

# Hunt, Kill, Report:

## *A Dismounted Infantry Company's Perspective as OPFOR at NTC*

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In February 2024, the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division (Raider Brigade) sent my company to augment the permanent opposing force (OPFOR) at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA. We served as a guest Blackhorse element, acting as the dismounted infantry attached to the 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR).

Over three weeks, we endured historic rainfall and near-freezing temperatures. Our experience at NTC showed us that the most synchronized combined arms plan is only as effective as the small units that carry out the mission. As simple as they may seem, training the fundamentals will serve as a force multiplier and help your organization win. This article will focus on valuable lessons we learned regarding the employment of our anti-tank (AT) weapons in the defense and the importance of field craft and physical fitness in the expeditionary fights that we can expect to encounter in large-scale combat operations.

We arrived at Fort Irwin with 109 Soldiers from Comanche Company on 1500 the day before the force-on-force portion of NTC Rotation 24-04 began. My first sergeant and I were standing around a vast terrain model during the combined arms rehearsal when the squadron S-2 spoke through a megaphone: "Expect 4-6 inches of rain and temperatures to hover around 36 degrees Fahrenheit." 1SG Trevor Brenner and I gave each other the same silent look, "Of course." Anyone who has been wet and cold in the field knows that is the worst combination a person can endure so of course there would be historic rainfall in the desert the month we are deployed here.



Soldiers from the 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment conduct a combined arms rehearsal at Fort Irwin, CA. (Photos courtesy of author)

As the rain started to fall during the rehearsal, I zippered up my issued wet weather top and got closer to the terrain model. LTC Darrell Fawley, then-commander of 2/11 ACR, looked directly at me to give guidance and intent:

*“You will use your dismounted Infantrymen to clear, seize, and hold severely restricted terrain throughout the training area. You will occupy platoon battle positions and integrate into our engagement areas to kill armor with your Javelins. Your strength is clearing complex terrain and establishing AT overwatch positions with their Javelin missiles. We require you to help us lay waste to this brigade. We make the rotational units better by killing them. You will have the most physically demanding job in this squadron over the next 10 days, and I know you are up to the task. Death rides a Blackhorse!”*

We started to get excited. I wanted nothing more than to show up here as guests from the 4th Infantry Division and win. Within days of the first battle period, we learned our first lesson.

### **Lesson 1:**

**Nine Javelin missile systems, expertly handled and concealed in severely restrictive terrain with clear fields of fire, will destroy a battalion’s worth of combat power.**

Our AT teams used the following techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) to maximize their effect:

**1. Maintenance of your Command Launch Units (CLUs) must be an infantry company’s maintenance priority.** CLUs serve as the Javelin missile’s targeting and guiding system. CLUs are not pacing items on your equipment status report (ESR); however, they are the only item in an infantry company’s weapon arsenal that delivers a munition with a 99-percent probability kill rate on a T-90.

In your unit’s maintenance meetings, the CLUs need to be tracked with the vigor that pacing items are monitored. If your battalion staff does not prioritize the CLU, you must as a company commander. If your CLUs are non-mission capable, they most likely will require evacuation to another organization that fixes them. This takes time and resources. You cannot go to a combat training center or deployment and find out they are broken there.

**2. Each Soldier in your company must be able to effectively and instinctively employ the Javelin missile system.** Our company made it a weekly habit to get our Soldiers behind the CLU. Every installation in the Army with a Training Support Center (TSC) can sign out the Javelin Basic Skills Trainer (BST) and vehicle multiple integrated laser engagement systems (MILES) to receive feedback from the CLUs. If you do not have access to the BST or MILES, employment of a Javelin is an Expert Infantry and Soldier Badge task. This is low-to-no-resource training that platoons and squads can execute so long as the arms room is open and your signature cards and accounts with TSC are up to date.

**3. When task-organizing your AT teams in the defense, group your Javelin teams, your squad designated marksman, and your fire supporters in the observation posts (OPs) together:** The squad designated marksman rifle (SDMR) and grid-producing optics carried by the fire supporters (i.e., the lightweight laser designator rangefinder [LLDR]) assist the AT team in locating targets and locking on in high and low visibility conditions. The AT teams paired with a fire supporter in the defense also allow fires to fix an armored vehicle while the Javelin can destroy it when stationary.

**4. Each platoon can effectively employ three Javelin missile systems carrying six to nine rounds, depending on the physical fitness of your unit and other mission variables.** We found that each platoon can employ two systems forward, with one in the rear as a reserve in case a CLU became non-mission capable. The two systems forward can conduct gun drills (for example, one Javelin fires while the other reloads behind cover and vice versa). How many rounds your platoons can carry is ultimately up to how fit your Soldiers are and how much time you have in the defense. We found that we could only effectively carry three missiles per CLU to move the distances at the speed required for the mission. Twenty-seven rounds for the company were still enough to culminate a battalion per battle period.

