

Fighting and Winning with Fires:

The Patriot Brigade's Record-Setting JRTC Rotation

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On 24 April 2021, the Patriots of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 10th Mountain Division emerged from their demanding Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) rotation at Fort Polk, LA. The Soldiers of Geronimo, the opposing force (OPFOR), lived up to their reputation and proved to be the last enemy anyone would ever want to fight. Their attacks were constant and occurred in all domains and throughout the depth of the battlespace. They fought with agility, tempo, and decisiveness. Though Fort Polk is the Patriot Brigade's home turf, the seasonal rains and densely wooded training area made for highly restrictive terrain and a very difficult training environment.

Despite these challenges and a litany of its shortcomings, the brigade's fires warfighting function (WfF) set multiple records during this rotation:

- More battle damage assessment (BDA), the total number of enemy casualties and damaged or destroyed equipment from fires than the previous six rotations combined;
- The first brigade to outshoot Geronimo with fires;
- The first ever fully digital sensor-to-shooter fire mission at JRTC;
- The fastest counterfire time in eight years; and
- The longest firefight to defend the brigade's howitzers at a position area for artillery (PAA) in recent memory.

This article will describe some of the key decisions and actions that made this success possible, with the intent that other brigades would be able to replicate these successes in future JRTC rotations.

Training Progression

Before addressing each of the factors that were critical to success, though, examine the brief summary of the unit's training progression outlined in Figure 1. After a nearly 15-month long training hiatus due to a Southwest border deployment, COVID restrictions, and Hurricane Laura recovery efforts, Soldiers of the "Thunder Battalion" — the 5th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery Regiment (5-25 FA), as well as the other Patriots of 3/10 BCT, followed a condensed but fairly standard training progression.

Though this training progression was not particularly novel, the brigade made the most of its available training time in two important ways:

- (1) By leveraging great support from 10th Mountain Division's Division Artillery (DIVARTY) and other division counterparts at multiple points in the train-up, and
- (2) By having built-in, brigade-protected windows to

Timeline

June-December 2019: Southwest Border Mission
February-June 2020: COVID-19 restrictions
August-September 2020: Hurricane Laura recovery
September 2020: Artillery Table (AT) VI (Section Qualification)
October 2020: AT XII (Platoon Qualification)
November 2020: Leader Training Program (LTP); AT XV (battery qualification); company combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX)
December 2020: Company/battery-level re-training field training exercise (FTX)
January 2021: Mountain Peak (brigade FTX); AT XV
March 2021: Brigade command post exercise (CPX); company/battery-level re-training FTX
April 2021: JRTC rotation

conduct after action review (AAR)-driven retraining after major collective training events.

One other item to note was that the brigade did not merge its Artillery Table XV with company combined arms live-fire exercises (CALFEXs). Treating each as a distinct event with its own training objectives and timeline enabled the battalion to ensure each training audience was able to train to standard.

It was a fast-paced and aggressive training progression. Throughout that progression, though, there were three factors that remained constant and were vital to the brigade's success, despite the many challenges we faced: ideology, deliberate decisions, and culture.

Ideology — Leading with High Explosives (HE)

Before any of us ever met, COL Matthew J. Hardman, commander of 3rd BCT, initiated a running dialogue with all of the battalion commanders about how we as a team would fight the brigade. We discussed all WfFs as COL Hardman wrote and disseminated a "how we fight" document and led leader professional development (LPD) sessions on the topic. By the end of the leader training program (LTP) in November 2020, leaders were all on the same page at every echelon: The brigade would "lead with HE." The 3rd BCT would do most of its damage to the enemy with HE and then clean out hard-to-reach places with lethal rifle companies and platoons. That was easier said than done, but everyone understood that was the goal. LTC Benjamin E. Jackman, commander of 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment,

demonstrated his understanding and commitment when he pointed out that “we tend to think of using fires to support maneuver, but there will also be times when we will have to maneuver in order to get fires into position.” LTC Jackman was speaking specifically in terms of the maneuver WFF, but the intent to lead with HE had implications for other WFFs as well.

Intelligence drives operations, so the brigade could not effectively lead with HE unless the intelligence WFF was ideologically aligned. During its rotation, the BCT would be without a targeting warrant officer, a field artillery intelligence officer (FAIO) working within the brigade intelligence support element (BISE) to transform intelligence into targets. After some LPDs during the brigade’s training progression, key players within the brigade S2 shop bought into having a “mentality of lethality,” not just an analytical mentality. They began to think of themselves as hunters. This was tempered, though, with some important guidance from COL Hardman. He told the staff, “We collect for two reasons: to answer PIRs (priority intelligence requirements) and to facilitate targeting. We never do only one or only the other, but we always have to be clear on which one is the priority. When I’m not there, the CHOPS (chief of operations) makes that decision.” When targeting was the priority, the intelligence WFF was ready to hunt.

