

# RAZOR 2014:

## SHARPENING THE BLADE THROUGH MISSION COMMAND

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In February 2014, the Italian Army's 4th Alpini Airborne Infantry Regiment (Ranger) headed to the Monteromano Training Area in Italy to conduct a battalion-level field training exercise (FTX) called Razor 2014. The exercise lasted two weeks and tested the Ranger unit's capabilities in fighting regular and irregular threats while integrating joint and multinational enablers. The main training objectives were:

- \* Completing the pre-deployment training of a task unit ready to move to Afghanistan;
- \* Verifying the capabilities of soldiers attending the Ranger qualification course;
- \* Increasing the readiness level of the regimental recon platoon; and
- \* Improving the battalion's capability to integrate joint and multinational enablers while conducting complex full-spectrum operations.

The Ranger battalion was joined by elements from the 2nd Alpini Combat Engineers Regiment, the 1st Army Aviation Regiment "Antares," the 33rd Electronic Warfare (EW) Regiment, the Italian Air Force (ITAF) RESTOGE (Reparto Supporto Tecnico Operativo alla Guerra Elettronica) EW unit, the 6th ITAF Squadron, the 32nd ITAF Squadron, the U.S. Air Force (Air Support Operations Squadron [ASOS] joint terminal attack controllers [JTACs]). All but the EW units were in a supporting role. The EW units assumed the opposing force (OPFOR) role, jamming the communications of the friendly forces during the main events.

The culminating events consisted of the simultaneous infiltration of all task units (heliborne, airborne, or by land on Lince wheeled vehicles and BV-206S armored tracked vehicles) in a target area where hostile forces were reported. All units had 24 hours after infiltration to find, fix, and strike their assigned objectives. The mission was to search and destroy the adversary infrastructure (command posts, weapons storage facilities, enemy compounds, and bunkers) in

order to clear the target area from hostile presence in a non-permissive environment (see map on page 51).

During the last years the training of Ranger units focused heavily on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, so it was decided to shift the attention more on skills related to combat operations. In particular, training was concentrated on combined-arms distributed maneuver and mission command at squad level. Mortars, attack helicopters, and bombers were available during the main events to test the capability to synchronize maneuver with joint fire support. Italian combat engineers and U.S. Army JTACs were attached to the task units and fully integrated as team members of the Ranger squads with limited time for amalgamation of personnel and rehearsals, but that did not hinder the efficacy of operations.

Upon execution, the events highlighted the importance of building up confidence in the junior leaders, and the only way to do it was to get their boots muddy. The abundant rain in the training area not only helped get soldiers' boots very muddy, but it also added other challenges for the soldiers to deal with such as recovering stuck vehicles. Decisions had to be made, unexpected delays had to be managed, and junior leaders had to make the call without support from their higher headquarters. Communications were jammed in critical moments, and squad leaders had to give orders in time-sensitive situations based on



Photo courtesy of Italian Army  
Soldiers from the 4th Alpini Airborne Infantry Regiment (Ranger) prepare to jump from a Chinook helicopter.

their commander's intent only. It was challenging, and mistakes were tolerated so that the junior leaders could learn from their own errors.

As they maneuvered separately, the task units were autonomous and had to find, fix, and strike their assigned objectives on their own with scarce intelligence support. In order to overcome difficulties, they had to rely on the intuition, experience, and flexibility of their leaders. They faced challenging situations such as reorganizing with little notice for a hasty air

assault when an airborne infiltration was cancelled due to bad weather, executing tasks without radio communications (because of jamming), or adjusting their movement-to-contact plans after leaving behind wheeled vehicles which were stuck in the mud.

