

Heavy Weapons in a Light Airborne World: a Delta Company in Decisive-Action Combined Arms

by CPT Michael F.R. Freeman

Weapons companies have been employed incorrectly for many years. They have the most firepower within an infantry battalion and the most flexibility, but they are often delegated to stationary security positions such as traffic-control points or base security.

With that in mind, you can predict that a weapons company will not be employed to its full potential as it heads into a training rotation at a combat training center. The various weapon systems and vehicle platforms a weapons company uses are seen as a burden rather than as the advantage they provide. This perceived limitation of a smaller-sized infantry company often prevents weapons companies from being employed in an appropriate role. However, weapons companies are critical to the battalion because of the way they can be used, the type of training they can conduct and their unique setup.

Unique setup

The unique setup of a weapons company does a few things: 1) it provides an excellent leader-to-trooper ratio; 2) it allows the company to operate alone or task-organized to another element; and 3) it has the advantage of “the arms-room concept.” The arms-room concept means the sections have the capability to mount M2 (.50 caliber machinegun), M240B (general-purpose, medium machinegun), MK19 (40mm grenade machinegun) and/or the Improved Target Acquisition System (ITAS). Typically, each platoon is employed in the hunter/killer methodology where two vehicles have an ITAS and an M240B, while the other two vehicles have M2s.

The leadership ratio and task-organization within a weapons company, or Delta Company, is a fundamental reason for its success. The leadership-to-Soldier ratio advantage generates options for the commander, increases flexibility of the assigned platoon and provides tactical agility to the commander. Each platoon has a platoon leader, platoon sergeant, section sergeant, squad leader (sergeant) and many senior and experienced specialists. Each platoon is comprised of about 16 to 18 paratroopers when at 100-percent strength. In contrast, a rifle company has roughly four staff sergeants and eight sergeants per platoon and around 26-30 privates through specialists.

Another advantage of a weapons company’s unique setup is the ability it provides a commander to operate independently or task-organized to another element. Weapons companies may not have the quantity of troopers of a rifle company, but they are still able to take action on smaller objectives without the support of another company. Using higher-echelon assets such as battalion mortars or attack aviation, a weapons company can function in the same way as a rifle company.

Another employment method for a weapons company is found in its habitual relationships with the rifle companies within the battalion. Each platoon is aligned to a rifle company, while 4th Platoon remains free to act as the quick-reaction force, escort the forward-support company or provide a personal-security detail as needed. Having such relationships greatly increases the shared understanding and facilitates the development of tactics, techniques and procedures. Also, each relationship is mutually beneficial. A rifle company benefits by gaining the additional firepower of anti-vehicle/anti-tank weapon systems. Support companies are able to focus on resupply by allowing the weapons company to secure the resupply convoy. A headquarters company gains a rapid response and flexible maneuver force to reinforce success or exploit weaknesses with a weapons-company platoon attached.

With many varied employment options available to commanders, they must tailor the loadout of the weapons company to the mission. Each platoon is broken down into two sections that employ the “arms-room concept” as armament. While a weapons company’s unique setup is important, it is not the only thing that makes it successful.

Training

With such a wide variety of roles, training a weapons company can be challenging. You have to train your Soldier's individual skills plus train them to operate mounted and dismounted as a squad, platoon and company. Each of these areas can be daunting in their own way but, with the right approach and flexible planning, they can be accomplished.

During the past year, Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), participated in two major training rotations: a Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation in the early spring and a training rotation in Europe. Delta Company's focus during preparation for the initial JRTC rotation was training gunners, qualifying crews and sections and supporting rifle-company platoon live fires from mounted platforms. The gunners became lethally accurate; sections within the platoons did an excellent job of communicating among crews and with the rifle company; and command-and-control on the move became second nature. Unfortunately, there was friction during actions at the halt or when deciding what to do once there was no longer a 40-Soldier dismounted platoon around the vehicles.