Another critical conversation that paid dividends during the JRTC rotation centered around targeting and the fires WFF. Many months before the rotation, COL Hardman sat me down to discuss targeting. I came in with the prevailing mindset that we should not expend ammo and expose ourselves to counterfire for low-payoff targets, that we had to avoid chasing minor enemy capabilities with fires, and that we had to have a disciplined adherence to our high-payoff target (HPT) list, attack guidance matrix, and target selection

standards. After hearing me out, COL Hardman said, “Jon, I agree with you, and 90 percent of the time, we will do exactly that... Sometimes the targeting team will tell me that two or three particular enemy capabilities are the most important things to destroy, and you’ll be right. But then Murphy and the enemy will vote, and we just won’t be able to find it. At some point — and I trust you to know when this point is — we need to stop looking for the unicorn and just kill a bunch of infantry.”

This artful, intuition-driven balance between a disciplined approach to targeting and an opportunistic approach to “fight the enemy, not the plan” worked well. Several times 5-25 FA landed a haymaker by destroying a critical HPT, but when its intelligence efforts could not find the HPT, the battalion hit Geronimo with as many body blows as it could, neutralizing infantry platoons and reducing enemy combat power with every fire mission. To repurpose GEN Eisenhower’s famous quote: “The target synch matrix is nothing; targeting is everything.” In other words, the fight rarely unfolded exactly as we expected coming out of each targeting board. However, by running the targeting process every single day, the brigade was able to request and lock in assets which it could then re-task and re-purpose as needed in execution; the brigade was able to “fight the enemy, not the plan” while remaining nested in the shared understanding of the commander’s targeting guidance.

To facilitate that approach, we embraced the idea that “if it’s worth killing, it’s worth overkilling.” Commanders at all echelons, fire support teams (FISTs), and fire direction centers (FDCs) became comfortable planning for large volumes of HE, built from the JRTC adjudication tables. The

Soldiers from 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division react to fire from a simulated opposing force on 10 April 2021 as part of Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 21-06 at Fort Polk, LA.

Photo courtesy of Joint Readiness Training Center Operations Group



field artillery (FA) battalion used the adjudication tables to develop all of its fire orders and made massing and high volume fire orders the norm, starting as early as section certification. Training Circular (TC) 3-09.8, *Fire Support and Field Artillery Certification and Qualification*, establishes a minimum requirement of 15 rounds per section to certify; 5-25 FA shot 50 per section. Early in the training progression, the battalion broke the habit of low volume, precision-centric fire missions that had become so pervasive after nearly 20 years of stability operations.

The “lead with HE” mentality does not work without close integration with the sustainment WfF. During LTP, COL Hardman made it clear that tracking HE Class V is commander’s business. Organic indirect fire systems are the most effective way for commanders to shape the fight at their echelon (mortars for companies and battalions, and artillery for the brigade). Therefore, commanders at every echelon must know what they have available, report accurately, and anticipate future requirements. The FA battalion tactical operations center (TOC), for instance, tracked every 105mm and 155mm artillery round by location and planning horizon including: what each battery currently has on hand; what is at the combat trains command post (CTCP) and therefore available to shoot within eight hours; what is at the brigade support area (BSA) and therefore available to shoot within 24 hours; and what is at the division support area (DSA) and therefore available within 48 hours. Sustainment is a team sport. Tracking and synchronizing to this level of detail required close coordination between the batteries, battalion S4, forward support company commander at the field trains command post (FTCP), headquarters and headquarters battery commander at the CTCP, brigade S4 and support operations officer (SPO), and 710th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB). LTC Barry Murray, commander of 710th BSB, drove sustainment for the brigade and worked

wonders to keep the mortars and howitzers fed with Class V.

The greatest planning at the brigade and battalion level can fall apart if companies/batteries/ troops are not prepared to execute. Early in the brigade’s training progression, the 3rd BCT’s command sergeant major (CSM), Nema Mobarakzadeh, hosted a brigade-wide LPD for battery/ company/troop command teams. He used Charlie Battery to demonstrate the resupply process from logistics status (LOGSTAT) through delivery of supplies, including how to prepare for and receive supplies at the logistics release point. This thorough LPD and live demonstration prepared units across the brigade to resupply themselves effectively and efficiently with ammunition and other supplies, conduct field maintenance, and fuel the fight. This LPD ensured leaders down to the company level knew what right looked like for tactical distribution operations, and accurate LOGSTAT reporting became a key training objective throughout the BCT’s training progression.

