FORUM & FEATURES

Bradley Platoon Tips

LIEUTENANT THOMAS T. SMITH

During my tour as a Bradley platoon leader, I learned that there is considerably more to know about the job than just the tactics and doctrine connected with leading the platoon. So, instead of debating those issues here, I want to discuss a few of the more practical and technical aspects of the job and to share some pragmatic solutions to a few problems.

First, a J-series (Bradley IFV) mechanized infantry platoon leader is responsible for about $7.8 million worth of vehicles and equipment. The squad and platoon equipment in the platoon issue totals more than 800 items. Property accountability is therefore a critical aspect of the job.

Basic issue items must be inspected frequently. The vehicle bumper number should be etched on every piece of a Bradley's basic issue equipment, including the 60 or more 30-round 5.56mm magazines. Then the platoon leader can settle disputes between squad leaders over property custody with a simple statement: "If your bumper number isn't on it, it's not yours." He should confiscate all equipment of dubious heritage—items with multiple or scratched out bumper numbers, for example.

Our company had a lockable metal box (NSN 8115-00-679-5594) for each squad. In garrison, valuable basic issue items such as CVCs or PRC-68 radios, field phones, and the like were secured in the metal box with a 200-series lock. The box was then locked inside the vehicle's troop compartment.

Neither a lock on the drivers' hatch nor the lock in place on the combat door, though, will keep a determined intruder out of a Bradley. He can get in through the coaxial access doors. For this reason, a heavy strap should be tightened across both of these access handles when in garrison.

PREPARATIONS

When preparing to go to the field, a platoon leader must plan carefully and pay attention to detail. First, if everything that goes into the Bradley is not properly stowed, either the equipment or the vehicle itself can be damaged.

Items stowed under the seven-gallon water container or anywhere along the right interior ammunition shelf must be strapped securely. Just forward of the squad compartment's Halon internal fire extinguishers is a small opening in the right side of the turret basket. Loose equipment has a nasty habit of going through this hole and causing damage to the turret or the fuel cells.

There are also openings in the turret step from the squad compartment, and any unsecured items—even a plastic canteen—that is allowed to float around in the turret can bounce through one of these openings into the turret base and cause extensive damage when the turret is moved.

A tool bag stowed in the engine compartment must be fully secured with straps, or it will slide off the stowage shelf and into the right final drive.

The cleaning rods and boresight adaptor for the 25mm chain gun are very expensive and easily damaged. These can be stowed in an extra M60 spare-barrel bag ordered from the arms room.

Rucksacks are stowed under each troop seat, and their contents should be standardized to include wet weather gear, MOPP suit, one ration, and ammunition.

Since there is no storage space for the PVS-5 night vision device, in our company the carrying case was strapped under the Bradley commander's seat.

The two net bags and two pole bags that make up the camouflage screen system for the Bradley can be strapped to the trim vane—the net bags on the far right side, one above the other, and the pole bags horizontally, one above the other. The round base of the pole bags must be up against the net bags, or they will obscure the driver's vision.

At the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, we found that each Bradley could carry ten rolls of concertina wire and six pieces of six-foot PSP steel matting for overhead cover. Wire and PSP can be strapped to the side of the vehicle, anchored by the armor skirt-lifting handles.

Eight rucksacks can be strapped to the back of the bustle rack. (This is not possible in forested terrain, but it worked well in the desert.)

Other matters, too, need attention before going to the field.

The seven-gallon water container is a good feature of the Bradley, but the system is not designed to allow a soldier to fill his canteen, just his cup. Soldiers who try to fill their canteens bend the water container nozzle up, causing tears in the rubber gasket or cracks in the plastic. The solution my platoon implemented was to put a clear plastic hose (3/8-inch interior diameter) on the nozzle with a small automotive clamp. Total cost, 13 cents.

The two hull drain plugs must be checked constantly to make sure they are tight. If they are allowed to loosen and hang down, they can bend and become unserviceable.

