

A HEAVY WEAPONS COMPANY IN A LIGHT AIRBORNE WORLD

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Weapons companies have been employed incorrectly for many years. They have the most firepower within an infantry battalion with the most flexibility, but they are often delegated to stationary security positions such as traffic control points or base security. Heading into a training rotation at a Combat Training Center, one could predict that the weapons company will not be employed to its full potential. The various weapon systems and vehicle platforms a weapons company utilizes are often seen as a burden rather than an advantage. The perceived limitations of a smaller-sized infantry company often prevent weapons companies from being employed in an appropriate role. Weapons companies are critical to the battalion because of the way they can be utilized, the type of training they can conduct, and their unique setup.

Unique Setup

The unique setup of the weapons company does a few things: it provides an excellent leader-to-trooper ratio, allows the company to operate alone or task organized to another element, and has the advantage of the arms room concept.

The leadership ratio and task organization within a weapons company — or delta company — are fundamental

reasons for its success. The leadership ratio 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 (SGT/E-5), and many senior and experienced specialists. Each platoon is approximately 16-18 paratroopers when at full strength. In a rifle company, there are roughly four E6s and eight E5s per platoon and around 26-30 E1-E4s. The smaller platoon size has advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage is there is often a number of paratroopers on profile, taskings, or on leave/pass. Paratroopers not present for duty impact the platoon's capabilities, so closely monitoring "troop to task" is paramount. One of the advantages of the small size of a delta company platoon — and a significant reason for the success of a weapons company — is the leader involvement. Leaders not only are involved and ensure their paratroopers are doing the right thing, but they are forced to participate to accomplish the mission, whatever it may be.

Another advantage of the weapons company's unique setup is the ability it provides a commander to operate

Paratroopers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division and six NATO nations established and expanded a lodgment after conducting an airborne joint forcible entry during Swift Response 15 at Hohenfels, Germany, on 27 August 2015.

Photo by SGT Juan F. Jimenez



independently or task organized to another element. Weapons companies may not have the quantity of Soldiers that a rifle company does, but they are still able to action on smaller objectives without the support of another company. By utilizing higher echelon assets such as battalion mortars or attack aviation, a weapons company can function in the same way a rifle company can.

Another method for employment is found in habitual relationships with the rifle companies within the battalion. Each platoon is aligned to a rifle company while the fourth 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. Additionally, each relationship is mutually beneficial. A rifle company benefits by gaining the additional firepower of anti-vehicle/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 the commander, one must tailor the loadout of the company to the mission. Each platoon is broken down into two sections which employ the arms room concept as armament. The arms room concept means the sections have the capability to mount M2, M240B, MK19, and/or the tube-launched, optically-tracked, wireless-guided/Individual Target Acquisition System (TOW/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. While the unique setup is important, it is only part of what makes weapons companies successful.

Training a Weapons Company

With such a wide variety of roles, training a weapons company can be challenging. Not only do you have to train Soldiers on individual skills, but you must also train them to operate mounted and dismounted as a squad, platoon, and company. This can be daunting, but with the right approach and flexible planning it can be accomplished.

Over the past year, Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), has participated in two major training rotations: a Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation at Fort Polk, La., and a training rotation in Europe. As Delta Company prepared for the initial JRTC rotation, the main focus was on 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 between crews and with the rifle company; and command and control on the move became second nature. However, there was friction during actions at the halt or what to do once there was no longer a



Photo courtesy of author

Soldiers with Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, discuss a mission during Swift Response 15.

40-man dismounted platoon around the vehicles.

Each vehicle has a driver, gunner, truck commander (TC), and one to two dismounts. Some platoons have more than others, but that is the task organization Delta Company, 2-501st PIR had at JRTC. While at JRTC, Delta Company executed numerous 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 the defense around the forward landing strip, the company was able to repel the enemy's advances ultimately destroying dismounted, vehicle, and armored enemies within the engagement area. The mission then transitioned to the offense with the battalion moving to assault enemy forces strong pointed in urban areas. During this phase, the company operated within a battalion task force providing security to the ground assault convoy; then upon arrival at the assembly area, it transitioned to support of the assault force.

In both phases of the rotation (offense and defense), Delta Company performed well with a few key learning points for each. Upon return from JRTC, Delta Company, 2-501st PIR transitioned to dismounted tactics, focusing mainly on platoon attack and enter building/clear room training. Admittedly, there was risk assumed in not focusing on as many machine-gun ranges or mounted exercises given the short training window before our European 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 shoot house. This enabled the paratroopers to really learn how to operate dismounted and provided the battalion the capability of utilizing the weapons company as an additional rifle company for smaller objectives or missions (i.e. check point security, dismounted reconnaissance of objectives and tactical operation center locations, and quick reaction force from a rotary wing platform).

There were struggles, at least initially, returning to mounted operations. Simple tasks such as mounted land navigation, FM communication, and logistics status took more time to plan/execute properly or consolidate/reorganize. Ultimately, Delta Company was able to overcome these obstacles; however, those small setbacks added up and caused undue stress, which detracted from the mission.

I believe 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 those 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 of your paratroopers and equipment.

Utilization of the 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 provides 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 the fourth platoon as the battalion reserve. With so many different weapon systems available, understanding the battalion commander's tactical task/end state provides the company commander with options to employ his platoons. For example, given the task of isolating an objective, commanders may utilize the M2, M240B, and MK19s to engage forces attempting to retrograde or reinforce them; once the objective has been seized, they may reinforce the battalion with TOW/ITAS systems to destroy any enemy armored threat.

In the defense, the weapons company can perform a screen in front of the rifle companies to provide defense in depth, be divided up amongst 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 in order 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, 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 the 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 upon arrival," according to the 82nd Airborne Division's Airborne SOP (Edition IX). In this scenario, the weapons company could have a portion of the weapons company attached to a rifle company while the unit is on a no-notice deployment status. This leaves the rest of the company to be bravo echelon (vehicles that will arrive by air-land as opposed to air-drop) once 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 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 really as creative as the commander can be given the environment. Not only does the commander have the maneuverability to move around the battlefield, he also possesses the firepower to destroy most enemies encountered with little resistance.

The Way Ahead

In summary, weapons companies are absolutely essential to the battalion because of their firepower, capability set, the personnel within the company and roles they perform, and their 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.

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