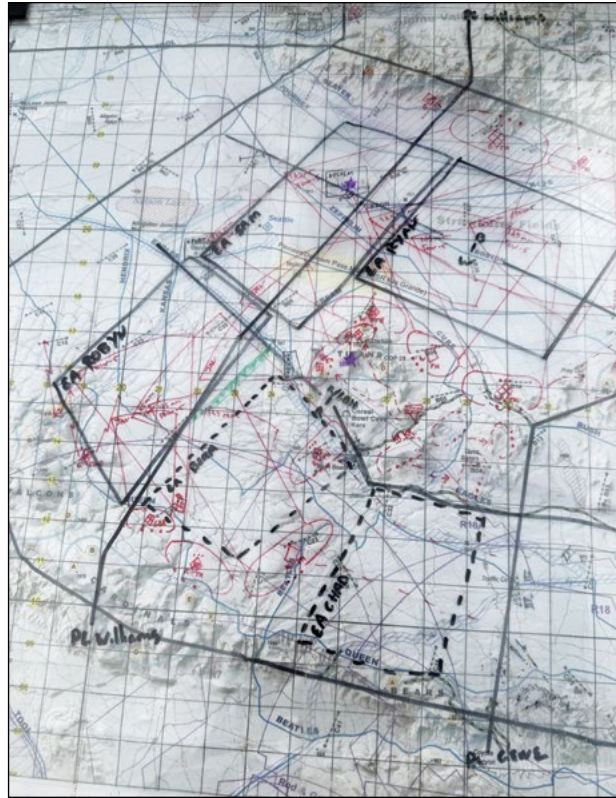


Figure — Battle Period 1 Operations Graphics

**5. Detail and rehearsals will pay dividends:** Give your AT teams specific engagement criteria and triggers to unmask and move from their concealed position to their firing point. The time it takes for them to get into position should match when they will meet their engagement criteria. Meticulously rehearse so that emplacement is fine-tuned to the second. You want to avoid unmasking your Javelin teams early and risk exposing them to indirect fire. You must operate under the assumption that you are constantly being surveilled. The following is an example of what was briefed to our platoon during the operation order for Battle Period 1:

*“We expect that the mechanized infantry company will move through Engagement Area Robyn. Once four or more M1s are observed by Scout Team 1, located IVO (in the vicinity of) Jaguars F crossing Phase Line (PL) Becky, they will radio to 1st and 2nd Platoon occupied in Battle Position 1 (BP1) and Battle Position 2 (BP2). This will trigger AT teams 1 and 2 in BP1 and BP2 to unmask and occupy their firing positions. We expect this movement to take 10 minutes. At the 10-minute mark, we expect the enemy mechanized platoon to reach PL Williams. Once they cross PL Williams, they will enter Engagement Area Ryan and fire support team (FIST) 1 will call for fire using brigade tactical group (BTG) fires and fix the platoon east of PL Charlie. **AT teams 1 and 2 will then fire two Javelin missiles, one at the lead and rear vehicle in the formation, boxing them in. The enemy will conduct survivability drills, and we assess that with direct and indirect fire we will destroy two M1s and mobility kill the other two. AT Team 1 will be reloaded by then and fire another missile at one of the remaining two vehicles, destroying a third vehicle.** We assess the enemy company will reinforce that platoon and begin to call for fire on our battle position. This will trigger 1st Platoon’s displacement from BP1.”*

If your nine Javelin AT teams are planned and synchronized to this level of detail in the defense, 27 rounds with 27 tracked vehicle kills will culminate a battalion.

At the end of our first battle period, we culminated the enemy brigade twice and stopped its advance through the Brown and Debmán Pass Complex. Blackhorse had achieved its mission. Our company killed 50-plus tracked vehicles utilizing the TTPs mentioned above. We were then offered an opportunity to refit our equipment, and the rain started to fall again. As temperatures dropped to 35 degrees, we were sent back out in the middle of the night to occupy our positions for the second battle period. The next seven days taught us some harsh lessons.

### **Lesson 2:**

**Do not neglect field craft and packing lists. Mission variables will dictate your packing list and how long you expect to remain in the field until a refit.**

Our company encountered unpredictable rainfall and near-freezing temperatures, which exposed many issues. We turned these into valuable takeaways, which we summarize below.

**1. Our packing lists must plan for different mission variables and be tailored with the assumption that you will not receive a refit.** We incorrectly assumed we could return to the barracks between our second and third battle periods and change our wet clothes. The reality was we received one refit after the first battle period, and that was it. This incorrect assumption led to Soldiers not bringing wet weather bottoms, bivy sacks for their sleep systems, and ponchos. We also found that most of our Soldiers needed to learn how to make a rain shelter.

