



Organizing an Infantry Company for a SbT CWMD Environment... A Way

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The Korean Theater of Operations (KTO) is a wildly complex operating environment. Organizing for combat in the KTO requires a different approach than conventional infantry tactics. Close quarters battle is a complex and strenuous environment to operate in on its own. Layer on CBRNE (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosives) threats, poor air quality, loss of line-of-sight (LOS) communications, and zero ambient light, and you start to realize just how challenging the subterranean (SbT) environment can be. It forces leaders and Soldiers to be versed on much more than just tactics.

Fighting underground necessitates that units find a battle rhythm and are well rehearsed so that decision making can focus on environmental factors. To have that level of expertise within our formations is much easier said than done. Asking the 20-year-old specialist who is carrying a rifle, a shotgun, a chemical detector, protective mask, mission-oriented protective posture (MOPP) gear, marking equipment, medical equipment, ammunition, and body armor to also be able to operate a robot, know how to map a facility, conduct immediate decontamination, and understand/identify indicators of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and CBRNE threats under night vision is just too much to ask of our “trigger pullers.” To truly enable our personnel to build expertise, we have to limit how much we ask them to do. Assigning a team with one additional task to master is much more practical. This is the reason for the creation of company-level countering weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) standard operating procedures (SOP).

It is an effort to rapidly get to a proficient level in something that doctrine has not been able to keep up with. Units rotating to the KTO are expected to “fight tonight,” but without building on a previous rotation’s experience, this is not possible and undoubtedly degrades readiness. Our way of organizing an infantry company for combat in the SbT CWMD environment



Photos by CPT Bernard Wheeler

Soldiers in the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment complete subterranean operations training.

offers a starting point to increase task force lethality and proficiencies in the KTO by providing a specific set of tasks distributed among a specialty platoon and two assault platoons. In this article, we will explore each specific platoon’s responsibilities when organizing for SbT operations.

In a SbT CWMD environment, there are many critical skills required — more than we can expect our Soldiers to master. A few examples include CBRNE detection and assessment, air quality assessment, mapping, breach, and decontamination. Typically, we like to build redundancy in our formations for teams that are required to complete key tasks on an objective (for example, enemy prisoner of war [EPW], aid and litter, etc.). This redundancy provides commanders and subordinate leaders flexibility by ensuring there are multiple people capable of providing a specific capability or performing a specific task. In the KTO, we must be able to fight both the CBRNE environment and enemy combatant forces. Expecting our Infantrymen to execute all this to any level of proficiency is unrealistic within such a short period of time as expected with rotational forces. After all, that is why there are military occupations specialized to handle such jobs. In order to protect ourselves and make sure

we can maintain the initiative no matter the environment, we must train our Soldiers on the specific equipment that is unique to SbT operations and CWMD hazards. To enable Soldiers to acquire such technical skills in a short period of time, on top of their primary duties, we found success in standardizing all the special teams across a company by habitually tasking platoons with the same mission to generate subject matter experts across a CWMD task force (TF).

The Specialty Platoon - Breach

The first platoon in the SbT company is the specialty platoon. They have three specified tasks. First, they conduct a breach on the exposed portal (identified by the surface force) either with organic equipment or with the support from attached enablers. After the breach, this platoon is tasked with gaining the initial foothold on the SbT objective. If there is a known or suspected CBRNE threat, the platoon must be prepared to conduct an assessment of the environment. This task requires experts capable of operating Joint Chemical Agent Detectors (JCADs), UDR and VDR radiac detectors, oxygen monitors, and even robotic equipment while wearing the appropriate MOPP gear. This platoon is further broken down so that specific teams are responsible for one type of detector, not all. One team is tasked with radiological and the other with chemical. The last specified task for this platoon is to provide security to the TF enablers as they are attached to the company. The platoon conducts



Soldiers in the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment move down a tunnel during subterranean operations training.

initial link up and provides an element to escort enablers on the objective as well as to and from the different platoons. Standardizing these tasks so that the platoon conducts them during every operation allows the Soldiers the repetition and experience needed to provide feedback on the SOP/tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

The Assault Platoon – Initial Clear

Second and third platoons are both assault forces tasked to clear. They conduct a forward passage of lines with the lead element and begin or continue the clearance of the facility. Clearance of an underground facility is more complicated than clearance of a surface objective. It is much more deliberate due to the likelihood of CBRNE hazards. There is more emphasis on the environmental threats, not just the kinetic enemy threat(s). The pace of clearance has to be sustainable so that the assault force can close with and destroy the enemy, all while being careful not to outrun its detection equipment. Special equipment like robots helps maintain the appropriate pace and provide early warning against both the enemy and environmental factors if fitted with the proper detectors. Much like the specialty platoon, each team within the assault platoon is dedicated to either chemical, radiological, or explosive detection using a variety of specialized equipment. While they must have a base knowledge of detector functionality, the real expertise for the clearing force resides with the clear understanding of the indicators associated with each threat that Soldiers could encounter. Specifically, if there are any CBRNE production, weaponization, storage materials, or other indicators, the TF would need to request a CBRNE enabler (such as a hazard assessment platoon or chemical response team) to further exploit. There are limited numbers of these specialized enabler teams. Therefore, understanding threat indicators on an objective and having the ability to accurately report are primary tasks of every element within the CWMD TF.

Headquarters – Mission Command

The primary role of the HQ is to provide command and



Soldiers in the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment enter a room during subterranean operations training.



SbT Lessons Learned by 2-7 IN in the KTO

control (C2) and liaise to higher headquarters for coordination of enablers. Leader placement is therefore essential due to the communication challenges the SbT environment presents to LOS radios. Company headquarters elements have more flexibility for leader placement and how to provide C2 on SbT objectives. Since the kinetic fight in SbT operations centers at the squad level, the company commander and the headquarters can move to the point of friction to provide C2 for the entire objective rather than maneuvering platoons.

Attached enablers frequently exceed the reasonable span of control of the maneuver unit during SbT operations. This task requires someone's full attention. Assigning the executive officer or fire support officer as the chief of enablers is a useful technique to maintain an appropriate span of control within the company. This is necessary for cross-coordination between the surface and sub-surface companies. Ultimately, leader placement and span of control are the most critical decisions to effective C2 of the objective.

In closing, the terrain in the KTO is wide-ranging and includes everything from restrictive mountains to dense urban areas to SbT facilities. These are all arduous challenges for military operations on their own, but in Korea what makes it even more challenging is layering these with the presence of CWMD threats. During the Raider Brigade's rotation to Korea,

we identified the vast amount of technical knowledge required of Soldiers to conduct the CWMD mission and SbT operations later than we care to admit. We learned the hard way that a task force must be able to close with and destroy the enemy as well as detect CBRNE threats, conduct initial CBRNE assessments and decontamination, operate with zero ambient light, communicate where LOS equipment does not work, map facilities, and escort enablers. We developed a specific task organization for a company to execute these operations underground, which distributed tasks all the way down to the fire-team level. Soldiers not only need to be prepared to fight the enemy tonight, but they must also operate in complex environments where CBRNE threats are just as dangerous as the enemy combatants. These skills are not frequently focused on during collective training cycles by conventional mechanized units, yet they are critical to allowing RAF units to "fight tonight" on the Korean peninsula.

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Photo by MAJ Pete Bogart

Soldiers from the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division complete subterranean operations training in the Republic of Korea. The Raider Brigade deployed to Korea as part of a regularly scheduled rotation of forces supporting the 2nd Infantry Division.