Ingraining the ideology to “lead with HE” during the train-up provided understanding of the commander’s intent that was applicable throughout the brigade. Having that shared understanding early on in the brigade’s training progression enabled countless other decisions and actions across WfFs and echelons that converged with incredible effects during JRTC.

Deliberate Decisions — Manning, Training, Equipping, and Leading with What You Have

“Readiness is about what you have, not what you don’t have.”

— MG Milford H. Beagle

Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry)

The U.S. Army lives in a resource-constrained environment. Therefore, leaders must make deliberate decisions about how they allocate what they do have without fixating on what they don’t have. This applies to how leaders man, train, equip, and lead.

From a manning perspective, this necessitates effective talent management and aligning the right person to the right job. In the absence of warrants, I handpicked a hard-working, intelligent, ambitious, and resilient first lieutenant (1LT) as my targeting officer. Short on captains, I also handpicked two 1LTs, two staff sergeants, and two specialists who had the smarts and, perhaps more importantly, the resilience to work the fires cell on the brigade current operations (CUOPS) floor and take constructive criticism from the CHOPS, the brigade operations officer (S3), myself, and the brigade commander. They rose to the challenge and actually got better every day without buckling under the weight of all that pressure and rank. Also, every fire mission that comes to the FA battalion comes through the battalion FDC. So, I put my best pre-command captain and moved the section chief of our top FDC out of his firing battery and into the battalion FDC. Yes, the battery suffered from



Photo by SSG Ashley M. Morris

Logistics Soldiers move artillery rounds in preparation for the start of Joint Readiness Training Center Rotation 21-06 at Fort Polk, LA.

the loss of a fine section chief, but the battalion as a whole benefited.

From a training perspective, 5-25 FA benefited from many, many reps during its train-up. In addition to battalion- and brigade-driven training, DIVARTY ran the battalion through two Table XV's and a battalion fire support element certification, and division planned and resourced a Mountain Peak rotation (complete with observer-controllers [OCs] and an OPFOR) as well as a Virtual Mountain Peak command post exercise. Teams at every echelon had opportunities to train, AAR, and then retrain, often with the assistance of OCs. The 10th Mountain Division and DIVARTY were both invested in the battalion's success. The 5-25 FA could not have achieved that success without their resourcing, support, and subject matter expertise.

From an equipping perspective, once again, the battalion needed the support of the broader team to succeed. All of C Battery's ammo trucks were deadlined with faults beyond the capability of 5-25 FA mechanics to repair. LTC Murray, the BSB commander, agreed to prioritize these ammo trucks for passback maintenance and even leveraged a Tiger Team from the 10th Sustainment Brigade to assist. After considerable effort, 5-25 FA was able to get five ammo trucks into the fight for JRTC, greatly easing the sustainment burden on the battalion's distribution platoon and increasing its ability to employ the M777 155mm towed howitzers. DIVARTY also allocated significant funds from its budget to help rebuild the battalion's howitzer shop stock and fill shortages for its FIST equipment. Whether in a JRTC rotation or in combat, combat power = trained teams + fully mission-capable equipment + ammunition + command and control. With help from the BSB and DIVARTY, 5-25 FA was able to generate far more combat power than it could have on its own.

Despite my best effort to manage talent, equipment assistance from great teammates, and a multitude of training reps, 5-25 FA still had less combat power than we wanted. When this occurred, the best thing the battalion could do was to be honest with itself about the capability it truly possessed and then make deliberate decisions about where to apply limited resources. This was most starkly true with the FISTs. The battalion did not have sufficient manning to fill all FISTs authorized by modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). Rather than allow talent and equipment to be randomly dispersed throughout the FISTs, we deliberately shut down several FISTs and aligned the best equipment with the best-trained, best-led FISTs and — of critical importance — ensured that these FISTs were aligned with the companies that each battalion commander most trusted. Being unable to give every company a world-class FIST, the 5-25 FA command team at least gave the companies that would execute their battalion's decisive operation the best FISTs they possibly could.

Where to position leaders on the battlefield was another critical decision. Early on, COL Hardman and I agreed that my personal primary place of duty needed to be the BCT TOC

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during the rotation. As COL John M. Barefield, commander of 10th Mountain DIVARTY, pointed out, the fire support coordinator (FSCOORD) is the only person with the training, experience, intuition, and authority to drive the entire fires WfF and the best place to do that is the BCT TOC. In the BCT TOC, I sat behind the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) manager and fires desk and within arm's reach of the joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) and air defense airspace management/brigade aviation element (ADAM/BAE) cell. From that location, it was possible to drive real-time fires execution in a way that would be impossible from the FA battalion TOC.