The driver should be issued a PVS-5 battery. If the power cable to his AN/VVS-2 night vision viewer ceases to function, he can install that battery and continue to operate.

In our company each squad was issued a good pair of bolt cutters (NSN 5110-00-596-9102) with 12-inch handles. These are a great help in breaching wire obstacles and also in clearing wire from the final drive and the tracks of the vehicle. In garrison the bolt cutters were stored in the arms room.

If standard antenna tie-downs are used to tie the antennas back on the Bradley, they seldom stay in place, and when they snap free the clip and rope tend to wrap around the turret. In the field, our platoon used half-inch cargo straps near the antenna base to correct this problem.

OPERATIONS

There are also some things that can be done to help matters during operations.

If a map is laid on the turret, it will blow off and disappear just when it seems it is needed most. (The Bradley goes very fast.) Two maps with operations overlay should be prepared. One can then be stored in a safe place and the other put on the turret, but under the bunji stretch cord hooked from the base of the aircraft sight to the lip of the gun casement. A small piece of green canvas can be used to cover the map to prevent it from being seen from the air.

Two small plastic call-sign and frequency boards should be put on the vehicle—one taped to the turret just in front of the commander's hatch, and the other inside the turret on the coaxial access door. Call signs and frequencies for two days can be put on each of them in grease pencil. (This is better than having all those ink scribbles on hands and arms.)

For better command and control, although our battalion had standardized its system for vehicle identification markings, our platoon used some additional markings when in the field. We put 10-inch strips of green tape on each side of the turret. The platoon leader's vehicle had a V, the first squad's one vertical strip, second squad two horizontal strips, and the third squad three vertical strips. On many occasions, these were a great aid to command and control. At night the tape markings were visible in the thermal sight at short range whereas the standard paint markings were not.

For dismounted operations, the new PRC-68 squad radio cannot be depended upon. The platoon leader needs a PRC-77 on a backpack aboard his vehicle. Since he does not have one, he can take one from a squad leader. Although this leaves that squad with only one radio in the turret, a platoon leader has to be able to communicate. (Company commanders tend to get excited when they can't talk to their lieutenants.)

The PRC-68 squad radio is useful in the defense, however, and its range can be improved with the attachment of a PRC-77 short whip antenna. Once, in a mounted movement to contact at night, my platoon radio in the turret went on the blink, and I used the little hand-held PRC-68 to control the platoon. (I had no way of receiving on the platoon net, but at least my platoon members could hear me.)

Command and control has been improved by the use of fighting sections with the Bradley. The platoon leader and one squad as wingman form the first section, the platoon sergeant and one squad form the other. When the platoon dismounts, the platoon sergeant controls the vehicles. When the platoon leader and all the squad leaders are on the ground, the assistant squad leaders become vehicle commanders. It is important for the platoon sergeant not to become too fond of one vehicle but to rotate every other day.

The platoon leader's wingman should always be on the right side of the platoon leader's track. Although the driver of the wing vehicle can see well to the left, his vision to the right is blocked by the engine compartment.

SIGNALS AND SOPs

Flag and arm signals are also critical to command and control, and SOPs concerning these signals must be practiced often.

SOPs should also be used to distribute firepower during the defense or movement to contact. One vehicle per section should be designated to engage BMPs or soft-skinned vehicles with its 25mm chain gun. The other vehicles of the section should be prepared to engage tanks with their TOW missiles. (TOWs should always be up in the defense or on short halts.)

In the defense, Bradley drivers should not be allowed to leave their hatches open, because an open hatch will prevent the turret from rotating, and if an enemy suddenly appears the gunner will not be able to engage him.

When the unit is mounted and receiving indirect fire, the commander's hatch should be in the first open position instead of fully closed. This improves visibility and seems to offer about as much protection as when it is fully closed.

Another consideration on hatches is the noise from the cooler motor on the thermal sight, which can be heard up to 50 meters in front of a position. In the defense, if the commander's hatch is left open for ventilation and the gunner's hatch is closed, this noise can be reduced by half. (The thermal sight is also power hungry, so vehicles should be started at least once an hour in the defense.)

