

# U.S. 'Snake Squadron' Cavalry Soldiers Integrate with New Zealand Infantry Regiment Recon Units to Train



by SSG John T. Pantalici

The U.S. 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's reconnaissance troops have historically strengthened international partnerships through repeated training exchanges in the South Pacific. As part of this ongoing initiative, Soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team's 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, have attended courses conducted by New Zealand's army since 2018.

In 2020 the 2-14 Cavalry "Snake Squadron" Soldiers witnessed how the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment (RNZIR) 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's reconnaissance (recce) platoon imparted institutional knowledge of reconnaissance operations. American Soldiers were integrated into RNZIR recce detachments during their annual execution of the Dismounted Reconnaissance Patrol Procedures Course.

The 2/1 recce soldiers demonstrated their expertise and professionalism in the execution of light reconnaissance tasks and training. The execution of international operations will continue to be a crucial component of readiness in the Pacific, and New Zealand's army continues to be a valued and essential contributor to a free and open South Pacific.



**Figure 1. Soldiers employ camouflage techniques.** (Photo by SSG John Pantalici)

## **New Zealand army background**

In the New Zealand army's doctrinal concept, the role of the infantry-battalion recce platoon is to provide the commander with information about the enemy and terrain within the area of operations, areas of interest and battlespace. In the RNZIR, the patrol is the fundamental unit: the sensor team fighting for information. Squad sections are the essential element. The emphasis on the application of technical skills and tactical knowledge in the small unit is the foundation of success for the larger organization throughout all phases of war.

The recce-platoon course covers the tactics and techniques that allow its selected soldiers to operate in areas of uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, the gray areas of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Dismounted Patrol Procedures Courses are run yearly by the recce platoon at Burnham Military Camp on the Southern Island home of 2/1 RNZIR.

The New Zealand army's institutional reconnaissance training was informed by jungle warfare in Vietnam. New Zealand army recce and tracking courses have existed in challenging environments since the 1970s in places such as Malaya and Singapore. The 2/1 Recce's Patrol Procedures Course has existed since the Cold War exploits of New Zealand's "Grey Ghosts." Hard learned-lessons in jungle fieldcraft and survival in the bush have been transmitted through decades. In the jungles of the Southeast Asia, Kiwi soldiers knew they had become one with the environment when the "flies wouldn't even land on them."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the country's history, New Zealand's soldiers have demonstrated a willingness to endure shared hardship on patrol.

Modern operational knowledge within the 2/1's recce platoon has been derived from downrange excursions in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Afghanistan and Iraq. Senior course instructors have spent most of their careers within the same units, providing them in-depth institutional and cultural knowledge of their formations. Soldiers, noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers often serve longer-term assignments in their battalions.

New Zealand's army brigade is divided between the Northern and Southern Islands. It is common for recce soldiers to experience Special Air Service selection and service. Though well versed in combat operations, the New Zealand army experience goes beyond the skillful application of military force. The army has also served its citizens well assisting in earthquake-relief efforts in 2011 and Australian brushfires in 2020.

## **Required course**

The successful completion of the patrol-procedures course is a prerequisite for battalion infantry soldiers to serve in the recce platoon and the sniper section. The course is comprised primarily of enlisted soldiers, although officers attend as well. The course is useful for infantry officers to learn the role of reconnaissance elements and