However, being the FSCOORD did not absolve me of responsibility to command the FA battalion, and the easiest way to be in two places at once was for those two places to be the same. The 5-25 FA always kept its battalion TOC one terrain feature away from the BCT TOC. They did not share a footprint, but the FA battalion was always close enough that the FA battalion commander had reliable comms from the BCT TOC and could quickly move between the two locations when face-to-face engagement was needed.

While that became SOP early in the training progression, the most important leader placement decision I made each day of the rotation was where to place CSM Sean O'Brien, the 5-25 FA's senior enlisted leader. He was the ace up my sleeve. Wherever I sensed friction — be it ammo movement from the field trains to the combat trains, security at a firing battery due to recent casualties, or keeping the battalion staff moving on the next military decision-making process (MDMP) cycle — I deployed the CSM. No one in the battalion understood my intent better and had the freedom of action to go where I needed him. While I spent almost the entire rotation at a command post, I was able to use the CSM to be at the right point of friction at the right time to ensure my commander's intent was executed.

Culture — Re-establishing Standards, Discipline, and Accountability

Even with the great leaders in place at the time, the climate, culture, and identity of the Thunder Battalion and Patriot Brigade suffered from 15 consecutive months of friction spanning the non-standard Southwest Border mission, COVID lockdowns, and a disastrous hurricane. Restoring a culture of standards, discipline, and personal accountability has been the BCT's number one priority, even while preparing for JRTC.

Training, in and of itself, does not build readiness. Training to standard does. Standards have to matter; they have to mean something. In combat, it is not ok to be just “ok.” Leaders at every level must set and achieve high standards, and this requires discipline. The discipline to train and fight to standard is the same as the discipline to do anything else to standard; it is a mindset and an identity. Soldiers who do not have the discipline to clean their weapons to standard cannot be trusted to fight to standard. A leader who lacks the discipline to enforce uniform standards with their Soldiers in garrison cannot be trusted to enforce noise and light discipline in combat. It can be easy to let these “minor infractions” slide in garrison. Being disciplined in garrison can sometimes be harder without the life-and-death impetus provided by the immediate danger of a lurking enemy. That is why it is so important. If standards and discipline are the norm, second nature, and habitual in garrison, then that mentality will transfer to combat.

With that in mind, enforcing standards and discipline has been an enduring top priority for the brigade for over a year. This is easier said than done, especially when it requires removing tactically competent leaders. Manning was a constant challenge, as described previously. In some cases, these manning challenges were exacerbated by having to separate or relieve personnel for cause. A number of Soldiers, including leaders from section to battery level, were separated or relieved with as little as a week before the JRTC rotation. The loss of these Soldiers and leaders right before the rotation created additional challenges, but it was more than offset by an increase in motivation as other leaders and Soldiers became aware that technical and tactical proficiency or a perceived need for full manning would not shield anyone from the consequences of violating the standard. Everyone saw that leaders and Soldiers in 5-25 FA would be held accountable if they did not adhere to the Army’s standards that build trust and confidence within the unit.

Holding people accountable to standards is necessary but is insufficient to ensure the development of a learning organization, and in a near-peer fight, the side that learns fastest wins. When technology overmatch is negligible or non-existent, learning overmatch can be decisive. While many organizations strive to be learning organizations, success in learning ultimately relies upon the self-accountability of the



Photo courtesy of Joint Readiness Training Center Operations Group

Soldiers from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division react to fire from a simulated opposing force on 10 April 2021 as part of JRTC 21-06 at Fort Polk, LA.

student. Yes, the teacher’s job is to teach, but the student will never learn unless he or she takes personal ownership of the process by asking questions, conducting independent study, and, most importantly, being open to instruction in the first place. The acronym we developed in 5-25 FA was to “be CHAD: coachable, humble, and disciplined.” During any training progression, leaders at all levels will interact with coaches, whether within their organization or external evaluators from other units. Learning leaders have to be coachable to learn from these coaches. Also, leaders have to make decisions with imperfect information. Sometimes these decisions do not work out, and learning leaders have to be humble enough to learn from those mistakes. None of that matters without discipline. The hardest part of any training event is not the actual training, it is having the discipline to implement the “sustains” and “improves” from the AAR, to execute the plan of action, and to follow-through on the retraining. An organization has not truly learned until its behavior has changed, and that behavior change occurs during retraining.

