

HEAVY WEAPONS GUNNERY

IN AN AIRBORNE/AIR ASSAULT WEAPONS COMPANY

CPT JOHN M. HERGER

Nearly 14 years of moving troops and equipment into and out of combat has bred a unique mentality into the U.S. Army. The increased budget, expedited promotion rate, and growth of the force structure have enabled the branch to sustain combat on two major fronts while continuing to support numerous contingency activities across the globe. This mentality, reinforced by the brigade combat team (BCT) structure, has created commonalities across all units and echelons in the Army. Tankers found themselves tightening their rucksacks for dismounted patrols through the mountains while light Infantrymen rode for miles and engaged the enemy from heavy armored vehicles. The Army has demonstrated a true proficiency in adaptability, tailoring skill sets and organizations for the fights in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the spirit of that adaptability, units must now look beyond skills developed during the global war on terrorism to identify where the training and organization focus must shift for the future.

Projected in the upcoming years are slimmer budgets and fewer deployments, and as a result coveted training “white

space” is expanding. Units that were once locked into a sequential pattern that culminated in a deployment are finding the time and resources to hone skills that made the culture and capabilities of each of the Army’s divisions unique. With this shift there comes a necessity to adapt at all echelons. Leaders must identify how their units can best support the Army’s needs while expanding capabilities in those skills unique to their piece of the pie.

Developing those capabilities and skills is a unique challenge in a heavy weapons Infantry company. Delta company formations are often composed of Soldiers with a wide range of operational experience. Mechanized Infantrymen, light Infantrymen, Cavalry scouts, paratroopers, pathfinders, and Soldiers from any other variety of operational specialties find themselves adapting their individual skills to best utilize the vehicles, equipment, and task organization of the heavy weapons company. At the individual level, adaptation comes with its growing pains, but these are usually short-

An Infantryman assigned to Dragon Company, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) reloads his M2 .50 caliber machine gun.

Photos courtesy of the author



lived. Collectively, however, the entire culture of a weapons company must fall in line to support the unique characteristics and missions of the organization. A heavy weapons company typically fields more property, fewer Soldiers, and one more platoon than a rifle company. Among that property there are heavy weapons, advanced optics, missile launchers, and armored vehicles — all requiring specific training for proper operation and maintenance. This results in a variety of considerations when planning, resourcing, and executing mounted training events.

The Cavalry uses the phrase “horse, saddle, rider” to prioritize the needs of the unit. The horse is how you get around, the saddle stabilizes your essential gear, and the rider makes it function. This adage applies well to a heavy weapons company. The company’s proficiency in its mission essential task list (METL) relies heavily on its vehicles, key systems mounted on those vehicles, and the operators of those vehicles. The development and assessment of these capabilities are compiled in the gunnery progression.

In the contemporary operating environment, gunnery means different things to different units. The past decade’s deployment cycle has forced heavy units to adjust training cycles, tables of organization and equipment, and priorities to better fit the theater and mission they were assigned to support. In some units, gunnery stayed true to the published mounted tables. Other units created tables evaluating strictly dismounted tasks. Still, other units found a middle ground, evaluating both mounted and dismounted tasks. Each technique serves the characteristics and culture of the unit in its own way and none are wrong, according to the first step of the 10-step training model and TC 3-20.31, *Training and Qualification, Crew*. Both sources state that a unit’s METL must first be identified and evaluated in order to drive the creation of evaluation criteria for certifying events.

Gunnery is a highly structured progression of training that begins with the assessment of basic individual skills and culminates with platoon collective training. Until recently, 12 gunnery tables outlined the tasks required for a platoon to certify on mounted platforms. Now, gunnery focuses on the six tables in which crews certify on their mounted platforms, and section and platoon gunnery certification are executed as collective training (designed at the company and battalion levels).

Crew qualification outlined in TC 3-20.31 progresses over six tables.

Prerequisite tables cover the first three tables:

* Training Table I, Gunnery Skills Test: Each crew member must successfully complete no more than six weeks prior to the qualifying event.

* Training Table II, Simulations: Each crew must successfully complete the required commands and procedures no more than six weeks prior to the qualifying event.

* Training Table III, Proficiency: Each crew must successfully utilize training aids, devices, simulators, and simulations

(TADSS) to demonstrate the minimum proficiency to safely train with live rounds; this should be done no more than six weeks prior to the qualifying event.

Live tables covers tables IV through VI:

* Table IV, Basic: Each crew trains on basic skills of the platform within the previous qualification period (six months). Table IV can be executed with the appropriate TADSS if training ammunition is not available. This is important as it allows some flexibility in the resource requirements for completing gunnery.

