

AT FOR A DISMOUNTED RECON TROOP

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Soldiers with the 1st Squadron, 153rd Cavalry Regiment, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Florida Army National Guard, conducted reconnaissance operations with an attached weapons company during its 2015 annual training (AT) March 11-29 at Fort Stewart, GA.

Prior to this event, the squadron's dismounted reconnaissance troop (DRT) — C Troop — had struggled with figuring out its place within the mounted cavalry reconnaissance squadron and how it could best be deployed.

Background

During AT in 2014, C Troop was the 53rd IBCT's decisive operation for a brigade air assault at Camp Blanding, FL. The troop inserted on the landing zone (LZ) at night and started its zone reconnaissance toward anticipated enemy positions. The C Troop commander drove forward in his command high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) and attempted to coordinate reconnaissance missions and submit situation reports (SITREPs) to squadron headquarters. The C Troop scouts were supposed to advance up to 2 kilometers in from the LZ to conduct reconnaissance of named areas of interest (NAIs). Once the scouts located enemy battle positions or 24 hours after insertion, the two mounted reconnaissance troops (MRTs) were to ground assault convoy to C Troop's left and right and start their zone reconnaissance missions. C Troop would remain between the two MRTs and recon the severely restricted terrain in the middle. The problems were many.

First, C Troop packed according to a packing list more designed for deploying than for reconnoitering. They had too much extra stuff. It seems that most scouts had an extra pair of boots, an extra set of uniforms, and many socks, t-shirts, e-tools, water, etc. Second, the terrain they were to move through was severely restricted; the scouts spent three hours chopping at palmetto bushes and tangled vines to advance 300 meters from the LZ. Some scouts had machetes and whacked wildly through the night, which did little except tire the lead scouts. They took turns hacking, making a lot of noise and losing the battle with the Florida swamp. The most effective way to traverse the palmettos was for the lead scout to fall backwards using his rucksack to cushion his fall and knock down some of the palmetto fronds, but this also tired the scouts and created too much noise. Since they inserted at night, the unit could not find another way forward in the dark canopied forest. The third issue was communication. The scouts inserted with short whip antennas because they were easier to move with. The problem was that short whip antennas often failed to reach the troop commander, and the troop commander was so far forward that even he had trouble communicating with the squadron tactical operations center (TOC).

As a night battle captain in the TOC, I was shocked to hear the C Troop commander report he could no longer move: his scouts were exhausted and they had used most of their water. His troop was going to establish security and wait for daylight. Upon hearing this, the squadron immediately launched the two MRTs to move toward their line of departure (LD) and start their zone reconnaissance. That night the two MRTs passed C Troop and reconnoitered by force, finding enemy positions, calling for air support and fire missions, and at times directly engaging the enemy.



The infantry battalions air assaulted into the same LZ the next day and also passed C Troop. C Troop not only failed its reconnaissance mission, but it had little value to the brigade during the remaining fight.

So where does C Troop fit in with the IBCT's reconnaissance? The avenue of advance was severely restricted and higher's expectations may not have been realistic. C Troop was acting like an infantry company, moving as one large unit and making a lot of noise while doing it. After the troop's failure to advance on the first night, it was bypassed and not used again. On top of this demoralizing performance, there was talk throughout the Army of either replacing the DRT with a third MRT or disbanding Charlie Troops altogether.

All of this was on every Soldier's mind as we prepared for our 19-day AT in March 2015 at Fort Stewart. I took command of C Troop five months prior to AT and had three things I believed we needed to do differently in order to be successful during our reconnaissance missions: engaged leadership with a special emphasis on encouraging Soldier initiative, improved Soldier load planning, and better communication planning. We needed to focus on reconnaissance at the scout section level. The sections needed to be comfortable with operating separately from the platoon and troop, and they also needed to be able to work and communicate with different commands. I envisioned two ways to employ C Troop. One way would be to assign us battlespace with a zone reconnaissance mission. This is simple for control measures, but the DRT cannot move as fast as the MRTs and this is exactly the way the troop was used during the 2014 AT. The second way would be to give us NAIs across the squadron's battlespace. These NAIs may differ from the MRTs' because they are in areas inaccessible to HMMWVs or because the NAIs are further in front and stealth is required.