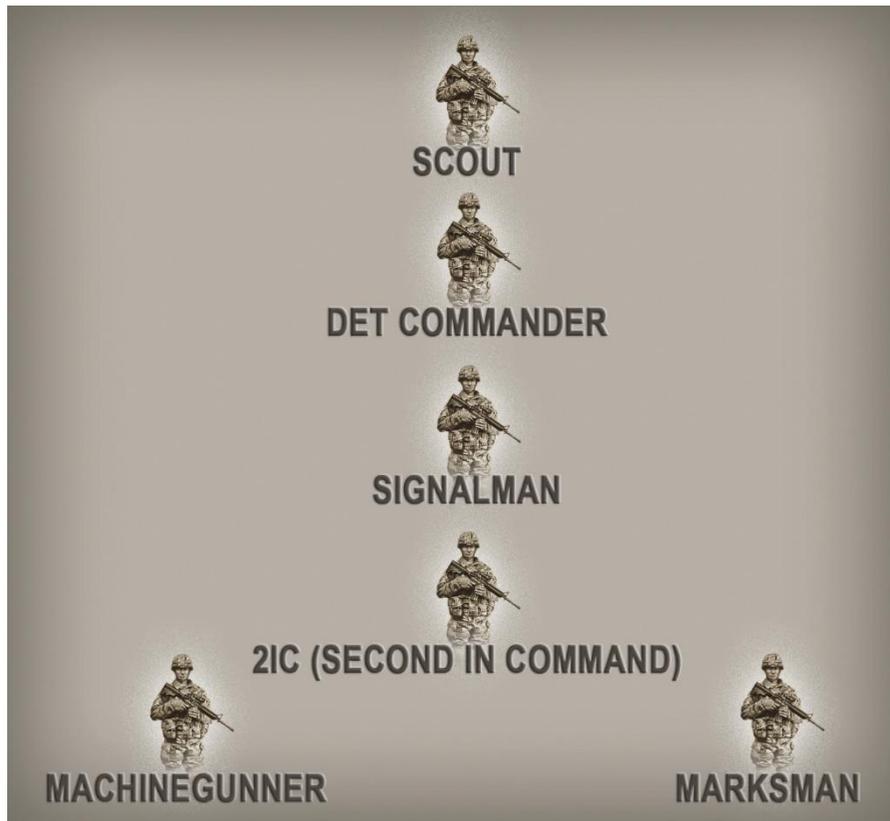
for the army to vet future recce-platoon leaders. Soldiers must demonstrate an aptitude for reconnaissance and are assessed on their personalities and individual discipline. Tactical patience, initiative, detail-oriented observation and the ability to operate in small formations with greater responsibility is crucial for service within the recce platoon.

The course aims to prepare selected regular-force infantry subalterns and other ranks in the interpretation and applications of the dismounted-reconnaissance platoon standing operating procedures, according to the 2/1 RNZIR joining instruction.

### **Structure of New Zealand recce platoon**

An overview of platoon roles covered in a doctrinal portion of the classroom instruction demonstrated that the detachment is comparable to an American Army squad. The detachment commander is the platoon leader, and the 2IC or “second in charge” is the platoon sergeant. The detachment also consists of a scout, a signalmán, a machine gunner and an interchangeable marksman or medic spot.

The New Zealand army recon forces have received changes to their force structure much like the doctrinal adjustments made to platoons, squads and sections in the U.S Army during the last decade. New Zealand recce detachments have fluctuated from between four and six individuals, with three detachments forming a dismounted recce platoon.



**Figure 2. RNZIR recce-detachment structure.**

### **Cooperation with U.S. Army**

Throughout the decades, the U.S. Army has greatly benefitted from its relationship with the New Zealand defense forces. Fighting formations of both countries worked together during both world wars, the conflict in Vietnam and right through the Global War on Terrorism to present day.

There are interesting parallels between U.S. Apache scouts and native Maori trackers in New Zealand. GEN Donn Starry, former commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, who was the architect the U.S.

AirLand Battle doctrine, specifically mentioned the skill of Maori trackers in the Vietnam jungle-warfare courses: “The soldiers who were teaching at Tracking Wing were New Zealander, native Maori. They were very well educated but retained their traditional skills. The more we watched our Soldiers in 11<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, the more we tried to train them well in those skills.”<sup>2</sup>

The Maori soldiers’ experience increased survivability in the Blackhorse Regiment’s battlespace.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division has committed to continuing this relationship with the New Zealand army. The division’s chief of interoperability and the fusion cell have ensured that training partnerships have flourished. In the past two years, Warrior Brigade of 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT) has hosted Kiwi soldiers at the U.S. Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) and successfully integrated them into the order of battle.

Warrior Brigade’s 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry, integrated the New Zealand recce troops in JRTC Exercise 18-04. The 2-14 Cavalry has completed more than four exchanges in the last two years, sending its Soldiers to patrol-procedures and tracking courses on both the Northern and Southern Islands of New Zealand.