During operations, the Bradley's speed should be thought of in terms of "dash"

speed for moving quickly between firing or overwatch positions, or for rapidly repositioning forces. It should not be used for rushing forward into trouble or uncertain situations.

Because of their vastly increased supporting ranges, Bradley platoons are often widely dispersed. They should therefore be well-versed in self-recovery. Platoon leaders should practice tow-starting and recovery procedures. In our company, each platoon leader was issued his own set of slave cables with NATO adaptors. This greatly reduced the maintenance team's headaches in finding and jump-starting dead vehicles.

Another technical aspect of the platoon leader's job is Bradley gunnery.

Before each Bradley gunnery exercise, our company had a solid pre-gunnery training period of about a week. At the end of the week a gunners skill test was administered to Bradley commanders, gunners, and assistant squad leaders. This is important both for training new gunners and for refreshing old skills. (Even the platoon leader's radio-telephone operator should be trained as a gunner at every opportunity.)

Fire commands are essential to effective, efficient gunnery. The crews must be taught to use proper fire commands instead of taking the "There's a target; let's shoot it" approach. (Tankers seem to take proper fire commands much more seriously than infantrymen do. It may be because they have had about 50 years more experience at turret gunnery than we have.)

Range estimation is also a key to good gunnery. At every opportunity squad leaders should be trained on range estimation. The choke sight in the Bradley gun sight works well if the soldiers practice with it.

Several precautions need to be taken during gunnery to protect the weapons themselves.

Our battalion had several incidents in which TOW boresight telescopes were damaged because they were left in the launcher when it was lowered. We added a red tag to the boresight kit, and it was hung from the TOW launcher's UP/DOWN switch to remind the crew to remove the telescope.

The 25mm chain gun is a fine weapon, but it has close tolerances in the feeder link-guide system. When 25mm ammunition is loaded in the ready box, every link-guide should be carefully cleaned and lightly lubricated. This will eliminate any malfunctions caused by debris or dirt in the feeder's link-guide rails.

In a dry, dusty environment, dust will collect on the intake grill screen. When the 25mm fires, this dust is pulled out of the intake screen and into the air, blinding the gunner. To eliminate this dust problem, a platoon vehicle should carry a five-gallon water can in the bustle rack so that the Bradley commander can occasionally splash water on the intake screen.

These are only a few of the problems and a few of the solutions for Bradley platoon leaders. There are some other problems, though, that leaders need to think and talk about and try to solve. For example, the platoon leader has an M25 protective mask so he can communicate through the vehicle communication system, but this mask does not have a voice emitter. When in the dismounted role, the platoon leader cannot talk on the PRC-77 radio and cannot shout instructions that are audible more than two feet away. In addition, the filter hose becomes tangled in every vine and tree branch within a grid square. I have seen platoon leaders throw the mask to the ground in frustration, preferring to breathe gas rather than wear it.

What do we do now, lieutenants?

Lieutenant Thomas T. Smith, a graduate of Southwest Texas State University, has been a Bradley platoon leader, a rifle company executive officer, and a headquarters company executive officer with the 2d Armored Division at Fort Hood.

The Platoon Team

CAPTAIN JOSEPH K. MILLER

During maneuvers at the National Training Center, and elsewhere as well, a pure infantry or armor platoon operating as part of a company team of Bradley IFVs and Abrams tanks has occasionally found itself in desperate need of closer support from the weapons of the other branch's vehicles.

As an example, let's assume that such a company team is conducting a movement to contact to eliminate the remaining elements of an enemy motorized rifle regiment before a U.S. counterattack. The company team is in a V formation using the bounding overwatch technique, but because a heavy fog limits the effectiveness of the BIFV's thermal sights, the bounds between platoons must be shortened to less than 1,000 meters.

With the armor platoon in overwatch, the infantry platoon leader is advancing