

12th Cavalry Regiment's Early Contribution to Building Post-Vietnam Armored Force: Ground Force for Air-Cavalry Combat Brigade Tests I and II

by retired LTC Tom Rozman

It was 1971; the Army was following a trajectory of disengagement from its operations of the last decade in Vietnam. Looming large on the horizon was the Army's viability to confront an aggressive Soviet Bloc force on the plains of Europe, especially with its diminished armored-force capabilities of the day.

To remedy this shortfall, the Army had begun a range of force-design initiatives that would result in the fielding of the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, M-1 Abrams main battle tank, M-2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle, M-3 Bradley Cavalry Vehicle and other systems, as well as the modified tables of organization and equipment that were introduced for U.S. armored forces in the middle 1980s.

Two of the early initiatives in this massive project occurred at Fort Hood, TX, in 1971-72. The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and 1st Battalion, 13th Armor, played significant roles in this effort.

The first of these two initiatives was the extensive six-month program of Air-Cavalry Combat Brigade (ACCB) Test I conducted at Fort Hood and administered by the U.S. Army's Modern Army Selected Systems Test, Evaluation and Review project. The test was an effort to study and evaluate how experience and lessons-learned in the application of air-assault and attack-helicopter capabilities developed and applied in Vietnam might also apply to a European situation against Soviet ground forces. The 1st Cavalry Division had been returned from Vietnam and reorganized as a tri-capability division with one armored brigade, one attack-helicopter brigade and one air-assault brigade to support the test.

Company A of the division's 1st Brigade, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, saw its 1st Platoon placed under the operational control of Company A, 1st Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, for the six months of Test I. The platoon returned to the control of its parent unit at the conclusion of the test.

Preparing to deploy

The parent company of the test platoon then needed to prepare for deployment with the entire 2nd Battalion for the several weeks of maneuver that would comprise Test II. Unfortunately, due to other missions and funding, the other elements of Company A had only limited opportunity to train and exercise tactically during the preceding six months.

In addition, a new company commander had taken command two months earlier. Although he was an infantry captain, he had no prior experience with mechanized infantry. Fortunately, he was an open-minded officer with prior enlisted service, most as a noncommissioned officer, so the new company commander called the 1st Platoon leader to his office for a meeting shortly after assuming command. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss development of a plan to tap into the maneuver expertise developed by the platoon leader and Soldiers of 1st Platoon by devising an accelerated training program to bring the company and its other platoons to an enhanced level of maneuver proficiency. There was a limited time window to put a training effort in motion before the company would deploy for Test II. Time was of the essence.

The two officers discussed several concepts regarding how the compressed training program could be managed in the limited time available. The format decided on was almost entirely experiential, and it would apply a "lane training approach." Using a "demonstration and do" format within the lane training approach, the two officers expected to achieve a viable training compression – a sort of crash course for the company. The leaders of the other platoons were responsible for preliminary checks, inspection of equipment and baseline individual and collective preparatory training with training objectives identified by the 1st Platoon leader. The effort would be an intense immersion in tactical maneuver by the platoons of Company A, 2–12 Cav.

Emphasizing intensity

To emphasize the intensity, the platoons of Company A would be exercised in various tactical-movement, defense and attack missions and scenarios in lanes, allowing units to observe the veteran 1st Platoon, then execute with critique and execute again. This process continued until the platoons were proficient with the movement and employment of tracks, squads and platoons on the different scenarios to the standard the 1st platoon leader indicated.

The company dedicated a full week to this concentrated maneuver-training rodeo. The 1st Platoon leader, who served as the company's training officer, coordinated with range control for an excellent maneuver box he was familiar with in detail from Test II. It was selected for its ideal terrain for the purpose of this training concentration and for its close proximity to the cantonment to minimize lost time to travel. Some maneuver boxes were significant distances from the barracks – upward of 10 to 25 miles in some cases. The distances would support movement-to-contact exercises.

The company commander issued the order to deploy, and the company training officer took control of the company for the exercise. For a week, the platoons of the company savored the unique flavor of the dust of Central Texas as they went through one iteration of movement-to-contact, attack, defend and do it again. They had feedback and lessons-learned sessions included in the training.

By the end of the week, the platoons and their squads were proficient in these exercises. The squads, platoons and their vehicle crews became confident in their equipment and their ability to exercise it in these maneuvers. Attention was also given to mounted land navigation and command-and-control communications.

At about midpoint in the training density, the company commander took command of the lanes' maneuvers from his command track, gaining experience moving and maneuvering the company tactically from the track. By the end of the week, he was experienced in the movement of the company and command-and-control sufficient to deploy on Test II. Some more work would be done the following week to further enhance his abilities.