After Mountain Peak in January, which was certainly a learning experience, no one would have anticipated that 5-25 FA would have had the fastest counterfire mission response time in eight years during its JRTC rotation just a few months later. The battalion’s counterfire response times were dreadfully slow during Mountain Peak, but the whole team, commander included, learned from the excellent coaches, were humble enough to learn from failures, and were

disciplined enough to implement changes. The entire battalion became CHAD. Everyone in 5-25 FA embraced the input from their OCs and made up for lost time during Mountain Peak and Virtual Mountain Peak. During Virtual Mountain Peak, the battalion worked dozens and dozens of counterfire drills every day from sensor to shooter. Each day, Soldiers throughout the battalion figured out ways to improve and were coached on how to shave seconds off of response time here or there. Each day, intelligence preparation of the battlefield improved; the team was able to anticipate enemy PAAs, emplace call-for-fire zones over those PAAs, develop airspace coordination measures between the counterfire battery and enemy PAAs, and lay the designated counterfire battery on those enemy PAAs. This sounds simple in theory, but it is difficult in practice in a dynamic training environment. The Thunder Battalion team members needed a lot of reps and coaching from our excellent division fires and DIVARTY teammates, but it paid off.

Another important part of being a learning organization is to avoid self-defeating unforced errors. In this vein, we talked about “the 4 S’s” (safety, standards, sensitive items, and security) for months before the JRTC rotation. Nothing can derail a training exercise as quickly as a significant safety issue, which is exactly what happened the first time the battalion deployed to the field after Hurricane Laura. The battalion experienced two accidents before making it from garrison to the training area. Needless to say, when Soldier safety has been put at risk in an accident, the training immediately takes a back seat. There is always time to retrain, but you cannot un-injure a Soldier. The effect of losing a sensitive item is similar to that of an accident since training grinds to a halt to find the missing item. The third “S” is standards, discussed previously, highlighting the correlation between standards and training readiness. The fourth “S” is security, discussed at length in the following paragraphs. If leaders intently focus on the 4 S’s, they will avoid those major distractors that greatly inhibit learning.

Near the end of LTP, COL Hardman pulled all the battalion commanders together and said, “We are going to struggle with many things during this rotation. Pretty much every unit at JRTC struggles with security. Let’s at least struggle with that.” The 5-25 FA embraced that guidance. The battalion’s Soldiers became diggers and tree-dwellers. These redleg warriors tucked their howitzers as deep into the wood line as they could and dug fighting positions at every PAA. In fact, during a Table XV, the DIVARTY commander half-jokingly remarked that the battalion should rename all of its batteries after animals that are known for their digging skills.

The emphasis on security worked. During JRTC, the battery commanders and I routinely talked about balancing our manning allocation between offense (firing capability), defense (local security), and special teams (capabilities like



drone busters and stingers). Thunder Battalion deliberately sought out undesirable PAAs. Batteries tried to avoid the obvious PAAs in large open fields, instead opting for PAAs that might feel a little too small for an entire battery or would be difficult to traverse because of the vegetation. That didn’t mean the batteries won all their close-in firefights at the PAAs, but it always came at a considerable cost to Geronimo, if they could find the batteries at all. At the final AAR, the OPFOR battalion commander said that he had an especially hard time finding the M119 105mm howitzers, that the battalion’s “special teams” repeatedly damaged his reconnaissance aircraft, and that the firing platoons would not go down without a significant investment of combat power from the OPFOR. The modern battlefield is a slog, and leaders at all echelons must emphasize security in order to be prepared to fight to maintain combat power.

Conclusion

The success of the Thunder Battalion and the Patriot Brigade at JRTC was not luck. It did not just happen. It was the result of the confluence of multiple decisions at multiple echelons which began many months in advance. Over a beer with CSM Rodney Graves (the JRTC OC for FA battalion CSMs), I told him I was frustrated that I had struggled with many of the same trends that others struggle with during their JRTC rotations. He said, “Sir, the trends are the trends. What makes the difference between a good rotation and a bad rotation is always leadership.” Reflecting on that conversation since, I am convinced he is right. Whether it was infantry battalions and rifle companies leading with HE at echelon, the BSB reliably feeding the guns with Class V, fire support officers and NCOs doing the best they could with what they had, or battery commanders doggedly defending the brigade’s guns, leaders at all echelons achieved the BCT commander’s intent:

- (1) Lead with HE,
- (2) Make tough but deliberate decisions about constrained resources, and
- (3) Foster a culture of standards, discipline, and accountability.

Every unit has its share of struggles at JRTC, and 5-25 FA was no exception, but its success in employing fires largely stemmed from those three factors.

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