Success or Failure: The Importance of Junior Leadership in the Decisive-Action Training Environment

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When 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment (a Stryker reconnaissance squadron), participated in a regimental training exercise at the Army's decisive-action training environment, its junior leadership spelled its success or failure.

This article focuses on the movement and maneuver that Nemesis Troop conducted during the exercise's first two days, specifically highlighting the tactics and techniques used to overcome the diverse factors of terrain, civilian considerations and enemy presented by a non-contiguous and non-permissive operating environment. Ultimately, despite a series of both real-world variables and training-specific scenarios, the troop was able to accomplish its tasks through the junior leadership's adaptability and flexibility.

Background

The exercise was a two-week operation in October 2012 at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, that tested the squadron's capabilities in fighting hybrid threats — consisting of both conventional threats and asymmetric forces — within the parameters of Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, ***Unified Land Operations***.

In the time comprising the military decision-making process and troop-leading procedures that led up to our exercise, senior leaders within the regiment and squadron spent hours developing the plans used to conduct the first exercise of this magnitude in the Bavarian countryside since 1989. The squadron's Soldiers concerned themselves with dedicating the same degree of preparatory work and training they had applied to all the squadron internal training events that year — just as professional cavalrymen in the U.S. Army are expected to do.

Success or failure at this keystone event would come down to how Soldiers at platoon-level-and-below executed their orders and conducted themselves in accordance with the finest traditions of cavalry. The junior leaders within 4th Squadron would be responsible for leading these Soldiers within the parameters of their commander's intent and would ultimately bear the weight of success or failure in the exercise.

Exercise missions

The squadron had three essential tasks built into the initial mission. The first task was to conduct zone reconnaissance from Grafenwoehr Training Area to Hohenfels Training Area to defeat enemy forces in area of operations Dragoon. The second task was to pass an infantry squadron, Task Force War Eagle (1-2 Cavalry Regiment), forward near Phase Line Patriots to allow them to penetrate to HTA. Finally, the squadron was to conduct wide-area security near the northern border of HTA.

Nemesis Troop's mission involved zone reconnaissance from the south side of GTA through the German countryside to the north side of HTA. Nemesis Troop was task-organized to include a Stryker anti-tank platoon, which was given a "follow and assume" mission, and two reconnaissance platoons, allowing the troop to operate in "hunter-killer" teams and defeat enemy armor assets beyond the normal capabilities of a Stryker reconnaissance troop.

The two reconnaissance platoons' tasks included identifying a series of possible enemy engagement areas and defeating any enemy within respective capabilities.

Terrain challenges

Even before Nemesis Troop left the passage point at GTA, the leadership and Soldiers alike were well aware that the terrain they were tasked with reconnoitering was different from the typical maneuver training area found on most Army posts. Most of the Soldiers had operated in similar environments during several preparatory training events in the months preceding the DATE within Weiden Maneuver Rights Area. However, this particular AO offered unique challenges, particularly because of the sheer frontage each troop was tasked to cover. Supporting ranges and distances were often stretched to their limits.

Nemesis Troop received the easternmost portion of the squadron AO, which spanned 10-15 kilometers from west to east at any given point and was geographically isolated from the rest of the squadron on the eastern side of the Vils River. The terrain varied drastically, often consisting of rolling fields, sprawling and dense woodline, and small pockets of tightly packed urban areas. This made identifying, seizing and controlling key terrain paramount to the reconnaissance effort's overall success.

Platoon leaders had the freedom during TLPs to conduct their own intelligence preparation of the battlefield. They worked closely with their platoon sergeants and senior scouts to develop routes through the countryside that maximized both cover and concealment, ***and*** that offered the best vantage points from which to observe and control the previously identified key terrain.

Even with careful and attentive planning, the terrain rarely cooperated during the operation's reconnaissance phase. Rural routes often could not support the sheer size and weight of the Stryker platform, and low-hanging branches hindered stealthy and rapid movement. Success under these conditions was not possible without competent vehicle commanders to make rapid decisions and navigate with dated maps, at night and in the unpredictable German climate.

Vehicle recoveries

In the course of the movement to HTA alone, 1st Platoon performed five vehicle recoveries. These recoveries weren't staged variables built into the training scenario, but rather were the result of the real-world effects of terrain not specifically built for traffic by U.S. military vehicles.

