

Developing our Soldiers to Outthink, Outmaneuver, and Outfight the Enemy

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Introduction

LTC Craig Broyles

Here in the Dark Rifle Battalion (3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment), we practice the “Dark Rifle Way of War” (DRWoW). This method is rooted in doctrine, which states: “success in operations hinges... on the ability of leaders and Soldiers to... outthink, outmaneuver, and outfight the enemy.”¹ Our method focuses on advancing these principles and building leaders. As such, leader development is our number one priority. Teaching combined arms maneuver is central to our leader development program. We are different than our peers because we focus on combined arms maneuver at echelons as low as buddy teams and as high as battalion.

We operationalize combined arms maneuver by having an “ambush mentality,” summed up in our motto: “Hunt, Race, Kill.”² An ambush mentality means outthinking (hunt) the enemy by cultivating a hunter mindset in every Soldier that focuses on finding the enemy first. After finding the enemy, we train our Soldiers to outmaneuver (race) the enemy, attacking the enemy from behind. Once behind the enemy, we teach Soldiers to dislocate the enemy to ease our ability to outfight (kill) the enemy through employment of combined arms. By combining the different capabilities of our weapon systems, we create a dilemma for the enemy. For example, if the enemy stands up, we cut them down with direct fire. If the enemy seeks cover, we blast them with indirect fire. Should the enemy seek an armored solution, we deny that solution with our anti-tank weapons. By surrounding the enemy and combining arms, we create psychological shock which ultimately defeats the enemy. Instilling shock by combining arms to the enemy’s rear is our decisive point. In other words, it is how we attain “checkmate.”

The DRWoW relies on simple definitions. We use simple definitions to create shared understanding and purposefully combat against vague generalities and obscure terminology that both masquerade as sophistication. We define maneuver simply: it means moving to attack the enemy from behind. In other words, it means gaining the decisive rear-naked choke on the enemy. To gain this decisive position, we must first fix the enemy. By fix, we mean pinning down the enemy using frontal fire. Our goal is to create “tunnel vision” in the enemy and draw them closer, encouraging their overeager leaders to rush to establish a base of fire. We then exploit the tunnel vision created by our frontal fire. Our base-of-fire position aimed frontally is the lure, setting up the trap. The trap springs when our out-of-contact maneuver element “hits the other fellow as hard as [they] can, as fast as [they] can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain’t looking.”³

Figure 1



The “lure and trap” is the basis for the DRWoW, both offensively and defensively. When met with frontal fire, few Soldiers or leaders can break out of the tunnel vision it creates. They cannot resist being drawn into a frontal engagement. That basic human tendency is the weakness we attack. We aim to turn every encounter into an ambush.

To realize this ambush-focused way of war requires leaders who are both teachable and willing to learn the maneuver warfare theory founded by John Boyd and recognized in Army doctrine. Therefore, our number one priority is developing leaders who are committed to outthinking, outmaneuvering, and outfighting the enemy.

Task Force Dark Rifles (TF DR) succeeded during National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 21-05 because of our development and adherence to the DRWoW. Beginning 12 months prior to our rotation, leaders across all echelons developed and vigorously ingrained this model into our task force. As illustrated in Figure 1, culture is the pintle; it is the critical point that links our tripod to success. The three legs of the tripod build and enable each other: Leader development enables combined arms operations, which in turn enables success in fires and intelligence. TF DR’s success was the product of a shared vision and the continual work of leaders throughout the formation. Although implementing this process was not easy, other units can replicate and improve it.

Leg 1: The Dark Rifle Leader Development and Certification Program

CPT Trey Botten

The Dark Rifle Leader Development and Certification Program is a deliberate, methodical approach to validating all Soldiers and officers who have the word “leader” in their duty position title. The purpose of this program is multi-faceted. First, in many organizations within the Army, leadership positions are assumed based on rank, not by merit, capability, capacity, or competence. This program serves to mitigate the inevitable discrepancies that occur when positions are simply “given” not “earned.” Second, the program serves as a model for subordinate echelons to design their own organic certification process for authenticating and outlining competencies expected for each position. Third, the program is designed to create leaders who think, act, and make decisions aligned with the DRWoW, focusing on understanding the intent two echelons above their current grade which is key for mission command. Finally, in creating these programs, subordinate leaders are forced to validate their own knowledge, describe their leadership philosophies, and learn through deliberate teaching, coaching, and mentorship — which serves as an indirect approach to force subordinate leaders to achieve mastery. This program was tailored and applied to all platoon leaders, squad leaders, and team leaders in TF DR.

Platoon Leader Certification

At first, we began this leadership development course with only the Infantry platoon leaders as the training audience. When 3-161 IN transitioned from a battalion to a task force for its mobilization to NTC and follow-on NATO mission (Enhanced Forward Presence Poland), we expanded the program to include all officers at the second and first lieutenant (2LT/1LT) ranks, including fire support officers, specialty platoon leaders, and troop and battery officers (however, company executive officers and staff primaries were exempt). The program was introduced with a memorandum of instruction to all platoon leaders describing three phases: a written examination, a practical exercise with both physical fitness and tactical events, and a board, which was chaired by the commander and included all company/troop/battery commanders. The certification process endured over the course of four months to allow attention and effort to be dedicated toward preparation, execution, and evaluation of the training audience.