* Table V, Practice: This table can be executed on the actual range where qualification will be completed; however, the targets need to be changed to execute table VI.

* Table VI, Qualification: Table VI is also classified as the gate to live fire (GTLF). Qualifying individual crews in Table VI enables those crews to safely participate in the higher echelon live-fire exercises at the section and platoon levels. The manual is clear about the importance of qualifying individual crews before progressing on to higher-level training. Battalion-level emphasis is required to support Table VI, which is the battalion master gunner’s responsibility. The master gunner (MG) should be heavily involved throughout the entire, continual process. Coordination for outside resources, validating targets, organizing vehicle crew evaluators, and scoring and maintaining records are just a few of the key tasks that can overburden an executing company during gunnery. Additionally, an Infantry battalion is not organized to commit the required staffing to both the rifle company training progression and a robust gunnery training progression. The MG not only relieves some of that pressure by assuming those responsibilities but also enables battalion oversight of the event and the crews’ performance. The MG maintains a succinct and accurate snapshot of the heavy weapons company’s capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses while minimizing oversight of the lead-up training and archived records that are accessible (and inspectable) within the S3 shop. Essential conditions for crews to qualify are utilizing a fully operational platform and weapon, allotted ammunition, a certified vehicle crew evaluator, and full-scale targets. Given those conditions a crew must score a minimum of 700 out of 1,000 points overall (score 70 points or more on all targets on at least 7 out of 10 engagements, and at least one of those engagements must be shot at night). The target specifications can be found in the TC, but Table VI mandates a variety of stationary and moving vehicular and dismounted targets.

The gate requirement period simply allows for all crews to achieve the standard scores qualifying them in Table VI. Some crews will pass through each gate during their first iteration; some will require returning to specific engagements to earn the minimum score to pass; and other crews will require multiple executions of the entire Table VI or possibly returning to events from lower tables to ensure optics and lasers are accurately zeroed. Ultimately, all crews can achieve a rating of qualified; however, only crews that successfully complete Table VI without re-firing any engagements can



Soldiers with Dragon Company, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) prepare for a gunnery table.

achieve a “distinguished” rating (scoring more than 900 points) or a “superior” rating (scoring more than 800 points). At the end of the gate requirement period, every crew that will be participating in collective training must have achieved the standards for Table VI as outlined in TC 3-20.31. It is important to note that section and platoon collective training in the gunnery progression is not broken down into gunnery tables as it has been in the past. Commanders are charged with identifying key tasks based on the units’ METL and integrating them into the collective training events utilizing the standardized key collective tasks as a baseline on which performance can be evaluated. For example, TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wireless-guided) tables may be integrated into collective training if resourcing allows and the unit commander has identified a TOW shoot as an essential task. This task may take the place of what otherwise could have been a machine-gun engagement or call-for-fire mission. The battalion commander (BC) maintains the authority to prioritize the training focus for the gunnery progression following the GTLF. Authorized commanders can adjust the requirements outlined in Tables I-VI only “when live and tactical proficiency is adequately displayed.” Aside from that, for crews to be qualified they must complete all key tasks in Tables I-VI identified in TC 3-20.31, according to the published standard.

The reporting period encompasses the nine months between completing a gunnery progression and the next opportunity to qualify crews. During this time units are rated “Trained” or “T” by maintaining and sustaining 85 percent qualification on all assigned main gun/ATGM (anti-tank guided weapon) crews (regardless of vehicle type) and 85 percent

of all mounted machine-gun crews (regardless of type) as defined in the standard. At a minimum, crews must qualify every nine months; however, battalion commanders are authorized to adjust the criteria by which a crew remains qualified. An example of this is a truck crew remaining qualified in crew gunnery after truck commanders (TCs) are exchanged within the formation. The BC can make the determination that since those TCs were previously qualified with a crew, they maintain that qualification as part of a new crew. This can be employed as an overarching policy or on a case-by-case basis. Whatever the determination is, that unit is only considered “Trained” when at least 85 percent of the crews are qualified according to the gunnery standard.

The way to get the delta company back to mechanical zero in mounted tasks is outlined in TC 3-20.31, and

there are a few key ways to facilitate the process. Prioritizing tasks within the company while limiting specified tasks is absolutely essential for a successful gunnery progression. With a clear priority of tasks, platoon leaders have the flexibility that allows them to employ initiative and aggression in the execution of gunnery tasks. This flexibility also enables leaders to focus on areas requiring special emphasis within their platoons, for example one platoon might require additional training on the gunnery skills test events, while another platoon is having problems refining their crew commands. Gaining flexibility in the gunnery plan by prioritizing not dictating key tasks, enables subordinate leaders to tailor their training to correct specific shortfalls in their formations.