These were just a few examples of the many issues squad leaders had to face, but they highlight the impact of agile junior leaders on the battlefield. Lessons identified during the after action review confirmed the three critical skills required for effective junior leaders:

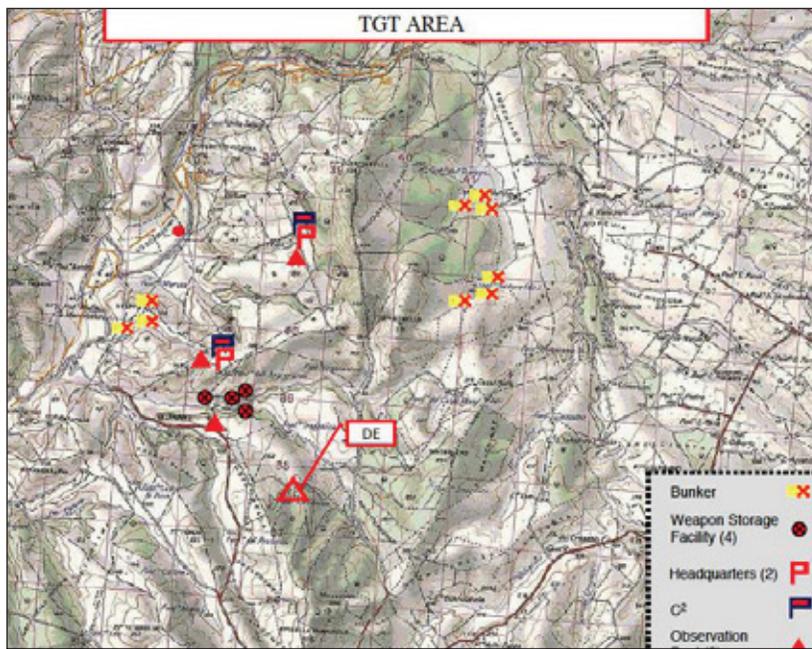
a. **Rapid decision-making process** — Often, distributed maneuver and wide area of operations in a complex operational environment do not allow much time for planning. A smart glance at maps, well-established standard operating procedures (SOPs), and consolidated troop leading procedures may make the difference.

b. **Lead by example** — Soldiers follow the men more than the orders.

c. **Endure battlefield stress.** Tired or exhausted leaders are prone to bad decisions or late reactions to unexpected events.

### Destruction of Enemy Command Post

Success is often decided on the battlefield by the decisions of junior leaders in the last 200 meters between friendly forces and enemy positions. If they master their craft through drills and repetition of basic tasks combining effective doctrine knowledge, creativity, and versatility, then the battalion maneuver may be fluid and flexible. Especially in the contemporary operational environment characterized by hybrid threats, strict rules of engagement, and the presence of many actors (government organizations, non-governmental organizations, private military, and security companies) which may significantly influence the events in the area of operations.



Ranger Target Area in the Monteromano (Italy) Combat Training Center

Otherwise, if they are only bound to the stringent instructions of their superior officers and their actions are always based on detailed orders, then the battalion maneuver will be slow, inert, and rigid.

Therefore, it is vital to push junior leaders to their limits and train them in the worst case scenarios (for example, meeting engagements with limited intelligence, jammed communications, and against superior enemy forces). Training should always be challenging

and put them in positions where they need to decide among many options in a short time frame without higher echelon support. That is the way to learn how to adapt to unexpected situations on present and future battlefields.

“Less conversation and more action” was the general training guideline given by the battalion commander throughout the exercise. The indication was to make the most with the available time in the spirit of the regiment's motto “Mai Strack” (never tired), so many events were scheduled without significant pauses and rest time. That also gave the commander the chance to evaluate his junior leaders under substantial stress in estimating the tactical situation, choosing solutions, and issuing orders as well as to assess their reactions to unanticipated conditions.

The Razor exercise was an excellent chance to generally test the battalion's capabilities and particularly to measure the qualities, temperament, and character of all participants. Naturally, it is not possible to draw too many conclusions after a single performance, but it is surely possible to emphasize the value of mission command-focused training. It clearly develops the leader's confidence, reasoning, and grasp of tactics. Maybe that is not enough to win next war, but it may be enough to gain the initiative on the next battlefield.

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