Phase 1 began with the distribution of an open-book, written examination comprising 20 questions. The questions were pertinent to the art of warfare, the Dark Rifle Playbook (how we fight), maneuver warfare, combined arms theory, and leadership. The commander encouraged the junior officer leadership to seek guidance from and ask questions of their commanders to facilitate discussion, consolidate knowledge, and provide a deliberate opportunity for mentorship and coaching. As a company commander, I had the opportunity to review the questions, determine my ideas for appropriate responses aligned with the battalion commander, and have intellectual discussions with my junior officers participating in the exam. Over the course of a week, I allowed the young leaders to work through their own thoughts, study, and take a stance on their answers. I then guided them as necessary to create shared understanding. Interestingly, this process also created an opportunity to observe which officers sought guidance and mentorship, which did not, who took it seriously, and who put in nominal effort. After reviewing



Soldiers in 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment maneuver to a new position on 4 March 2021 during training at Yakima Training Center, WA. (Photo by SGT Adeline Witherspoon)

each of their exams prior to submission, I found many opportunities to retrain, coach, and guide toward answers that better aligned with mine, which were informed by the battalion commander's priorities. After submitting the exams to the commander, each exam was given timely, specific feedback. This feedback was then shared with each junior officer, highlighting both correct responses and shortcomings in knowledge or application.

Phase 2 was an 18-hour field training exercise (FTX) with the battalion commander and all participating junior officers. This phase started with a grueling, two-hour physical training competition designed and led by the battalion commander. This event prioritized and reiterated the necessity for combat leaders to be physically and mentally tough. Throughout the day, the junior officers worked with the battalion commander in the field to better understand forms of maneuver as well as the effects and impacts of tunnel vision created by fixing and flanking forces, movement techniques, movement formations, and engagement area development. While executing the situational training exercise (STX)-based training, the LTs saw the effects of the "lure and trap" ambush mentality — both employing and being caught in the trap. The training concluded with a classroom officer professional development (OPD) describing the commander's standing orders, culture-building, and leadership theories.

Phase 3 was a formal board that took place in the battalion conference room. Approximately three weeks prior to the week-long event, the training audience received a short study guide describing concepts and questions that may be asked during the board. Junior officers received individual timeslots in which they would report to the president of the board and answer a series of questions from the company, troop, and battery commanders. The commanders conducted a rehearsal of the event and came to the board with a variety of questions focused on maneuver warfare, combined arms theory, leadership philosophies, commander's intent, and mission command — all concepts, principles, and strategies applied to the DRWoW.

This event offered the opportunity to apply simulated stress outside of a combat or field training environment, with the underlying goal to inoculate newer officers to its effects. As expected, the board showcased a wide array of talent, preparation, and effort. Commanders coached those who were unable to answer questions toward the desired response. This model served to reinforce the knowledge the commanders' possessed and guide the junior officers toward shared understanding of complex concepts.

Squad Leader Certification

The Squad Leader Development and Certification Program modeled similar approaches, but each company's

course could be unique at the company commander's discretion. As the commander of B Company, I developed a list of 20 standards of performance against which we would measure our leaders in the company. The program was initiated with a one-on-one counseling with each of the 19 leaders, senior sergeants and staff sergeants across the company, where we discussed the training methodology for the program. The course would similarly be conducted in three phases.

Phase 1 comprised both an extensive closed-book exam primarily focused on the science of warfare, land navigation principles, characteristics of the offense and defense, mission and civilian variables, and movement formations at the squad, platoon, and company levels. Afterwards, participants then took a 15-question short response exam. This test was similar to the platoon leader exam, focusing on maneuver warfare, decision-making techniques, the OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) Loop, and leadership philosophies.⁴

Phase 2 comprised four blocks of instruction: combat leadership, protecting our people, the art of war, and the DRWoW. Each block of instruction was assigned four primary instructors and a correlating comprehensive reading assignment. Squad leaders received the reading assignment three weeks prior to each of the four classes. The readings related to the block of instruction and facilitated the instruction and discussion during the class. These classes took place over the course of three months while the company simultaneously completed rigorous FTXs, platoon live fires, gunnery, and community engagements to build relationships with the local Polish community.

Finally, the certification program concluded with a board comprising the platoon sergeants, platoon leaders, first sergeant, and company commander. The questions asked in this board were designed to move squad leaders' thoughts from specific to conceptual, focusing on open-ended questions to force squad leaders to wrestle with wider and more theoretical ideas surrounding the profession of arms and leadership.