Figure 1. Company D, 2-501 PIR, vehicles escort a logistics element to its destination during Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) Rotation 15-0, Grafenwohr, Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)



Figure 2. SPC Blake L. Pirkl practices with the M240b as Company D paratroopers execute rehearsals prior to airborne operations during JMRC Rotation 15-06 in Baumholder, Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)

Each vehicle has a driver, gunner, troop commander and one to two dismounts. Some platoons have more than others, but (across the company) that was the task-organization Delta Company, 2-501 PIR, had when it went to JRTC. While at JRTC, Delta Company executed many missions in as many ways as possible (platoons attached to rifle companies, weapons-company organic, in conjunction with brigade and battalion assets, etc.). Initially, in defense around the forward landing strip, the company was able to repel the enemy's advances. The weapons company ultimately destroyed dismounted, vehicle and armored enemies within the engagement area. The mission then transitioned to offense with the company moving to assault enemy forces in urban areas. During this phase, the company operated within a battalion task force, providing security to the ground-assault convoy. Then, it transitioned to support the assault force upon arrival at the assembly area.

In both phases of the rotation (offense and defense), Delta Company performed well with a few key learning points for each. When operating independently, a focus point for post-rotation training was the use of dismounted tactics, including both offense and defense.

Upon return, Delta Company, 2-501st PIR, transitioned to dismounted tactics, focusing mainly on platoon attack procedures and tasks like entering a building and clearing a room. Admittedly, there was risk assumed by not focusing on as many machinegun ranges or mounted exercises given the short training window before our Europe training rotation. The paratroopers practiced reflexive fire, executed squad and platoon attacks, and executed team-level "enter building, clear room" live-fire training in a shoothouse. This enabled the paratroopers to really learn how to operate dismounted and provided the battalion the capability to use of the weapons company as another rifle company for smaller objectives or missions (i.e., checkpoint security, dismounted reconnaissance of objectives and tactical-operations center locations, and quick-reaction force from a rotary-wing platform).



Figure 3. SPC Robert F. Mooney and a fellow paratrooper from Company D, 2-501 PIR, reload a weapon on the MK19 range while engaging targets during a platoon live-fire exercise on Observation Post 13, Fort Bragg, NC. (Photo by 1SG Jose M. Trevino)



Figure 4. 1LT Corey L. Greene discusses with 1LT Mike F. Johnson the route Greene's platoon will take during an upcoming operation during Operation Swift Response 2015 in Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)

There were struggles, at least initially. Simple tasks such as mounted land navigation, frequency-modulation communication and logistics status took more time to plan, execute properly, consolidate and reorganize than we anticipated. Ultimately, Delta Company was able to overcome these obstacles. However, those small setbacks can add up and cause undue stress while detracting from a mission.

What I think is the winning formula in most cases is to train both dismounted and mounted tactics simultaneously. While it may be more efficient or simple to focus on one or the other, it will come at the cost of atrophy in skills not focused on. Working with the battalion operations officer and commander on the importance of being able to train both methodologies will greatly improve the readiness of the company and battalion. Of course, all this cannot be accomplished if you are unable to balance training with readiness or with your paratroopers and equipment.

Using weapons company

A Delta Company commander needs to be prepared for offensive, defensive and stability operations. As previously discussed, how a weapons company is employed in each of those components of decisive action can vary, but in the offense is where weapons companies can be most destructive. Defensively, a Delta Company can provide the battalion with strong-points to plan and transition to the offense again.

While in the offense, the weapons company provide a battalion commander a number of options. If the objective is in an urban area, the weapons company can isolate the target area while the rifle companies clear through urban structures. Given a weapons company's four platoons, this mission only requires two to three platoons with 4th Platoon as the battalion reserve. With so many different weapon systems available, understanding the tactical task from the battalion commander and what his endstate is provides the company commander with options to employ his platoons.

For example, the commander can task a platoon to isolate an objective by using the M2, M240B and MK19s to engage forces attempting to retrograde or provide reinforcements. Or, once the objective has been seized, a platoon can reinforce the battalion with the tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided ITAS to destroy any enemy armored threat.



