

THE LOST ART OF DISMOUNTED LAND NAVIGATION

MAJ JOHN P. VICKERY

Shoot, move, and communicate. This well-known tag captures the skills needed by every Soldier in its most simplistic form. It could be argued that if you perform these fundamental skills better than the enemy, you will win. There is no question that with the rapid advancement of technology, the tools our warriors now use to employ these skills have grown more complex, precise, and easier to operate. So that leaves the question: Are the “no-fail” basics originally used to complete these three fundamental tasks now obsolete?

Our nation’s most skilled Soldiers would declare that although our weapons should be outfitted with the most advanced optics and infrared (IR) lasers, it is equally important to maintain a rifle’s zero with iron sights. Furthermore, America’s most experienced combat leaders would argue that although having the most advanced communication devices is a combat multiplier, non-verbal communication such as hand and arm signals and recognition signals must be used in the event radios fail; which they can. So why is traditional

land navigation training no longer prioritized throughout our formations?

With the procurement of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) throughout the military, promoting the skills needed to navigate using a map and compass have degraded over the past decade, especially when considering the deluge of requirements of the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cycle. During my last tour of duty in Afghanistan, every task force headquarters could observe live operations with real-time pinpoint accuracy. Strykers in my rifle company were outfitted with Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) systems that displayed instant location updates. Platoon radio telephone operators (RTOs) carried a Defense Advanced GPS Receiver (DAGR), and nearly every leader, regardless of rank or position on the patrol, had a personally owned GPS on his wrist. Considering the availability, effectiveness, and reliability of the GPS, it is easy to see how units accept the risk of not training traditional land navigation in the limited time to prepare for upcoming missions abroad.



Photo by SPC Jacqueline Dowland

An Infantryman assigned to D Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, plots coordinates on a map during a land navigation exercise in Voru, Estonia, on 9 September 2015.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not against the use of the GPS. However, I am an advocate of training dismounted land navigation as it has proven time and time again to produce intangible results that technology cannot.

Although the evolvement of the GPS has unquestionably provided our Infantrymen a tremendous advantage on the modern battlefield, the individual confidence gained by navigating severely restricted terrain using a map and compass is immeasurable. Along with the newly gained confidence comes a better understanding of the terrain in which a Soldier is navigating. For example, Soldiers attain the ability to understand how the terrain could mask a squad's movement as they maneuver towards an objective, the proper employment of support-by-fire positions to maximize the effects of the systems, or simply to realize how the terrain looks when compared to the map. This heightened situational awareness doesn't naturally occur when using a GPS, and the possession of this capability is what could potentially determine success.

It is critical that our Infantrymen remain masters of dismounted land navigation. Not only is it a necessary skill required to get us to the objective, it is a confidence builder, physical conditioner, and mental workout. Because it is so highly perishable, it remains the unit's responsibility to keep its Soldiers proficient.

As stated in the Training Circular (TC) 3-25.26, *Map Reading and Land Navigation*, "The Soldier must continually make use of the skills he has acquired to remain proficient in them. The institution is responsible for instruction in the basic techniques of land navigation. The institution tests these skills each time a Soldier attends a leadership course. However, it is the unit's responsibility to develop a program to maintain proficiency in these skills between institution courses. The unit sustainment program provides training that builds on and reinforces the skills the soldier learned in the institution." That said, there must be a system of accountability at the unit level for maintaining land navigation proficiency. After all, there is an accountability

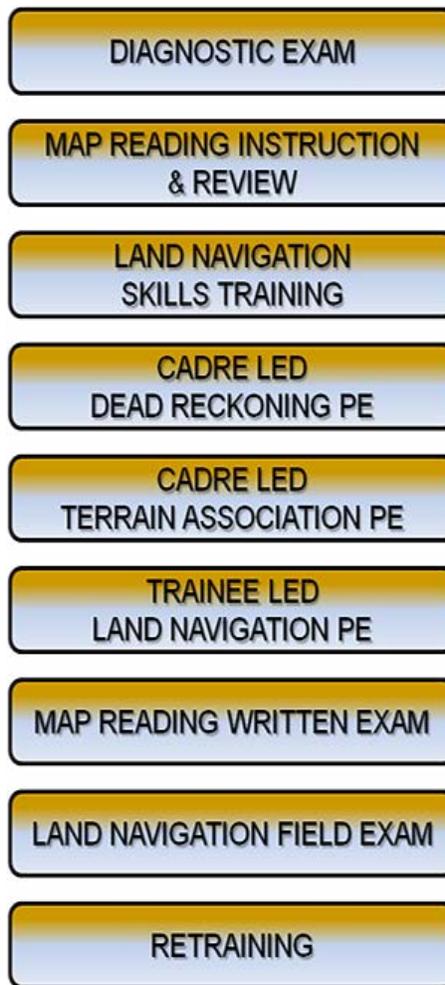


Figure — Example Land Navigation Training Outline

system in place for the Army physical fitness test (APFT), marksmanship, and even sexual harassment/assault response and prevention (SHARP) and equal opportunity (EO) training.

When considering how doctrine describes the training execution model, most units have it wrong. Almost every time I have conducted land navigation training, it usually started with formal classroom instruction on basic map reading skills. The trainees then confirmed their 100-meter pace count and a compass bearing, and finally culminated with a land navigation field test. During this test, trainees were given a list of approximately five 8-digit grids to locate in a predetermined training area. They would then return with all points found, none at all, or somewhere in between. This model of "trial and error" is simply ineffective. A cadre-led practical exercise (PE) should be implemented if the Army is

going to reinvigorate its land navigation proficiency.

In future training events, units should model their execution plan from TC 3-25.26 (see figure above). Before anything else, determine the organization's current level of proficiency with a diagnostic exam. Then conduct formal classes on map reading and land navigation skills such as dead reckoning, terrain association, catching features, linear backstops, and attack points to name a few. The next portion, and arguably most important, is the cadre-led PE in dead reckoning and terrain association. This consists of placing the trainees into small groups based on proficiency level (deduced from the diagnostic exam) and following a cadre member through a land navigation site to allow trainees to visually compare the map to the ground. During PEs, trainees would also be afforded the opportunity to lead the small group under the supervision of the cadre member. After several repetitions with the experienced leaders, trainees would take a written map reading exam and then test their individual skills in the field. Finally, like all training events, retraining would be conducted as necessary.

Now more than ever is the time to reinvigorate this lost art; the revolution starts with the leaders. It is not so much a question of how we train, but rather how we prioritize. Land navigation training remains easy to plan and resource, and it reinforces the fundamentals essential to every Infantryman, regardless of how long the training event lasts. The global situation tells us to be prepared for any terrain. Whether in the jungles of the Pacific rim, mountains of southern Asia, the Middle East or Africa, our ground forces must bring to the fight the ability to quickly adapt, remain more agile than the enemy, and demonstrate we have the competency to shoot, move, and communicate better than anyone else in the world. Follow me!

MAJ John Vickery is a graduate of North Georgia College and State University. He has served in Iraq as a scout platoon leader with the 101st Airborne Division and as a company commander in Afghanistan with the 2nd Infantry Division. He most recently served as the commander of Alpha Company, 4th Ranger Training Battalion, Fort Benning, Ga.