Team Leader Certification Academy

After completing squad leader certification, we implemented the Team Leader Development and Certification Program. Under the mentorship and guidance of the operations sergeant major (SGM) and command sergeant major (CSM), the squad leaders, platoon sergeants, and first sergeants planned, resourced, and executed this event entirely, making it an entirely NCO-driven event. Platoon sergeants and squad leaders developed and instructed field training courses for tasks including communication, battle drills, combat water survival, field craft, weapon characteristics, land navigation, and leadership. Team leaders executed a grueling, weeklong FTX in adverse conditions with minimal food and sleep to test and certify the junior NCOs physically and mentally.



In preparation for a National Training Center rotation, Soldiers assigned to 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment conduct tactical movement training on 4 March 2021 at Yakima Training Center, WA. (Photo by SGT Adeline Witherspoon)

I have served in the Army National Guard for 11 years. This is the first example of a leader development program that has been planned, resourced, and executed to completion, and I am proud to have played a part in implementing the program. The effects of the Dark Rifle Leader Development and Certification Program are far reaching. Because the program taught all our leaders to understand both the DRWoW and the playbook, we all have a shared understanding of how we fight. Although the variables of fog, fear, friction, and fatigue are difficult to replicate in garrison, this program deliberately placed leaders in stressful situations to better introduce them to what they may face in combat. Through this program, NCOs and officers proved to themselves and their leadership that they were capable and ready to lead our nation's men and women in combat.

Leg 2: Maneuver, Combined Arms, and Bronegruppa

LTC Craig Broyles and CPT John Krywicki

Maneuver

"The enemy must be surrounded and destroyed to win. We believe a strong, rapid enveloping attack is decisive as long as the enemy is pinned down by frontal fire."⁵

One bad habit in our formations is the unwillingness — or inability — to read, understand, and follow standard operating procedures (SOPs). A unit may have a tactical SOP (TACSOP), but it is often outdated and copied from a previous command. Even if the unit has a TACSOP, it is rare that the formation will know or follow it. The Dark Rifles took a different approach. We developed a small football-like playbook based on a guiding philosophy that centered around the statement: "You are doing no wrong if you are attacking the enemy from behind." The envelopment is the basis for everything we do. Our base offense, defense, and movement plays all aim to lure and trap the enemy. Simply, we cloverleaf our opponent (see Figure 2).

Running our offense typically requires three maneuver units (with a reserve) and leaders willing to make a decision at the point of action.⁶ The Hunters (Team 1) find the enemy and — once found — initiate a support by fire (SBF) through direct/indirect fires to allow the incoming Tank Killers (Team 2) to move. The goal is to fix — or create tunnel vision in — our opponent. The Tank Killers maneuver to an assailable flank and initiate an SBF for the Destroyers (Team 3). If the situation requires breaching or seizing a foothold, the Destroyers will assault up the middle between Teams 1 and 2. If we are attacking to destroy, Team 3 maneuvers to get behind the enemy to serve as an SBF for the final assault. The final assault can be made by either Team 2 or 3 — or instead, the enemy can remain fixed and be destroyed using indirect fire assets. Either way, once SBF 3 is set, we have checkmate.

Doctrinistas contend we have a direct-fire fratricide problem. We would if the engagement was fought two-dimensionally, like on paper or on a whiteboard. However — in the real world — distance, terrain, communication, and threat-based direct-fire control measures negate that problem. We take the additional step of breaking down and moving SBF 1 laterally to become the reserve once the Destroyers cross a specific phase line. Again, think cloverleaf.

Figure 2 (Training Circular 3-21.76, Ranger Handbook)



Defensively, the lure and trap methods are generally the same. The Hunters (Team 1) engage the attacker frontally while the Tank Killers (Team 2) get bypassed. Ideally, Team 1 withdraws pulling the attacker forward to facilitate the human tendency to push/bound forward. This sets the ambush. Once bypassed and fixed frontally, Team 2 engages the enemy from the flank and rear. The Destroyers (Team 3) are staged as the reserve to counterattack between Teams 1 and 2 or to cloverleaf, rerunning our offense.

Our movement play — dubbed the “Lazy Trident” — is the lure and trap in motion, ready to execute the envelopment no matter the direction of contact. This is how we outmaneuver our enemy.

Combined Arms

The DRWoW focuses on combining arms to put the enemy into a dilemma. If we engage with our machine guns, we expect the dismounts to take cover. When they take cover, our mortars, M320s, and grenades blow them out. If they stand back up, our machine guns cut them back down. If they call for armor support, our javelins and Carl Gustafs reduce the enemy’s armor to coffins. No matter what they do, they lose. That is combined arms warfare.⁷ Anticipation and sequence is key. We plan, rehearse, and practice combined arms fighting in all training events. This is how we outfight our opponent. If they know what they are doing and practice, all infantry formations — from fire teams to brigades — have the capability to fight this way.