Figure 1. A Company A platoon leader observes forward from a track in a defensive position during ACCB II.

The program developed by the 1st Platoon leader and the company commander worked well. Two weeks later, when the company crossed the start point for movement to its initial tactical assembly area for Test II, the company moved with confidence. It would continually improve on the skills and abilities gained during the weeks of the Test II.

Lessons learned

The vignette illustrates some interesting takeaways of effective leadership under less-than-ideal conditions. A key constraint was a shortage of time to prepare a fairly large and complex organization, one that had not recently exercised and with a new leader who was not familiar with the type of organization.



Figure 2. A Company A platoon sergeant and track driver work on an engine problem during ACCB II.

The first takeaway: The leader did not stand on bluffing or posturing around his lack of experience. He recognized that he had an expert source in a subordinate and promptly appealed to that source to jointly develop a plan to prepare and then work the plan. He gave the subordinate the necessary authority to act.

The subordinate accepted the task and responsibility. He acted swiftly to develop the plan, coordinate it and provide the necessary support. He aggressively executed the plan, while being careful to respect the commander's prerogatives and position.

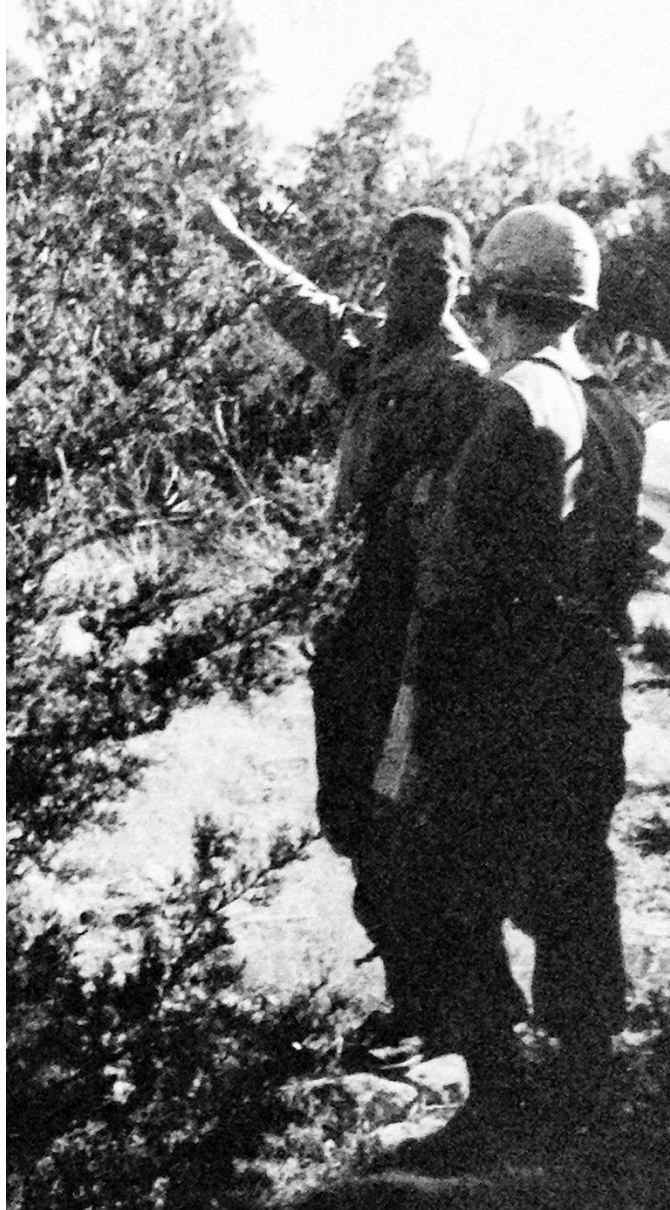


Figure 3. The Company A commander provides guidance during ACCB II.

When the company deployed and executed its maneuver missions during the test, it did so with skill and competency under the company commander's command. None of this would have been possible had leaders not moved beyond ego and focused instead on the mission, how best to prepare, doing that preparation and keeping leadership flexible and tailored to the task.



Figure 5. A squad leader in 1st Platoon mounts up his squad during ACCB II.

Although inexperienced at the start, a competent leader team formed among the officers and noncommissioned officers. They gelled through the lane training and even more so during the test. The company would continue to build on this foundation, eventually deploying on the first Continental U.S. multidivision force-on-force maneuver exercise to be conducted by the Army as it came out of Vietnam. The multi-week Gallant Hand Exercise saw Company A perform well as a mechanized-infantry company. The company met its regimental motto well: “Semper Paratus” or “always prepared.”

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ACCB – air-cavalry combat brigade