Engaged Leadership

The troop commander needs to be on foot with the insertion in order to understand the decreasing capabilities of the scouts as they continue their mission. Scouts should be at their peak just before the insertion and shortly after, but prolonged missions wear on their ability to make decisions, adapt, stay vigilant, and prepare for new missions. It is more difficult to assess their ability, which is heavily influenced by morale, if the commander is not with the scouts. Also, there is a meaningful morale boost when the commander is suffering the same as, or at least a little like, his Soldiers. I knew I had to be there to assess the scouts and to lead by example. During our air assault onto Remagen DZ at Fort Stewart, I inserted with the troop and followed one of the platoons as it set into a patrol base. I carried a rucksack with Advanced System Improvement Program (ASIP) radio set to monitor the squadron's command net, a COM-201B antenna to set up when we established our patrol base, and two extra batteries on top of my food, water, and very little personal gear.

We had four working vehicles before we left Florida, but by the time the exercise started we only had two: C27 — 2nd platoon's HMMWV and C4 — the supply light medium tactical vehicle (LMTV). The platoons had no vehicles and when I joined the "rolling" command post (CP), I used the vehicle-mounted Single-Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System (SINCGARS). I also brought with me my radio-telephone operator (RTO) and forward observer (FO) which made the rolling CP one truck with 10 personnel total. Most of the headquarters walked, leaving only three personnel in the vehicle. I preferred to walk and had my first sergeant ride. We never had the rolling CP in one location for more than a day. It had to constantly move to best support the scouts. C27 would sometimes drive off ahead or it would wait for us to move and then catch up, depending on the tactical situation. We rarely walked next to the vehicle because we believed it to be a target with a larger signature and it was stuck to roads and trails.

C Troop had undergone a fundamental cultural shift in my first five months of command. It was a long time coming, but the Soldiers were ready. The impetus for change started with my assumption of command and new philosophy. I placed an emphasis on initiative from the Soldier and specifically focused on the individual scout. We encouraged goal setting and held those failing to meet the standard accountable. We also rewarded Soldiers of any rank with schools based on an appropriate order of merit list.

Soldier Load Planning

The second most important aspect was to concentrate on the Soldier's load. We couldn't just start with a base packing list and then add mission essential equipment. The Soldiers would be too weighed down and become demoralized the longer the mission went on. We spent a lot of time load planning, and the platoons and sniper section rehearsed their packing days prior to the mission. We tried to have everyone use assault packs but realized that certain Soldiers needed to take rucksacks because of equipment and comfort added by having a frame. We planned to rotate rucksacks and assault packs as needed for the mission. For example, radios were assigned to individuals, but frequently passed around the platoon and troop as needed for certain missions.



An Infantryman with Troop C, 1st Squadron, 153rd Cavalry Regiment, 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, takes aim from a rooftop to suppress enemy soldiers during Vanguard Focus at Fort Stewart, GA, on 23 March 2015. (Photo by SGT Joshua Laidacker)

No pogy bait was allowed. I was very serious about this. I only wanted our Soldiers bringing Meals, Ready to Eat (MREs), broken down to cut weight. Leaders monitored their scouts on the amount of food they ate. Two MREs a day was our plan. I was afraid that Soldiers would load up on food they wanted to eat, like beef jerky, cans of tuna or chicken, Vienna sausages, and energy drinks. This was about discipline, carrying the bare essentials, and gaining the calories and nutrients needed to survive our exercise. I also believed that leaders didn't need to spend too much time considering nutrition; and since none of us are dietitians and the Army has invested years of research into MRE development, we did not allow Soldiers to bring their own food.

There was one medic attached, however, that I found brought cans of tuna and a three-pound bag of hard candy on the insertion. The attached medics and FOs were integrated late into the platoons, only a day before H-hour, and the scout section leaders responsible for their inspection told me later they were told they could bring anything they wanted but would have to suffer with it. Later, on a long movement behind "enemy" lines, the FO kept lagging behind and flopping on his back during halts. He was exhausted and needed help. His teammates ended up carrying his rucksack for him. They passed off the ruck between scouts until they reached their pickup site. We quickly sent that FO back to squadron. That FO will never walk with C Troop again. The real lesson learned here was that the platoon leaders (PLs) need to conduct pre-combat inspections (PCIs) on their attachments and ensure they follow the load plan guidance.