Bronegruppa

A crucial part of the DRWoW is fighting asymmetrically. The battalion does this at every echelon to achieve the greatest affect against an enemy that can outnumber and outrange us. Given our battalion’s manning, we knew we could only man two platoons per line company prior to NTC. Based on the way we fight and maneuver, we need three maneuver elements. In order to overcome this, the battalion adopted the bronegruppa, a method used by the Russians in Afghanistan to maximize combat power and create flexibility where there would be none. The bronegruppa creates a third maneuver element consisting of infantry fighting vehicles after the Infantry Soldiers have dismounted.⁸ This group of vehicles can be used as an ambush team, a mobile reserve, or as an “extraordinary (enveloping) force.”⁹ This technique has proved successful on numerous occasions to rapidly envelop enemy forces that were concentrating on friendly dismounted forces. Our Infantry Soldiers dismount and cover terrain, avoiding detection and identifying or neutralizing any kill threats to the Strykers. Once all anti-tank threats are cleared, the bronegruppa can then suppress dismounts.

The use of bronegruppa at NTC allowed us to further our combined arms mentality and put the enemy in no-win situations. Its use supported the tenant that “[w]e combine supporting arms, organic fire, and maneuver in such a way that any action the enemy takes to avoid one threat makes him more vulnerable to another.”¹⁰ When the enemy is behind cover, we blast them out with company mortars; when they attack, our Infantry Soldiers shoot them; and when they attempt to maneuver, our bronegruppa envelopes them. The combined arms mentality is something that we focus on from the battalion down to the fire-team level. We know that to win we must put the enemy in a no-win situation by combining arms. By that same token to prevent defeat, each arm protects each other.¹¹ We also use the bronegruppa to draw our enemy infantry away from their tanks and remove the enemy’s flexibility to combine arms against us. Once enemy infantry soldiers are removed from their tanks, we fight asymmetrically to defeat them.

When the Russians used bronegruppa, they generally placed it in a rear staging area until needed.¹² In TF DR we mirrored that technique and adapted a few techniques of our own. One technique we used was to have infantry clear intervisibility (IV) lines while Strykers were in defilade, able to support our dismounted Soldiers. Once the IV line was clear, our Strykers would move up and assume a new support position as our infantry continued forward. When these steps were followed, the results were successful. The danger in employing bronegruppa with Strykers is that they are highly susceptible to destruction from armored threats. Leaders must ensure armored threats are neutralized before exposing Strykers, even in a supporting role.

Bronegruppa works when a key leader is placed in charge. We found the company executive officer was the best person to assume this role. I believe it would be more successful if the following deliberate planning steps were taken:

- 1) I would establish company named areas of interest (NAIs) tied to decision points within the company-level plan and based on suspected enemy locations.



Soldiers in 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment camouflage their Stryker vehicle at the National Training Center on 10 March 2021. (Photo by SGT Adeline Witherspoon)

2) I would aggressively assume more risk to commit the bronegruppa. The absence of anti-tank assets on the battlefield is not evidence that there are anti-tank assets to be found!

3) I would commit the bronegruppa with other tasks and purposes outside of the decisive point. One such task would be to conduct a feint one terrain feature away from an enemy's attack. From the enemy's perspective, they would have recon report to them that around 10-12 Strykers are moving in their vicinity, but they do not know if dismounts are in them. Therefore, the feint would turn their direction of attack — or force the enemy to commit some forces to react to the threat — and set the conditions for the enemy to be defeated in detail.

4) I would infiltrate dismounts into an objective where the enemy would conduct an ambush on friendly movement. The bronegruppa would move out on their route and be spotted by the enemy listening posts/observation posts (LP/OPs). As the enemy moves to their ambush position, they would then be ambushed by our dismounted forces. The bronegruppa would then cut off any retreat of the enemy or assume an SBF role.

The separation of Infantry Soldiers from their vehicles has long been a go-to technique for Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCTs) at NTC. TF Dark Rifles took it one step further and used Strykers as more than simply a vehicle or mobile SBF. The Stryker is essential to combining arms, and we employed them in a way to maximize our lethality and flexibility.

Leg 3: Fires and Intelligence Synchronization

CPT Timothy Kastenholz

The Power of Reconnaissance and Indirect Fire

Reconnaissance and indirect fire (IDF) are central to the DRWoW. For our maneuver plays to be successful, we must find the enemy first. To this end, our TF uses our attached cavalry troop as our close reconnaissance and long range surveillance (LRS) teams as our deep reconnaissance. In doing so, we strive to find the enemy first and maximize our IDF assets to support the main effort and create shock in the enemy.

As a TF, we had both reconnaissance and IDF assets that are not typically available to an organic Stryker battalion. We had an attached battery consisting of four M777A2s, meaning our IDF assets could reach the enemy at three times the range of the typical, organic IDF assets for a Stryker infantry battalion. We also had additional reconnaissance: a cavalry troop with an added heavy weapons platoon. This troop (+) consisted of the following Stryker variants: 13x Reconnaissance Vehicles (RVs), 2x Mortar Carrier Vehicles (MCVs), 2x Mobile Gun System Vehicles (MGS), and 2x Anti-Tank Guided Missile Vehicles (ATGMs). During battalion operations, we primarily tasked the cavalry troop with conducting close reconnaissance, counter reconnaissance, and screening. Their key task in each mission was to identify the probable line of contact (PLC) for our dismounts.

