented protective posture (MOPP) suits. Motivated by the wavering morale of my Soldiers and frustrated by our entrapment, I began to brainstorm what my platoon could do to fight off the mechanized enemy. However, the reality we faced was that we could not defeat our mechanized enemy. Despite this harsh realization, I learned a few valuable lessons that could benefit other Stryker platoon-level leaders. Lessons that I hope other Stryker platoons can reflect and grow upon in order to make our small units effective against a conventional and smart enemy. From my experience, I believe the following lessons learned will increase our small unit effectiveness.

LESSON ONE: Stryker platoons must place light infantry fundamentals as the number one training priority and not overly depend on a Stryker's assets.

A Stryker platoon must not get into a mindset that the Stryker will protect it and win its battles. Platoon leadership must emphasize and perfect their knowledge and execution of basic light infantry tactics to be ready to move dismounted in the event that Strykers are incapacitated during the fight.

As my platoon's time during the "force-on-force" phase (the eight-day brigade exercise) of National Training Center (NTC) rotation 14-03 progressed, my platoon lost focus of important light infantry fundamentals. Prior to our unfortunate posture in the wadi, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment, had set up a defensive posture on a hilltop. We mounted in our Strykers and moved out of our battalion tactical assembly area at 0300. We dismounted approximately five kilometers from our planned defense position due to the rules of engagement (ROE) restriction of



Soldiers with the 3-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team from Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., continue their training at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., during Decisive Action Training Rotation 14-03, on 22 January 2014.

Photo by SFC Alan B. Owens



U.S. Army photo

A Soldier with the 3-2 SBCT provides security during Decisive Action Training Rotation 14-03 at Fort Irwin.

any vehicles moving past the international border of Atropia (our ally) and Donovia (our enemy). During our dismounted march to our defensive position, I began to notice the degradation of our infantry fundamentals. With close to zero illumination, my Soldiers began to lose proper intervals and spacing during our march. When conducting map checks with my squad leaders, they had no idea of our position unless they used a global positioning system device. My platoon, and truthfully the rest of the company, struggled to communicate our frontline traces dismounted because we didn't have complete PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) signal plans. These problems exposed our reliance on our Strykers — specifically our reliance on an advanced communication system which automatically identifies frontline traces and served as a communications platform between my platoon, company, and battalion. The Stryker's technological capabilities, light armor, and its ability to move quickly gave my platoon a strong attachment to it. This attachment proved to be detrimental to our operations.

While our Strykers should have been operational enablers, they became our weakness and a primary source of our problems. Our unit became too reliant on the Stryker as our means of transportation and security. As Infantrymen, we know that this concept is fundamentally wrong and potentially dangerous.

In a report written on GEN Walton Walker's Korean command during the first few months of the Korean War, GEN Matthew Ridgway expressed a similar concern on our Army's dependence on vehicles: "Just about everything in his [Ridgway's] report was negative. The troops all too often lacked infantry fundamentals and were not aggressive. They had become prisoners of their machinery, most particularly their vehicles, and thus of Korea's poor and limited system of roads.

They did not counterattack; they did not dig in properly, attempts at camouflage were careless, fields of fire poorly drawn up, communications between units weak..."¹¹

The North Koreans had superior tanks and numbers, but it didn't help that our Soldiers depended too greatly on vehicles which definitely had a negative impact on their infantry fundamentals. These factors directly contributed to North Korea's initial success in penetrating our lines and our embarrassing retreat toward Pusan in the first year of the Korean War.

Small units must ensure they properly train on

and employ light infantry tactics in order to decrease our overreliance on our vehicle platform. Competence in these tactics will allow us to use our Strykers as an enabler on the battlefield without overreliance. However, in order to properly use our Strykers as enablers, we must address small-unit logistical problems.

LESSON TWO: Functional and complete rucksack and assault pack packing lists must be used to combat logistical problems in Stryker platoons.

Logistics is a recurring challenge within a Stryker unit — whether it's getting batteries for the Javelin's CLU (Command Launch Unit), ammunition, fuel, or water.

In order to understand the importance of Stryker logistical support, we need to first understand the purpose and mission of a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) as explained in Field Manual 3-21.21, *The Stryker Brigade Combat Team Infantry Battalion*.

"The Stryker brigade combat team (SBCT) infantry battalion's primary mission is to close with and destroy the enemy during full-spectrum operations through close, violent combat. The SBCT infantry battalion is capable of accomplishing all missions historically identified with the Infantry and is organized and equipped to conduct operations in restricted terrain, severely restricted terrain, and urban terrain. The battalion, as part of the SBCT, deploys rapidly, executes early entry operations, and conducts effective combat operations immediately upon arrival to assist in the prevention, containment, stabilization, or resolution of a conflict."²²

If Stryker units are employed as an early entry combat force, logistics will be a challenge for every Stryker platoon

leader. Even in training at Fort Irwin, higher echelon units had a difficult time providing the most basic support to keep our Strykers moving. While defending the Atropian border, Legion Company spent six hours on the hill disrupting the movement of four mechanized infantry battalions, destroying three T80s and 11 BMPs in the process. An impressive feat, yet the enemy's overwhelming numbers and capabilities forced us to move into the military crest of the hill. The compounded effects of marching five kilometers wearing MOPP Level 2 and constantly moving and deploying Javelin rounds and CLUs

to good fighting positions during our six-hour stand depleted our company's supply of Javelin rounds as well as food and water. In order to conduct casualty evacuation and a basic resupply of ammunition, water, and food, we recalled our Strykers to our position. Unfortunately, a T80 in good defilade destroyed half of the company's Strykers while enroute. The enemy's destruction of our resupply efforts effectively neutralized Legion Company as an effective fighting force.