## **2020 patrol-procedures training**

In February 2020, patrol-procedures students gathered for the initial phase of instruction. American students were introduced to the New Zealand armed-forces structure, including a breakdown of its army’s capabilities and history. Weapons classes oriented U.S. Soldiers to the personal weapons carried by Kiwi soldiers. For example, RNZIR forces recently replaced their Steyr rifles with the Modular Ambidextrous Rifle System-Light carbine. The New Zealand army also employed Fabrique National Herstal 240 machineguns with modified barrel releases, increasing the efficiency of hot-barrel changes.

Classroom instruction covered recent New Zealand reconnaissance missions and the latest doctrine. Patrol equipment was covered in depth. Recce soldiers may adjust their kit and make modifications to their gear setup as long as the changes make sense and contribute to platoon survivability and lethality. They use various camouflage patterns such as Disruptive Pattern Material, Army Combat Uniform and the Multi-Terrain Pattern (MTP), which closely resembles the British MTP.

Another notable feature of the recce-platoon loadout is the use of a “grab bag.” This bag is smaller than the U.S. standard issue “assault pack” but allows the user to quickly separate a bare-essentials survival kit from the main rucksack. Every soldier carries a survival kit in the event of separation from the detachment.

The 2/1 Recce also had the opportunity to field newly issued rucksacks. Many soldiers were already making modifications to the packs, demonstrating the individual autonomy afforded to detachment members.

## **Attention to fieldcraft**

From the onset of the course, fieldcraft received heavy attention during instruction. The students broke down their ration packs and created tape-sealed bags, which would be familiar to many U.S. Ranger School and Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader’s Course veterans. Rainwater-collection methods were taught to the students. Special attention was paid to water rationing.

After equipment and “stores” were prepared, the movement out west began. The U.S. party enjoyed the scenic movement from Burnham Military Camp and passage through the majestic Arthur’s Pass National Park Region. The climate and environment of the training area conjured memories of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA, with weather patterns that serve as a mirror world to the gray skies, mist and rain of America’s Pacific Northwest. New Zealand’s Hochstetter Forest is a challenging environment for the application of small-group patrol procedures.

Patrolling instruction begins with the execution of hand signals and movement in formations such as the corridor formation and several variations of the Australian peel.<sup>3</sup> The importance of identifying and selecting navigation attack points, heel-to-toe movement and other individual movement actions were taught and stressed. Soldiers were taught to set up bivouac sites with their army-issued “hooch” and how to use a simple rainwater-collection method. Many of these techniques were subtly different but familiar to American scouts. Exchange Soldiers focused on and emphasized tactical similarities, not variance.

## Demonstration team

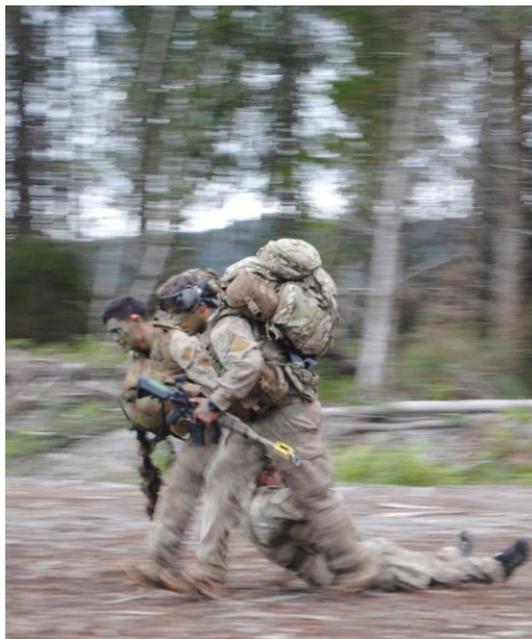
One thing that was particularly noteworthy from a training and teaching standpoint was the designation and employment of a demonstration team, referred to as the demo squad. The members of this squad are previous class graduates and therefore more seasoned members of the platoon. In addition to serving as demonstrators, they also took care of the command post and served as the opposing force throughout the course. Being assigned to this cadre is a privilege within the platoon.

After receiving instruction and demonstration, battle drills were recorded by the instructors and critiqued with the detachments during after-action reviews.