Given the extra reconnaissance assets attached, our TF chose to combine our organic scouts and snipers into a reconnaissance platoon. This formation paired the target acquisition and engagement capabilities of our snipers with the mobility, communication, and surveillance capabilities of battalion scouts, creating battalion LRS teams. These teams could remain mounted to rapidly move across the battlefield and then dismount to push deep behind enemy lines, identify enemy critical vulnerabilities, and destroy high-payoff targets using direct and indirect weapon systems. The Strykers served as mobile retransmission for our dismounted radios.

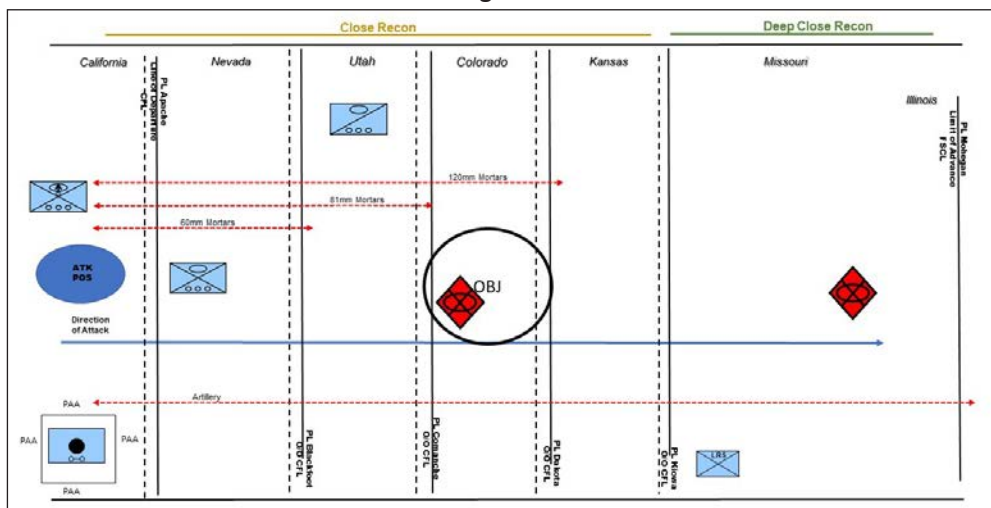
In practice, our method of reconnaissance was not merely successful, it proved to be decisive. During NTC Rotation 21-05, TF DR LRS teams infiltrated deep into the enemy's defenses, located the Black Horse tactical command post (TAC), and destroyed it with indirect fire — calling upon our attached battery of M777A2s to hit the enemy deep. Not only did they destroy the TAC, they killed the enemy battalion commander: Black Horse 6. For an infantry battalion — whose organic indirect fire assets of 120mm mortars are limited — it completely changes the battle to be able to get reconnaissance deep, identify high-payoff targets, and kill them at a range of 20 kilometers.

The Killing Machine

Our Killing Machine play focuses on massing IDF assets in a given area while minimizing coordination and communication with higher echelons. Speed is the goal; the quicker indirect fires can be massed the more effective they will be. The genesis of this play comes from a Center for Army Lessons Learned article produced by the 25th Infantry Division.¹³ We used the ideas discussed in that article to pair our indirect fire assets with observers and streamline air and space deconfliction. We separated the Killing Machine into two areas, the deep fight and the close fight.

For the deep fight, this play starts with S2 establishing target selection standards; these standards are based on the commander's priorities and serve as a flowchart to determine when to engage the enemy with IDF assets. The S2 then establishes NAIs for observation by all collection assets: unmanned aerial systems (UAS), TF reconnaissance, and forward observers (FOs). S2 then shares fighting products — enemy event template; enemy decision point matrix; intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) matrix; and high-payoff target list (HPTL) — up and down the chain of command to ensure shared understanding and efficient use of collection assets. If any TF asset observes enemy within an NAI, the NAI transitions into a target area of interest (TAI). The enemy is then refer-

Figure 3



enced against HPTL and pre-established target selection standards. Once an HPT is identified in a TAI or target selection standards criteria are met within a TAI, that TAI becomes a “hot” kill box. All or some available assets engage targets in the kill box. When the desired effect meets the desired end state — either destroy, neutralize, or suppress enemy within the kill box — the kill box becomes “cold.” The battalion collection assets will then look at other NAIs (potential future kill boxes) to continue to mass effects on the enemy.¹⁴

For the close fight, the TF used organic mortars to achieve effects against any enemies that outmatched our Strykers in a head-to-head fight. In other words, we used mortars to fight asymmetrically, pitting our strength against enemy weakness. By constantly bounding our mortars forward to support the main effort, we provide a protective blanket for our Infantry Soldiers and can rapidly employ our organic IDF when they find the enemy.