Figure 5. Fourth Platoon executes a mission briefing on the hood of a truck before moving out during Operation Swift Response 2015 in Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)



Figure 6. Delta Company serves in overwatch of a chemical reconnaissance team from 127th Engineer Battalion during Operation Swift Response 2015 in Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)

In the defense, a weapons company can perform a screen in front of the rifle companies to provide defense in-depth; be divided up among the rifle companies to bolster defenses; concentrate on engagement areas to maximize destruction in a given area; or provide a mobile defense. Having an understanding of the battalion's plan of how and where to destroy the enemy will dictate where the forces are arrayed.

There are advantages and disadvantages to any course of action, mobile defense, defense-in-depth or strong-pointing, but the battalion commander and operations officer will help determine the mission. The ultimate takeaway when performing the defense is that the company is defending to transition to the offense. Delta Company commanders need to keep this in mind when placing the company trains and working with the first sergeant on the resupply plan to stay mobile and agile.

As discussed previously, it is common for a weapons company to attach a platoon to another company. This platoon greatly enhances a rifle company's combat power by being able to provide a base of fire to maneuver on an objective; isolate enemy forces in an urban area; destroy enemy vehicle threats; and escort casualties or enemy prisoners of war on or off an objective, as well as many other functions. Forming that habitual relationship with a

rifle company will alleviate many of the typical friction points experienced during joint operations (communications, resupply, employment of the weapons-company platoon, etc.).

The mission of 82nd Airborne Division is to “always be prepared to move without notice to any place in the world by air and/or airborne assault, and to fight immediately on arrival” (82nd Airborne Division Standing Operations Procedure Edition IX). In this scenario, the weapons company could have a portion of the weapons company attached to a rifle company for the duration of the time the unit is on a no-notice deployment status. This leaves the rest of the company to be bravo-echelon vehicles or vehicles that will arrive by air-land as opposed to air-drop when the airfield has been seized. During the airborne operation, the portion attached to that rifle company will have vehicles that will be air-dropped. This will give that the alpha echelon the initial maneuver and firepower advantage over an enemy force. The bravo echelon increases those advantages until further follow-on forces can arrive.

The way a Delta Company is employed as a weapons company is as diverse as the commander is creative – given the environment. The weapons company has the maneuverability to move around the battlefield and possesses the firepower to destroy most enemies it encounters with little resistance.

Way ahead

In summary, weapons companies are absolutely essential to the battalion because of their firepower, capability set, the personnel within the company and the roles they perform. Another plus for weapons companies is the ability to maintain their organic equipment. Through proper focus on the commander’s intent and emphasizing the right training points, weapons companies can be successful in any theater. Whether deployed or at home station, weapons companies are flexible and agile enough to perform any mission.

CPT Michael Freeman is an armor officer who recently finished command of a weapons company in 82nd Airborne Division (Company D, 2nd Battalion, 501st PIR) and currently commands Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, NC. His other assignments include S-3 plans officer, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division; commander, G Troop, 5th Battalion, 15th Cavalry, 194th Armor Brigade, Fort Benning, GA; and platoon leader/executive officer/staff officer, C Troop, 1st Battalion, 91st Cavalry, 173rd Airborne Brigade, Schweinfurt, Germany. His military schools include Ranger School, Jumpmaster School, Airborne School, Army Reconnaissance Course and Maneuver Captain’s Career Course. CPT Freeman holds a bachelor’s of science degree in information technology and administrative management from Central Washington University.

References

Field Manual 3-21-12, *The Infantry Weapons Company*, July 2008.



Figure 7. PFC Steven S. Senatus engages targets downrange with his M240b during a platoon live-fire exercise at West McKeithan’s Pond, Fort Bragg, NC. (Photo by 1SG Jose M. Trevino)



Figure 8. CPT Michael F.R. Freeman talks to paratroopers in his company – SFC Robert D. Lovell, SSG Jonathan S. Waterbury and SGT Jose M. Tellez – during Operation Swift Response 2015 in Germany. (Photo by SSG Javier O. Orona)