One vehicle recovery occurred just hours into the first night of the operation when the M1117 Armored Security Vehicle manned by the attached combat observation and lasing team nearly rolled into a ditch bordering a large uncultivated field because the narrow dirt trail the platoon was using collapsed underneath the vehicle's weight. This immediately presented a number of concerns for 1st Platoon, which was on a strict timeline to establish a squadron-level passage point still more than 10 kilometers away before first light. The vehicle could not self-recover, nor could a Stryker offer much assistance due to the angle at which the vehicle was stuck. Squadron recovery assets were requested, but they did not appear on-site until well after first light.

The situation dictated that the platoon break into two separate sections — Bravo Section staying with the downed vehicle to provide local security while Alpha Section continued to maneuver forward to establish the passage lane. Section leaders became the key leaders of each operation, rapidly coordinating both the local security effort around the immobilized vehicle and the designated passage-lane team, while the platoon leader and platoon sergeant developed the situation for both the troop commander and the recovery assets from Headquarters and Headquarters Troop.

The flexibility to continue the mission despite unforeseen variables was the direct result of junior-leader competence, fortified by our repetitious training of basic Soldier skills in the field. By understanding key tasks, in conjunction with possessing the confidence to take charge when superiors were preoccupied with other tasks, section-level leaders were able to overcome unforeseen adversity. Leaders at platoon and troop levels were then able to supplement the section, providing security at the passage lane by reallocating a section from 3rd Platoon to assist. This ultimately ensured the lane was established per the regimental timeline. In this instance, the initiative of junior leaders was the catalyst that gave senior leaders the time and necessary picture of the battlefield, enabling them to allocate the resources mandatory for success.

Interacting with German populace

Another factor that increased the mission's complexity was operating in areas populated by German civilians (not role-players). Leaders were challenged to factor civilian considerations into their maneuver, which included varied issues such as avoiding the destruction of cultivated fields, integrating into patterns of life and preventing unnecessary property damage. Ultimately, these factors had the potential to turn the local populace against the squadron's operational lines of effort if not handled appropriately.

This was coupled with the fact that the Stryker platform does not blend in with small European automobiles or quaint villages in any capacity. Section leaders overcame these issues by planning bypass routes and, when this was not possible, they used vehicle bounding or traveling overwatch to ensure the vehicles in their section could mutually support each other while crossing danger areas. These on-the-ground decisions stemmed from comprehensive rehearsals, effective communication and the formulation of contingency plans during the TLP process.

Soldiers also found creative ways to interact with the civilian population to gain a tactical advantage over the enemy. Curious local-nationals would frequently seek out the seemingly-out-of-place military vehicles moving (literally) through their backyards to interact with the crews. Without hesitation, gunners or VCs would ask these civilians general questions pertaining to our priority intelligence requirements about other enemy military vehicles they may have seen and what direction they were traveling in.

Our training exercises reinforced doctrinal tactics and allowed us to creatively exploit situations to collect the information necessary to accomplish the mission. The platoons learned invaluable lessons about how doctrine applies outside of controlled training environments, which translated

into real-world confidence in the skills we trained and developed over months of field-training exercises. The cumulative outcome of overcoming the effects of diverse terrain and civilian considerations prepared the troop for the first contact with enemy forces that quickly followed.

Enemy contact

The enemy consisted of a hybrid threat composed of both conventional and unconventional forces, meaning Soldiers had to be prepared to make contact with everything from a T-80 tank to a Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Within 15 minutes of leaving GTA, while the troop maneuvered in a column to the line of departure, 3rd Platoon observed a black Jeep, which moved toward their position, then suddenly changed directions and sped off. The vehicle was spotted several more times moving on lateral routes in the troop's vicinity, but it failed to display clear hostile intent that would have been necessary for 3rd Platoon to apply lethal force against the vehicle.

In the context of this vignette, it is clear that the vehicle was in fact an unconventional enemy forward-reconnaissance element. However, leaders had to consider the possibility the vehicle was simply being driven by an interested civilian with no knowledge of the training event taking place.

The senior scout from 1st Platoon recommended establishment of a hasty traffic-control point to intercept the vehicle, but this fell outside the scope of the commander's intent and the platoon leader made the tough decision to continue mission.

In another instance, the lead vehicle from 1st Platoon observed two enemy Boyevaya Razvedyvatelnaya Dozornaya Mashinas stationary in the woodline adjacent to a cultivated field. While it was clear that contact with conventional enemy forces had taken place, the existence of a nearby village complicated the use of indirect-fire assets against the enemy vehicles. The COLT, in conjunction with the troop fire-support officer, had to consider the effects indirect fires could have on the nearby town before clearing the fire mission. This increased the time it took to receive clearance from the commander and for the mortar section to drop rounds on target.