Company-level leaders must change, review, and inspect the packing lists during daily pre-combat inspections. First sergeants must tailor packing lists to the environment they are fighting in and be flexible enough in case conditions change. In my experience, Soldiers will bring “nice to have” comfort items, not “need to have” items. For example, cold and wet weather gear met the “need to have” criteria in our situation. However, jet-boils and propane did not. Self-inflicted wounds (i.e., not bringing issued equipment) will make your formation ineffective. Throughout history, numerous armies have succumbed to environmental variables because they were improperly equipped.



**LTC Liam Walsh, commander of 4-9 IN, recognizes Manchú Soldiers between battle periods 1 and 2 of NTC Rotation 24-04.**



### **Lesson 3:**

#### **Our physical fitness training plans did not prepare us for the realities of our mission.**

Our rotation required our Infantrymen to travel dismounted anywhere from 5-8 kilometers at night with 50-60 pounds of external load. We would remain stationary for a day or two and then do it again. I realized that our youngest Soldiers were not prepared to execute these movements, which required our more senior NCOs to carry the load to maintain our tempo. After we returned from the rotation, many Soldiers went on profile.

We realized that we must pay close attention to our physical fitness training programs and focus on movement lethality so that our Soldiers can accomplish our tasks and return uninjured. As outlined in Field Manual 7-22, *Health and Holistic Fitness*, physical readiness is the ability to meet the physical demands of any duty or combat position, move lethally on the battlefield, accomplish the mission, and come home healthy.<sup>1</sup> We tend to forget about the “come home healthy” part. I have outlined some observations and changes I have made to our physical fitness training plans after this experience.

**1. Muscular and aerobic endurance, defined as the ability to execute sustained bouts of low-intensity resistance and movement, are the most essential components of fitness. The most critical structural capabilities a Soldier can possess are load tolerance and flexibility.**

Structural capabilities are intrinsic capabilities that allow a Soldier to perform physically. While creating your physical fitness plans, you must combine the components of fitness and occupational tasks with a Soldier’s structural capability over time.<sup>2</sup>

While deciding what position each Soldier takes up in an infantry platoon, consider each Soldier’s structural capabilities as a part of your talent management.

**2. Movement lethality must be taught and learned with meticulous attention to the precise replication of the movement required in combat.<sup>3</sup>**

The most effective physical fitness training plans are incorporated into mission-essential task training for your company. Your Soldiers should be wearing their carried load, moving the distances they will encounter, and replicating movement they will see in combat. We often see squads huddled around the same squat rack or bench press, working on one fitness component. A gym is a finite resource shared by all Soldiers on post; however, your authorized equipment, issued gear, and weapons in the arms room are at your disposal anytime. Use exercise ingenuity and on-hand resources to replicate combat conditions whenever possible.

**3. Leverage the Army’s Master Fitness Trainer (MFT) program to build experts.**

Our company sent one squad leader per platoon to become MFTs, and these individuals will serve as the subject matter experts on physical fitness in our company. We cannot expect our squad leaders to lead practical physical training every morning if they do not receive expert education. This also allows our junior NCOs to lead from a position of expertise. Brigade combat teams need the H2F resources to supervise squad-level physical fitness training. Invest in your unit’s education and send NCOs to school.

In April 2023, COL Michael Kloepper, then-commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, spoke about MFT expert power at an H2F symposium. The battalions from his brigade sent one NCO per platoon to become MFTs, and they each saw an average 21-25 percent decrease in profiles in nine months.<sup>4</sup>

Preparing Soldiers for their worst day in combat is our moral imperative as leaders. We must plan, resource, and execute tough, realistic training to replicate the challenges we will face in our next war. NTC and other combat training centers expose us to these challenges, but we cannot wait for the one or two times a year your brigade attends a CTC to encounter them. We must continuously place our Soldiers in environments where they must learn harsh lessons through repetition until it becomes second nature. It is the best life insurance policy we can give them.



Soldiers from 3rd Platoon, Comanche Company, 4-9 IN, patrol up the “Matterhorn” and establish a Javelin observation post during NTC Rotation 24-04.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Field Manual 7-22, *Holistic Health and Fitness*, October 2023, Chapter 3: Domains.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> COL Michael F. Kloepper, “Remarks from Holistic Health and Fitness Symposium on Non-Embedded H2F Brigades,” Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System, 26 April 2023, [www.dvidshub.net/video/881726/col-michael-kloepper-commander-173rd-airborne-brigade-combat-team-provides-his-remarks-holistic-health-and-fitness-symposium-non](http://www.dvidshub.net/video/881726/col-michael-kloepper-commander-173rd-airborne-brigade-combat-team-provides-his-remarks-holistic-health-and-fitness-symposium-non).

At the time this article was written, **CPT Anirudh Vadlamani** was serving as commander of Charlie (Comanche) Company, 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. He is currently serving as commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4-9 IN. His experience includes two rotations to the National Training Center, three to the Joint Readiness Training Center, one overseas deployment to the U.S. Africa Command area of responsibility, and participation in a NATO military skills competition in England.