In the first few days of the course, after repeated execution of battle drills, the instruction moved into scouting techniques. Detachment members learned how to use arcs during the reconnaissance patrol, which is comparable to sectors of fire in American maneuver doctrine. Tracking and counter-tracking methods were also taught during this period.

Land-navigation techniques are executed with Silva Prismatic compasses, and mils are used for orientation as well as fire-support training. Detachment members practiced a memory game common to sniper training.

Camouflage and movement techniques are heavily emphasized. Spot reports were noted if soldiers made too much noise or movement while patrolling; there was heavy emphasis on disciplined movement.



**Figure 3. The patrol-procedures demonstration team evacuates a notional casualty.** (Photo by SSG John Pantalici)

Demonstration team leader LCpl S. Richie explained what drew him and others to battalion reconnaissance: “Working in a recon platoon, the hierarchy I have experienced is a lot flatter. I’ve worked with a lot more flexibility and freedom to just do what needs to be done, which builds a lot of trust and respect. [I’ve experienced] complex taskings, greater responsibilities, high levels of fitness and learning specialized skillsets like visual track.”

Due to the use of New Zealand helicopters to assist with the Australian wildfire relief at the time, the air-ground integration and airmobile-drills instruction was unable to be executed. On a positive note, the absence of these enablers was a reminder of how essential defense-force equipment is to crisis management in the region.

Vehicle drop-off and extraction methods were the next phase of the course. Two military trucks used for extraction exercises were the Pinzgauer transport (frequently referred to as a Pinny) and the medium heavy

operational vehicle (MHOV) cargo truck. (The MHOV is comparable to the U.S. Army light medium tactical vehicle.) The vehicle drop-off exercises once again highlighted the institutional attention to tailoring tactics and employing creative methods for equipment use at nearly every level.

A heavy emphasis on expedient and stealthy vehicle deployment could pay dividends for light-infantry units using off-road vehicles like the MRZR<sup>4</sup> all-terrain vehicles and the infantry-squad vehicle. Paying careful attention to rapid pick-up procedures could significantly increase survivability during egress or when disengagement criteria has been met.

Pick-up area formations were taught and executed in conjunction with boarding procedures when vehicles were moving to increase survivability while conducting exfiltration.

Observation posts are a point of pride for detachment commanders. Bushnell and Leopold spotting scopes are used for observation. Instructors emphasized how observation nodes can effectively influence and shape an operation's outcome. Rendezvous-point procedures included one of the more complicated movements of the class. The scenario soldiers faced during this training found them separated during enemy contact and given a predetermined link-up point to reach by morning. Challenging night movement in the dark forests of New Zealand's West Coast followed.

Close-target reconnaissance exercises were also executed by all detachments. The platoon practiced ambush techniques as a contingency, and there was instruction on the implementation of Claymore mines.

Another task was the creation and location of sustainment caches. Members of the reconnaissance patrols had a lot of time to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Soldiers endured the rain, terrain and swarms of sandflies/mosquitos to demonstrate their aptitude and willingness to serve as the commander's eyes and ears.

The culminating event in the course was an observation mission of an objective. The demo team occupied a farmhouse, while soldiers in the course observed their patterns of life and compiled their collection notes in logbooks. Rendezvous procedures were executed at the conclusion of the observation.



**Figure 4.** The demonstration team executes a patrol movement. *(Photo by SSG John Pantalici)*

## **Future of conflict**

A role within the reconnaissance and security (R&S) platoon is truly earned; only five of 15 students were selected for posting to the R&S platoon at the conclusion of the Dismounted Reconnaissance Patrol Procedures Course. The American I Corps Soldiers successfully adapted New Zealand tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and standing operating procedures (SOPs), and it was a truly formative experience. RNZIR CPL R. Herewini summed it up nicely: "Having Coalition partners always brings a different dynamic, and [it] is great for interoperability."

Lightning Division Soldiers were successful in their primary task: interpreting and applying dismounted reconnaissance-platoon SOPs.

Leaders within the New Zealand defense forces presented their ideas about what the future of conflict might look like. Like in U.S. reconnaissance platoons, doctrinal change is a constant. New Zealand recce platoon SSG M. Lodoviko explained how the course has evolved through the decade: “The content remains the same, but with the changing environment, equipment and SOPs, we have to test and apply a few procedures moving forward. What I’ve seen change is the patrol numbers being pushed up to six-person patrols, which has [required] us to refine how we operate and include a sixth person in the patrols. With that is also a good chance for us to test and adjust our SOPs to solidify how we operate in the future.”