At NTC, our TF used the Killing Machine play to great effect. We nested our collection priorities with those from both division and brigade, increasing the likelihood higher echelons would devote assets to our TF. We synchronized our organic and attached assets, ensuring shared understanding and efficient use of collection assets. For example, we successfully employed our attached Special Forces element to identify and destroy enemy air defense artillery, maximizing effectiveness of our UAS and rotary wing assets. Every collection was given some IDF asset to destroy enemy that met our pre-established criteria. We kept our mortars in range to support our infantry as they advanced. By doing this, we fired more mortar rounds on the enemy than our observer-coach-trainers (OCTs) had seen in their two years of observing units. Further, by pushing our LRS deep, we destroyed the enemy TAC and enemy battalion commander. Our detailed planning and execution of IDF with recon allowed us to shoot faster as our planning pushed for decentralization of fires as much as possible. This all fits with the asymmetry that is central to the DRWoW: Mortars kill infantry and field artillery kills HPTs.

The Pintle: The Battalion Culture

Chaplain (CPT) Brandon Sanders

The Dark Rifles’ philosophy can be summarized as “Hunt, Race, Kill, Strength, and Honor.” Each tenant of our philosophy shapes who we are as individuals and informs how we interlace our personal efforts with the mission of the TF. These tenants craft a tapestry of excellence that has, time and again, outperformed those who are better manned and superiorly resourced. As Dark Rifles, we have crafted an internal culture that has allowed us to consistently fight outnumbered and win. We have done so by pursuing perfection of outcome rather than perfection of method. Rather than managers who merely operate within the culture, we have created leaders willing to change the culture for the better.

Hunt — The Ambush Mentality

We seek to leverage defeat mechanisms to win psychologically rather than through attrition and destruction. This is how we fight outnumbered, under-resourced, but consistently win. In combat, mass, momentum, and continuous combat are operative tactics. However, surprise can be substituted for mass. Thus, ambushing allows us to have a greater impact on the battlefield, as it leverages surprise to compensate for our size.¹⁵ Our internal culture and planning prioritizes skill, craft, and deception and ignores force ratios and other physical constraints that cripple other organizations.¹⁶ By exploiting the volatility of the human soul and having a greater desire for victory, we win.

The single greatest device to invoke defeat in the soul of an enemy is the ambush. In the offense and the defense, we seek to set the ambush so that we remain “shapeless” in the mind of the enemy and therefore a constant threat.¹⁷ This affords two key advantages. First, we always have the initiative. No matter if in the offense seeking to envelop or in the defense setting “islands of resistance” of squads throughout the battlefield, we are always setting the ambush. Secondly, we are afforded a psychological force multiplier that increases our lethality far beyond what we are capable of inflicting physically. The enemy can never fully articulate how many Dark Rifles they are facing or where they are. This allows us to concentrate upon their critical vulnerability and dissolve in such a way that counterattacks prove difficult, if not impossible.

This mentality on the battlefield also has a strengthening effect upon our formation. Since we are always hunting, we seek to do difficult things. This demands a tireless recon effort to be perpetually ceaseless. While on the battlefield, ISR, LRS, and cavalry elements provide this capability, and the Dark Rifle leader at the lowest level is our greatest sensor. Therefore, the team leader is our greatest asset in finding and fixing issues before they become initiative-crippling stumbling blocks.



Soldiers with 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment “Dark Rifles” pull security during a National Training Center rotation on 14 March 2021. (Photo by SGT Adeline Witherspoon)

Race — Speed is Everything

In TF DR, we prioritize speed and audacity beyond all other attributes. We see ourselves in keeping with the light infantry tradition of the German Jäger, in that we emphasize open-order tactics and value high-quality, independent junior leaders and Soldiers.¹⁸

To accomplish this, we believe decisions must be made closest to the point of action. Thus, we empower and enable our most junior leaders with making informed decisions in the moment. We truly believe that one Soldier, in the right place at the right time making the right decisions, is our path to success.

Team leaders are always encouraged and empowered to manage their Soldiers in the best way that they see fit. Therefore, TF-level standards and discipline issues are kept to a minimum in order to allow team leaders the greatest flexibility to solve problems. This is crucial in placing the Soldier first as team leaders know their Soldiers better than anyone else in the battalion and can tailor solutions faster and more effectively than anyone else.

In keeping with that, trust is our biggest force multiplier. We believe that operations can only occur at the speed of trust in our formation.¹⁹ Therefore, we empower team leaders and squad leaders more than most of our peer organizations. Having this level of trust in our most junior leaders allows us to withstand a large amount of stress and strain without having to have a lot of discussion.²⁰

Our culture of empowerment and trust allows us to establish and maintain momentum on the battlefield by making decisions at the point of action. This momentum — above all else — is crucial to gaining the initiative, pressing the attack, and staying well inside the decision loop of our adversaries.²¹ We believe that operation tempo is a state of mind, and we have largely grown accustomed to maintaining a high pace of operations.²²⁻²³ Everything is a race; if you don't know it, it is because you are so far behind.