Maybe it should go without saying, but we had a no cell phone policy in order to prevent distractions or compromise our positions. I also remembered my time as a night battle captain in the TOC during AT 2014 watching a feed from supporting aircraft that showed Soldiers playing on their cell phones while laying on top of their HMMWVs or in their battle positions.

The rest of the packing list was short. For our first mission we planned to insert, establish observation posts (OPs), remain unsupported for up to 72 hours, then withdraw, pass through the squadron's screen, and refit. Therefore, we decided that no extra boots or extra uniforms could be taken. We limited t-shirts and socks to one or two each. We carried two broken down MREs in our packs on the insertion. This was to carry us through one whole day and give us time to recover food and water caches. We initially planned to bring cases of MREs and five-gallon water jugs off the helicopters on the insertion and establish caches that first night. They would have been bulky to move and slowed us

down, but we wouldn't be carrying it in our rucksacks for days, like the year before. We changed that plan and planted the caches two days in advance. The caches were a huge success. We were able to carry less weight on our movement and had the confidence that resupply was available when we needed it.

The two platoons established two caches each and the sniper section used the same cache as 1st Platoon. One of 1st Platoon's caches was raided by wild hogs which ate all of the MREs, left a mess of MRE wrappers, and forced that platoon to cross load food, giving each Soldier a little less than two MREs per day. We figured that each Soldier would need 5 quarts of water per day. There are water consumption tables that give high figures citing gallons a day, but we believed that was impractical and that our scouts would eventually be in static OPs needing less water. We also considered the temperature which ranged from as low as the 50s at night to the high 70s in the day. The Soldier had to carry 5 quarts of water on them or in their pack for the first day, and the caches would cover the next two days of water. After we withdrew from our first mission, we left the water jugs in place. None were discovered by the "enemy," and we recovered them at the end of the exercise. It did cost a lot in water jugs to leave them, but we figured we still had enough to operate during the exercise.

Since we rucked everything in with us and were not to be resupplied for up to 72 hours, I ordered that Soldiers not shave during our first mission. This was to conserve water that might otherwise be wasted on shaving and keep Soldiers from bringing noisy electric shavers to their OPs. The no-shave order was about common sense, although it didn't hurt that it was popular with the Soldiers.

Communication

Our communication plan was certainly more robust than ever before, but it still left room for improvement. Our senior RTO was new to the position and was trained by the outgoing RTO (neither was school trained). Commo is the scout's weapon of choice, and it is every leader's responsibility to ensure they can communicate. C Troop has three ways to communicate — SINCGARS (VHF), High Frequency (HF), and tactical satellite (TACSAT) — and a total of five tactical platforms. For VHF we had PRC-119 manpacks and PRC-148 Multiband Inter/Intra Team Radios (MBITRs). Our single mission-capable HMMWV had two radios but only one mounted antenna. When the rolling CP stopped, the RTO hung an antenna in a tree and hooked it up to one of the vehicle radios. This was inefficient. The truck needed two antennas, but at the time we just didn't have that option. Later, we used a manpack on the floor of the truck commander's side with a long whip antenna extending out of the door. The soft door easily closed over the protruding antenna and allowed for on-the-move communication with two SINCGARS radios from the truck, one monitoring troop and the other monitoring squadron net. We brought four COM-201B antennas with us. I carried one, my FO carried another, and 1st Platoon and the sniper section each carried one as well.

We decided not to use the HF radios for three reasons. First, the squadron S6 assured us that the whole battlefield was in range for SINCGARS. Another reason we didn't carry the HF radios is that nearly every trooper was already burdened with some form of communication equipment already because we were at 50 percent strength, and we were trying to keep the Soldier's load lighter. (Note: We weren't at full strength because of school funding shortages. Any Soldier attending a school went in-lieu-of AT.) I regretted not taking the HF radios, especially after the first 24 hours of intermittent communication with squadron and 1st Platoon. HF would have been a good long-range, albeit unsecure, backup in the commo plan.