Patrol Procedures Course Manager SGT B. Ta’ala was part of a guest rotation at JRTC in Louisiana and described how the experience influenced platoon systems: “Having a free-play enemy that has armored and air assets really keeps you on your toes with no room for complacency! Having enemy unmanned aerial vehicles constantly follow us and being on the receiving end of indirect fire highlighted shortfalls in our TTP/SOPs.”

Military formations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have multiple emerging threats on the battlefield to consider. Drones, swarm tactics and electronic warfare – combined with deadly precision fires – are all threats facing Pacific forces. Shared training experience in courses and at combat-training centers may be difficult to facilitate, but they are essential.

In the new decade, joint training through network-linked augmented-reality systems may become standard. New Zealand’s reconnaissance soldiers are developing ways to meld new technology with decades of tried-and-true fieldcraft. Leaders within the New Zealand military recognize the challenge of serving in an era of rapid and persistent innovation.

Though New Zealand’s forces are forward-leaning, they do a superb job of retaining knowledge of institutional and operational history. Burnham Camp produces an excellent publication called *The Rifleman* that captures training, photos and other historical data.



Figure 5. Patrol-procedures students execute break-contact drills. (Photo by SSG John Pantalici)

## Takeaways

The patrol-procedures course served as an excellent example of a how a platoon can build, maintain and continue to cultivate a solid foundation of knowledge for reconnaissance Soldiers and leaders. Multinational

partnerships must continue to be a priority across all operational environments. International partnership among junior Soldiers expands knowledge and allows Soldiers to share their knowledge in new settings. The Kiwi approach to combat is tailor-made for the warfare of an expeditionary nature across Pacific island crucibles.

A shared language is a big part of shared knowledge. As GEN Robert B. Brown, LTC R. Blake Lackey and MAJ Brian G. Forester wrote in *Military Review*, “Procedural interoperability involves agreed-upon terminology [and TTP] that minimize doctrinal differences.”<sup>5</sup>

The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division has brought leaders and lessons from New Zealand and Australia to combat-training centers across the United States and must continue to do so. This type of training exchange must remain nested in higher organizational objectives. Presence in these training arenas ensures that knowledge is continually exchanged across formations. Committing forces to regional interoperability creates a shared body of doctrinal knowledge.

Likewise, New Zealand soldiers will benefit from participation in events like the U.S. Army’s Gainey Cup and Best Sniper Competition. Bringing Kiwi troops into the fold at these international events will strengthen ties between our nations and sustain an expeditionary spirit in both countries. Continued cooperation will be essential to the success of any future multi-domain operations task force.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Deborah Challinor, *Grey Ghosts: New Zealand Vietnam Vets Talk About Their War*, New Zealand: Hodder Moa Beckett, Jan. 1, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Guardia, *Crusader: General Donn Starry and the Army of His Times*, Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> As explained on Wikipedia, the “Australian peel,” “center peel” or simply “peel” for short is a type of retreat practiced by infantrymen. This particular tactic is more specifically designed for situations where smaller groups of infantry withdraw from an engagement with a much larger force. In general terms, it is a sloped or diagonal retreat from the enemy. The slanting motion of the tactic gives the impression of increasing numbers of infantry joining the battle, a psychological move designed to deter the opposition. The slanting motion also has the benefit of keeping open one’s field of fire. Retreating directly backward would put the soldier too closely behind his/her own men, severely limiting his/her field of fire.

<sup>4</sup> MRZR is not an acronym but a designator.

<sup>5</sup> GEN Robert B. Brown, LTC R. Blake Lackey and MAJ Brian G. Forester, “Competing with China for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” *Military Review*, September-October 2019 edition.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**JRTC** – Joint Readiness Training Center

**MHOV** – medium heavy operational vehicle

**MTP** – Multi-Terrain Pattern (uniform camouflage)

**R&S** – reconnaissance and security

**RNZIR** – Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment

**SOP** – standing operating procedure

**TTP** – tactics, techniques and procedures