Since we believe that it is not the stronger opponent that wins but rather the faster one, we tolerate a certain degree of imperfection.²⁴ Having a partial solution to a problem and acting on it today, is far more desirable to us than having the perfect solution tomorrow. This methodology leads to Soldiers improving themselves through practice. With each successive iteration of training, Soldiers refine themselves, which ultimately makes the Dark Rifles a more lethal organization as time goes on.

Kill — Overwhelming Bias for Action

As a partner to speed, TF DR prioritizes aggressiveness and initiative in all things.²⁵ We adamantly detest risk aversion and seek to leverage a “solve for yes” culture. We want a culture that seeks the toughest of challenges. Because of our culture, our leadership has consistently tasked our battalion with the hardest assignments. Whether it is riots, pandemic response, rotations at NTC, or deterrence of a near-peer adversary, we have time and again shown up only to win, nothing else.

Using this attitude and culture, we leverage the unique personalities and abilities of those in our formation, regardless of their traditional role and responsibilities. Understanding our National Guard origins, we know that our capability actually goes far beyond our modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). In our formation we have computer programmers, software engineers, avionics technicians, teachers, law enforcement officers, professional logisticians, media managers, etc. Given this set of unique and eclectic capabilities, we think beyond someone's title and position and look to their interests and abilities when solving the challenges presented to us by our leadership. Where many pay lip-service to the concept that "people are our greatest asset," the Dark Rifles truly live it.

Our culture is one of extreme lethality due to this empowerment and the audacity of commanders. Our culture calls for visionary command guidance and low-level empowerment, resulting in unique and ambitious solutions to problems that are the norm rather than outliers. This allows for continual, outside-the-box thinking as the creativity of leaders and Soldiers are used in all aspects of operations.

Ultimately, inaction is the only sinful action in TF DR. Considering the ample amount of trust and empowerment in our formation, we exhibit a large amount of grace and development of up-and-coming leaders. Soldiers must always be seeking to solve the problem and overcome the current adversary, or they cease to be part of the team.

Strength

Our culture is grounded in our reality. As a part-time force, we must optimize our existence to having only a few people — with only a few resources — most of the time. We view this as a value-added strength rather than a hindrance. Much like successful forces that have preceded us, we do not look to fix the things out of our control, rather we choose to leverage our reality to exploit the opportunities afforded us. Much like Israel in the Six-Day War, we turn to leadership and doctrine to answer our conundrums.²⁶

We truly believe that people are our greatest asset and the source of our strength. To take those people and coalesce them around a unified purpose, we spend a large amount of time on branding. Stickers, flags, awards, digital products, and a robust social media push lets our Soldiers, potential recruits, and adversaries know that we are a professional fighting force and ready for a challenge to test ourselves against.

This results in people who genuinely care and see the organization as an extended family. Once Soldiers feel "themselves to be full members of a close-knit group which forms the object of their loyalty, facing almost certain death probably becomes easier for them than deviating from the behavior pattern they know the group expects."²⁷ This leads to Soldiers personally owning their part of the mission and ensuring that they are successful. When Soldiers are welcomed into an elite unit with a strong culture of competence, branded as an elite Soldier, then trusted and empowered to bring their own unique solutions to complex and meaningful problems, excellence is the only possible result.

Our culture of strength revolves around developing those in our formation regardless of where they are at. At times this may mean moving people to new positions, but more often than not it means enabling and encouraging Soldiers in the midst of their present challenges.

We prioritize the study of maneuver warfare, emphasizing its theory, history, and application. As we firmly believe that "developing military judgement requires studying war," our officers study past engagements and battles.²⁸ During regular professional development meetings, our officers and senior enlisted leaders research and teach tactics and doctrine based on an assigned reading list. Collective learning is facilitated by leveraging a highly interactive discourse between those in attendance. This allows the topics covered to be seen from multiple perspectives as our own strengths and weaknesses teach one another.

Ultimately, this culminates in a training exercise where we put our newly developed strategies, skills, and techniques into action. We do this through free-play training where judgment is emphasized over the transmission of knowledge.²⁹ By frequently pitting two elements against one another and having a third observe the engagement, not only do the two elements get to test their own judgement and experiment, but the OCT element learns from watching them.

Honor

“You can tell a great unit by how they welcome and send off their Soldiers.”

— LTG Willard M. Burleson III

We seek to honor those Dark Rifles who both presently live our values as well as those who have gone before us. We believe that by celebrating the success of those who actively live our desired culture, our legacy will be that of an effective organization our country can count on when needed.

We honor the past Dark Rifles in two distinct ways. First, we regularly incorporate the running legacy of the 161st Infantry Regiment in our awards and ceremony. This allows our Soldiers to have their name placed beside those who have committed heroic acts in extremely adverse conditions. By opening this possibility up to our junior leaders, we incentivize them to be visionaries of what they and their teams can accomplish.