This humbling experience reinforced the importance of having fundamentally sound packing lists. As small unit leaders, we must make sure that we request and pack extra ammunition, extra batteries, two-quart canteens, and Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs). This way, if we are isolated from Strykers and logistical support, we can sustain ourselves and continue operations. We cannot afford to be fixated on the expected resupply dictated in conventional war doctrine. We must plan for and be able to self-sustain for longer.

LESSON THREE: In order to use our Strykers as enablers, we must consider taking tactical risks with our vehicles as long as we can define and control these risks.

In order to do this, we must first keep in mind that Strykers are our enablers and we must use them as such. The M2 and MK19 weapon systems, though not very effective against a mechanized threat, must be used to augment security for our Javelins and machine-gun systems. While the concept of using our Stryker's weapon system may seem too obvious for discussion, several times during the rotation I found myself dismounting a few kilometers from our objective never to see the Strykers again for a day. We do need to take some tactical risks and use a Stryker's capabilities to aid us rather than dismounting and leaving them out of the fight.

For example, during our defense of Atropia, we dismounted five kilometers away from our battle positions to hide our Strykers from BMP, T80, and Kornet (anti-tank guided missile) threats. When my platoon ended up with



Photo courtesy of author

Soldiers with 1st Platoon, Legion Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment, conduct pre-combat checks at the rotational unit bivouac area at Fort Irwin.

seven casualties after our stand, we needed a way to exfil out of our defensive positions quickly in order to medically evacuate our casualties. If our Strykers were nearby, they could have fulfilled this need and furthermore aided in the movement of my platoon to support adjacent units such as Charlie Company, which was fortifying our battalion's defensive positions. However, the T80 destroyed two of my four Strykers and halted the movement of the rest. Keeping our Strykers near the company's defensive positions would have made them an easy target and may have compromised our defense position. But, if we had used defilade to hide our Strykers and had moved more quickly off the objective (rather than sitting stagnant in our positions for a lengthy six hours), we may have been able to evacuate our casualties and consolidate my remaining Soldiers at other battalion defense positions.

Furthermore, a few days later as the brigade's decisive operation, I took a tactical risk in assaulting a well-secured, suspected CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) compound while mounted in Strykers. Instead of a lengthy dismounted assault of the CBRN compound, I decided to use the Stryker's speed and adjacent unit capabilities to mitigate my tactical risk. Meanwhile our adjacent unit, the Japanese Global Self Defense Force, used tanks to help us destroy the enemy mechanized defensive positions in the chemical compound. Using speed to our advantage, we approached the objective in a diamond formation and quickly dismounted within a short distance of the chemical compound. My platoon successfully cleared two CBRN buildings in MOPP Level 4 and secured the objective without casualties. In this situation, using my Strykers enabled my platoon to effectively and efficiently assault the chemical compound. Most importantly, speed allowed us to maintain the brigade's violence of action as well as my platoon's smooth tempo in clearing through the chemical compound.

Had we not enabled our Strykers, violence of action definitely would have been lost, and my Soldiers would not have been able to quickly prepare for an enemy counterattack.

Enabling our Strykers saved the stamina of my platoon, setting the conditions for us to conduct a thorough clearance and tactical site exploitation of our objective.

Conclusion

In hindsight, I am greatly thankful for the experiences and the lessons that NTC 14-03 taught my platoon. Even after eating mouthfuls of sand and experiencing excruciating moments with our WAG (waste alleviation and gelling) bags, I still thoroughly enjoyed the experience that NTC afforded us. It is truly beneficial for small unit leaders like myself to experience force-on-force training because we have only been exposed to unconventional warfare and counterinsurgency operations in our careers thus far.

Although it is commonly thought that conventional war is not possible in today's world, I think this is a dangerous misconception to have. In the 21 December 2013 issue of *The Economist* magazine, the editor warns world leaders about the disparaging parallels between the pre-World War I era to that of today. He shrewdly points out that the American public was certain that war was impossible due to strong economic connections, globalization, and new technology between both powerful and rising nations.³ In contrast to these popular notions, World Wars I and II raged throughout the early 20th century. As military leaders we will not make the decision to go to war, but it is important that as military leaders we prepare our units to the best of our ability for a conventional war. History suggests that it is essential for small unit leaders to understand how to fight a conventional war. We must better prepare and train our Soldiers, weapons, and equipment, specifically our Strykers, so that we are ready for the next fight. I hope that the three

lessons I learned as a Stryker platoon leader aid other Stryker platoons to be more effective and lethal in fighting a mechanized conventional force.

In conclusion, in order to be more effective against a conventional enemy, small-unit leaders should: focus on light infantry fundamentals, make sound ruck and assault packing lists to fight against logistical headaches, and finally take decided tactical risks that enable Strykers to work for us and to our advantage. I truly believe implementing these lessons learned into training will help ensure the success of our small units on the possible conventional battlefields in our future.

Notes

¹ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: American and the Korean War* (NY: Hyperion, 2008).

² Field Manual 3-21.21, *The Stryker Brigade Combat Team Infantry Battalion* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2003): 1-1.

³ "Look Back with Angst," *The Economist*, 21 December 2013: 17.

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A Soldier from 3-2 SBCT prepares to fire a Javelin during Decisive Action Training Rotation 14-03 at NTC on 28 January 2014.

Photo by SGT Paul Sale