Prioritization of tasks allows for the efficient use of the next key facilitator, which is time. There are many gates that will enable a crew, section, and platoon to properly execute gunnery. Weapons qualifications, simulators (some tables can be executed on the Reconfigurable Vehicle Tactical Trainer and Engagement Skills Trainer), licensing, maintenance, commands and gunnery skills testing are a few of those gates. At the company level, supporting those gates by protecting platoons’ time is essential. Above the company level, those gates must be structured, specified, and resourced because of the greater numbers executing the same tasks.

Another key facilitator that has a major impact on the planning and execution of mounted gunnery is knowledge of available facilities. Committing a few days to studying the evaluation criteria and applying them in real-time to the facilities that will be used enables leaders and evaluators to finalize execution plans and develop contingencies when friction points arise. Those friction points can range

from targets malfunctioning to range operator no-shows to ammunition restrictions. Having a deep knowledge of what each facility is capable of allows leaders to compensate for unanticipated issues without sacrificing the standards of the tables. In short; the training objectives should dictate the priority intelligence requirements for your range reconnaissance.

Dragon Company, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (Rakkasans), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) recently executed gunnery progressions according to both FM 3-20.21 and TC 3-20.31. As this was the first time that the company executed the gunnery training progression to the .21 and .31 standard, there were many key takeaways from the events. The first is the timeline requirements for a planning a proper unstabilized platform gunnery. If uninterrupted, an 18-crew delta company can complete the gunnery events to standard in two months. Land, ammunition, and other resources should be projected a minimum of 13-21 weeks prior to the first event of the gunnery. When all factors that might affect the timeline are totaled, the entire process (deciding that the company will execute gunnery to the last platoon completing collective training) will take around six months. The battalion MG should be involved throughout the entire process, offering guidance and outlining standards so that the company can execute a train-up that will support the performance expected during gunnery. Gates need to be identified during the planning process and integrated into the timeline. Dragon Company spent the weeks leading up to the Gunnery Skills Tests developing Table I and II skills in the motor pool and on available mounted simulators. This allowed for crew commands and operating weapons to become second nature to the Soldiers, and resulted in all crews achieving great success with minimal difficulty in the first two gunnery tables. During the planning process, you will identify the resources that will be needed to achieve the training objectives for the gunnery progression. At Fort Campbell, Range 55 was built almost exclusively to support gunnery. There are moving and stationary mounted and dismounted targets, vehicle fighting positions, two lanes on which vehicles can simultaneously travel and engage

targets, thermal-blankets to mark targets for thermal optics and the TRACR system which enables an evaluator to time engagements, deduct points for violations, and observe rounds. Paired with a knowledgeable and professional staff, the range hosts a robust set of features that can support a gunnery, but there are limitations. The two lanes minimize the maneuvering unit to one section per iteration. A platoon could execute a live-fire iteration on this range, but the layout presents strict limitations on fields of fire and maneuverability, diminishing the value of the event. The ammunition policy at the range and within the unit also requires special considerations. Currently, 90 percent of the dunnage from fired ammunition is required for turn in at a maneuver range. To overcome these limitations, the company executed Gunnery Tables I-VI at Range 55 on Fort Campbell and conducted off-site training at St. Vith's range on Fort Knox, Ky., to complete MK19 crew gunnery and section and platoon collective training. The progression worked well, enabling Soldiers to focus on the basic gunnery skills at their home station and execute collective training on an unfamiliar and more dynamic range.

The unstabilized platform gunnery progression outlined in TC 3-20.31 establishes a single, unambiguous standard by which mounted units must develop and evaluate their proficiencies. This single standard is essential for ensuring that each crew is trained in properly engaging targets from a mounted platform. It also provides every echelon in a chain of command with an accurate and readily accessible snapshot of the capabilities of their mounted units, down to the crew level. By adhering to this standard, mounted units within the Army will improve their proficiency in mounted operations and also reinforce the culture of gunnery-based evaluations.

CPT John M. Herger currently serves as the team senior for 20 Team, Task Force 2, Operations Group, Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, La. He previously served as commander of Dragon Company, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, Ky. He earned a bachelor's degree in business administration from Fordham University's Gabelli School of Business in Bronx, N.Y.