Charlie Troop has two vehicle-mounted PSC-5s which were not used in our operation because those vehicles were non-mission capable and two dismounted PRC-117 with inverted umbrella-shaped antennas. My senior RTO carried one of these and would set it up at every halt. The sniper section had one, too. Two of my RTOs had about an hour of training from a civilian on use of the PRC-117, but it was not enough class time. It has an alternate capability to communicate via SINCGARS, but my RTOs didn't learn how to use it in that configuration. We did communicate with squadron about half a dozen times throughout the exercise, but we attempted to communicate many more times. The takeaway is that C Troop needs a school-trained RTO and needs to spend more time with this equipment.

The troop's PACE (primary, alternate, contingency, emergency) plan changed slightly throughout the exercise. Each platoon and the sniper section often had slightly different PACE plans because the troop generally didn't own battlespace. We mostly worked in A and B Troop's battlespace, which meant that their command net on SINCGARS was part of our PACE.

Results

C Troop had tremendous success during AT 2015. One particular mission highlights the cultural shift and payoff of Soldier's load and comms planning. We were given a mission to infiltrate the enemy defense and conduct reconnaissance on an NAI which was believed to be the enemy battalion's TOC. The mission came after several days of long, tough missions.

I decided to create a unique patrol for our mission. My scouts were worn out, and I needed the most fit and able scouts to infiltrate. I led the mission personally because we were the decisive operation for the squadron and understood the positive effects on morale. I was also very aware of the past year's failure to accomplish a mission and knew this was a time for engaged and present leadership. The platoon leader (PL) for 1st Platoon was in charge of overall security and maneuver of the patrol while I communicated with higher and provided guidance to the PL. We had one of his organic scout sections and the sniper section. These were the two scout sections most capable for the long movements. I had my senior RTO with a TACSAT, and I had a manpack with long whip antenna to talk to squadron. We planned a route through thick swamps and streams, but instead of inserting at night like the year prior, we inserted several hours before darkness to give enough time to move through areas where we didn't anticipate enemy.

We planned to communicate with higher at pre-planned checkpoints so we could preserve batteries and for stealth. The C Troop executive officer (XO) acted as a liaison in the squadron TOC, keeping track of C Troop's movement while the squadron managed three other maneuver units. Squadron staff got nervous a few times when we didn't respond or communicate as often as expected.

The movement was slow and deliberate. When we reached one heavily used road, we waited for a safe time to cross. Before we reached our OP, we waited to cross another road near our planned objective rally point, using darkness to conceal our final movements. Using night vision and thermal sights, we located a substantial enemy base camp. Two Apache helicopters arrived on scene at nearly the same time we arrived, and we identified our position and the suspected enemy TOC. The Apaches confirmed there were many tents, generators, and vehicles. We later learned it was actually the opposing force's (4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division's) brigade support area (BSA). I called for 155mm artillery on target, and then the Apache team fired rockets and conducted gun runs. Shortly thereafter, a platoon-sized reserve element approached the west side of the airfield across from us and attempted to find us by engaging the wood line, but they did not know our location. We again called the Apache team, which then destroyed four HMMWVs and one LMTV. The destruction of the BSA and mounted reserve platoon caused chaos in the enemy's rear, and more importantly, C Troop templated a movement corridor in which the 53rd IBCT could pass an entire infantry battalion behind the enemy's defense.

Our success throughout the exercise showed our squadron what a DRT is capable of. At the start of AT, we heard during a previous iteration, one of the other infantry battalions operated in a similar manner that 1-153rd Cavalry did. A major exception was that its C Troop was overrun within hours of the infantry battalion's assault. The DRT had acted too centralized with larger formations on the battlefield, which were quickly found by the advancing "enemy." One platoon, we were told, surrendered after being cut off from the troop. It was in this shadow (and that of the previous AT 2014 failure), that C Troop prepared for and conducted the exercise.

C Troop has a long way to go to be where I believe a DRT should be, but we had come a long way. The DRT commander must train his scouts to operate independently at far distances without readily accessible support and should above all-emphasize initiative. We achieved success by focusing on planning of the Soldier's load and radio communication. We prepared sections to be comfortable operating separately and with some autonomy, and with radio silence for pre-planned periods in order to preserve battery life and keep noise discipline. Most importantly, I put an emphasis on engaged and present leadership and encouraged Soldier initiative. Our success showed the squadron that a DRT is useful and relevant in brigade reconnaissance.

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