Secondly, we honor our Soldiers and those who have lived the Dark Rifle culture by recording them in the Order of the Dark Rifle book. Any Dark Rifle Soldier can submit another to consideration for entrance into the order, and there are incremental induction ceremonies to celebrate the contributions of individuals to the good of the organization.

These induction ceremonies are live-streamed for family and leadership to celebrate the individual alongside the Soldiers. This breeds a culture of excellence as entrance into the book has become more of a status symbol than any formal military award or accolade.

Along with celebrating the Dark Rifles of the past, we also seek to simultaneously honor those who are actively contributing to the good of the organization in the present. Social media is a fundamental culture-shaping tool in this regard. While it has many functions, our social media efforts communicate to our Soldiers that they are a part of an elite organization that is fundamentally different from other infantry battalions they could be serving in. This creates positive incentives to join the Dark Rifles and stay to perform at the standards that our battalion’s image stands for. The speed, audacity, aggression, and honor that make for a formidable warrior is thoroughly documented and published for the world and our own formation to see.

Along with shaping the culture through social media, leaders produce unique awards that incentivize the behaviors we desire most in our junior leaders. This comes from community-sponsored gifts that tie our battalion close



A Soldier with 3rd Battalion, 161st Infantry Regiment calls for ammunition during a training exercise at Bemowo Piskie Training Area, Poland, on 23 September 2021. (Photo by SPC Osvaldo Fuentes)

to the people that they are directly serving. These awards incentivize junior Soldiers to be the most aggressive, innovative, and audacious Soldiers in the U.S. military. While formal awards are given at liberty to the deserving, these unique battalion awards are of the most coveted and the most proudly displayed amongst the junior leaders of the Dark Rifles.

We see discipline as our protective fabric.³⁰ No Soldier is above the law and dishonoring the name of oneself and the battalion is the fastest way to cease being a Dark Rifle Soldier. Given our high emphasis on trust and empowerment of junior leaders, we demand honor — doing what is right no matter how you feel about it.

Conclusion

By prioritizing our efforts into four main areas, the Dark Rifles have remained successful, both at NTC and the follow-on deployment to Poland. We have created a culture that focuses on leader development, combined arms maneuver, and synchronization of fires and intelligence. Our leader development program has created buy-in and helped solidify a shared understanding of how we fight. As such, we have been able to successfully employ maneuver warfare theory, using combined arms to pit our strengths against the enemy's weaknesses. We have been able to employ a unique approach to reconnaissance, getting deep to destroy the enemy's command and control centers. Through our successes, and reflection on our failures, we have created a culture of competence and widespread desire to constantly improve our ability to win.

Notes

¹ ATP 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squads*, August 2016, 73 (1-41) (emphasis added).

² Marine Corps Doctrine Publication (MCDP) 1-3, *Tactics*, July 1997.

³ Sir William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: Cassell & Co, 1956), 550-551.

⁴ Observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) — The OODA Loop is a rapid decision-making process; key to this process is the fact that it's a loop. Once the decision is made, it affects need to be observed and any follow-on course corrections needed are made, or the result is favorable and left as is.

⁵ Dark Rifle Playbook, from the Company Officer's Handbook of the German Army (Military Intelligence Division War Department, 31 March 1944).

⁶ Two units can run our offense, but those two units would need to be fast and proficient at lateral bounds.

⁷ MCDP 1-3, 39-41.

⁸ While the Stryker platform is not a fighting vehicle, it can still be used to support dismounted Soldiers in a similar fashion to fighting vehicles. For example, Strykers can still be used as a support by fire, to disrupt, to pursue, or to fix the enemy while the dismounted maneuver elements move to a position of advantage. Leaders must be aware of the risk of using the Stryker in this manner, namely that the Stryker's armor and range will be outmatched in a head-to-head confrontation with armor. However, we found using bronegruppa tactics with Strykers to be overwhelmingly successful.

⁹ Robert R. Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (NY: Presidio Press, 1995), 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 39-40.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 40-41.

¹² Dr. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War* (Fort Leavenworth, KY: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), 76.

¹³ MAJ Bobby Sickler, MAJ David Henderson, and John Hansen, "An Integrated Division Deep Fight, Deep Battle 2.0," News from the Front, Center for Army Lessons Learned, February 2017.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Richard E. Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare* (Washington, D.C., Potomac Books, 1985), IX, 303.

¹⁶ Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, 31.

¹⁷ Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, XI, 303.

¹⁸ Richard D. Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology* (NY: Presidio Press, 1993), 262.

¹⁹ Jim Mattis and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (NY: Random House, 2019).

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, 31.

²² Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*.

²³ Marshall Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, February 2014.

²⁴ Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare*, 262.

²⁵ Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*.

²⁶ Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare*, 262.

²⁷ Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, XI, 303.

²⁸ Hooker, *Maneuver Warfare*, 262.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Mattis and West, *Call Sign Chaos*.

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