In this instance, success resulted from not only having well-rehearsed fires but because flexible indirect-fire personnel could factor in unforeseen civilian variables both quickly and effectively.

The complex decisions made in these two enemy-contact situations capture only a brief glimpse into the multi-layered judgments junior leaders made regarding the second- and third-order effects of their actions. This was the cumulative result of reflexive and flexible leadership developed through months of field experiences, after-action reviews and the study of various conventional conflict vignettes at the troop and squadron level. It quickly became clear that when given the proper training, junior leaders have the capacity to learn from mistakes and achieve results that transcend the expectations of their rank and duty position.

Bridge control

The value of these lessons became apparent as the troop continued its reconnaissance push toward HTA and took on an even more complex mission. As Nemesis Troop maneuvered toward HTA, it received an on-order mission to secure a key crossing point on the northern boundary, marked by the Lauterach River — a mission that would directly affect the success of the regiment's movement into HTA.

The crossing site presented two challenges: the bridge was bordered by a high-speed avenue of approach, and the bridge itself was much smaller than originally anticipated. The platoons relied on the planning and rehearsals they conducted during TLPs to guide them through the task.

Alpha Section of 1st Platoon established overwatch of the crossing site, as well as security down the high-speed avenue of approach parallel to the river. The situation was complicated due to the high volume of traffic moving along the route; in fact, it would have been impossible to establish a TCP and stop all vehicular traffic moving along it without disrupting local patterns of life and affecting local stability as described in ADP 3-07. To overcome this complication, the leader of Bravo Section, 1st Platoon, recommended use of a "chase" vehicle, which would remain concealed near the route until a suspicious vehicle moved into the sector. At that point, the chase vehicle could either pursue or stop any suspicious vehicle with a hasty TCP.

With the exposed nature of the crossing point, 3rd Platoon used a rapid tempo to provide them with the edge they needed to quickly establish local security of the crossing site and conduct a hasty field classification of the bridge's military load capacity. Once established, the passage lane proved valuable and offered an axis along which the regiment penetrated into HTA.

Again, throughout the troop, the recommendations of junior leaders were valued and aided considerably in senior leaders' MDMP and in the unit's subsequent flexibility and adaptability. By learning from mistakes made only days prior, 1st Platoon was able to successfully provide overwatch and establish security by acting on junior leaders' recommendations.

Overall, the establishment of the passage lane was another learning point for the leadership born out of real-world conditions. The adage that the leader on the ground has the best perspective from which to make decisions based on the commander's intent proved to be true in this case. Squadron provided Nemesis Troop with a task and purpose, from which the commander developed an intent-based course of action that each platoon would take. This trust accounted for the flexibility that complex contemporary operations require. Platoon leaders were able to adjust from changing conditions on the battlefield and develop plans that worked in the multi-variable DATE that could not be drawn from map reconnaissance alone. A balance of doctrinally sound planning, interspersed with the adaptability and flexibility of leaders on the ground, achieved desired results and led to mission accomplishment throughout the exercise.

Junior leaders = success

The preceding brief collection of vignettes is a small example of the dozens of similar encounters the Soldiers of Nemesis Troop experienced during the two-day, 60-kilometer movement to HTA's northern boundary. Each platoon cleared anywhere from four to six named areas of interest the regiment had previously identified, as well as countless pieces of key terrain identified at both the troop and platoon levels during IPB.

The environment the platoons operated in was diverse and often not favorable for the Stryker platform. The platoons

faced challenging new variables while operating in the Bavarian countryside as well as within HTA's confines.

Success during the DATE's opening days established confidence and set the conditions for success throughout the rest of the exercise. Junior leaders at platoon-level-and-below demonstrated versatility, seeing first-hand how the conventional doctrine they had spent the previous six months dedicating themselves to mastering actually applied even under the most obscure combination of real-world variables.

This article has presented one perspective that is truly miniscule in the scope of the DATE as a whole, but it proves that junior leaders are able to influence the outcome of regimental operations on a complex battlefield.

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For more information on this exercise, called Saber Junction, visit http://www.army.mil/article/89237/_Saber_Junction__tests_U_S___partners__interoperability/.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ADP — Army doctrine publication
AO — area of operations
COLT — combat observation and lasing team
DATE — decisive-action training environment
GTA — Grafenwoehr Training Area
HTA — Hohenfels Training Area
IPB — intelligence preparation of the battlefield
MDMP — military decision-making process
SAMS — School of Advanced Military Studies
TCP — traffic-control point
TLP — troop-leading procedures
VC — vehicle commander