

The XO as 2IC in a Light Infantry Company

CAPTAIN WILLIAM B. CREWS

By its nature, a light infantry company tends to be dispersed over a fairly large area during many of its missions, and this dispersion makes command and control difficult. The most effective way of improving this situation, under the current MTOE, is to increase the number of experienced leaders who are involved in combat operations. The most obvious individual is the company executive officer (XO).

As currently organized under the J-Series MTOE, a light infantry company has no vehicles. Its company headquarters consists of the company commander, the XO, the first sergeant, the communications chief, the NBC NCO, the supply sergeant, the armorer, and two radio telephone operators (RTOs). To have this entire group, except for the commander and his RTOs, in the trains is wasteful in light of what these people can do in the line platoons. In most cases the first sergeant, if not the supply sergeant, can ensure that the company stays supplied. Having the XO in the trains is not only

redundant but often counterproductive.

An XO is usually the second most experienced officer in the company. He is also a "commander-in-training," not merely an administrator. If he is to be prepared to command a company, either through the loss of his commander or when he gets his own company, his place is in the field with the company, not back with the trains.

There are numerous tactical roles that an XO can easily assume. The first is pickup zone control officer (PZCO) during airmobile operations. Using the XO in this role allows the commander and the platoon leaders to devote their time and energy to developing the ground tactical plan. At the same time, the XO ensures that the manifests reflect the commander's concept of the operation and conducts any necessary coordination with the air mission commander (AMC). Naturally, the commander should coordinate in person with the AMC if there is time; as often as not, though, the operation will not permit him this luxury.

The XO in this role also makes sure the PZ is swiftly evacuated, which includes implementing the "bump" plan, and is responsible for the straggler control point, a particularly important duty at night. In the case of an extraction under fire, the commander continues to fight the battle while the XO makes sure the unit is quickly moved off the PZ. As PZCO, the XO is on one of the last sorties into the LZ, and this means an experienced officer who is familiar with the tactical plan is on the ground at what could be a critical time.

Because the XO is usually closely attuned to the commander's method of operating, he is also a valuable subordinate leader for tactical reconnaissance and quartering parties. As the leader of a quartering party, he again allows the commander and the platoon leaders to concentrate on moving the company or on follow-on operations. If the XO leads a tactical reconnaissance, he can identify assault positions, probable lines of deployment, and objective rallying points





"Light Fighters" from the 7th Infantry Division (Light) assault a simulated enemy position during training.

for the commander. The XO tends to be more thorough in this role than a platoon leader, who is often primarily concerned with the area his own platoon will use. The XO can also pinpoint the objective and keep it under surveillance until the company arrives. This allows the company to move quickly to the objective, particularly in night operations. The information the XO obtains can reduce the amount of reconnaissance the unit must perform once it arrives in the objective area. If the information is transmitted to the company before it moves, or while it is en route, the commander has more time to adjust his plan and issue a fragmentary order, if one is necessary.

When the company is defending, the XO can be positioned at the second most critical area, where he can help the commander control the battle. He can also act as a disinterested observer, objectively reporting his observations of the battle in that area to the commander. This will give the commander a second opinion of the situation, an opinion that can provide a counterpoint to the sometimes less than objective reports from the platoon leaders.

In offensive and decentralized opera-

tions, the XO is valuable as a detachment commander or as the commander of the company base of fire. If the Dragon section is being used as a rifle section, for example, placing this section and a rifle platoon under the control of the XO increases flexibility and reduces the commander's span of control. During a more deliberate offensive operation, the commander may consolidate the fires of the Dragon section, the mortar section, and several machineguns into a base of fire under the XO.

One of the XO's most important functions may be to serve as the commander's staff. He is, after all, the only other officer in the company who is familiar with the various logistics functions required if the company is to operate smoothly. This is particularly important when plans are made in the field without immediate access to the first sergeant and the supply sergeant. By studying the warning order and getting the commander's guidance and tentative plan, the XO should be able to get the logistical effort moving while the commander again concentrates on the tactical aspects.

To be most effective, the XO needs a radio. An AN/PRC-77 radio can some-

times be taken from the company headquarters or the Dragon section and given to him. Or, if the terrain allows the mortar section to fire by direct alignment, the XO can use that section's radio. (Ideally, each company should have two more AN/PRC-77 radios. This would allow the establishment of another headquarters and enable the XO to communicate on the company command frequency as well as on his own internal net. At the very least, one AN/PRC-77 and one small unit transceiver should be added.)

As a valuable subordinate leader, the XO is much more useful in the company command post than he is in the trains. Both his own professional development and the needs of the company demand that he be used tactically to the greatest possible extent. If he has his own means of communication, the XO can take a tremendous burden from the company commander and can add a greater degree of flexibility to light infantry company operations.

Captain William B. Crews served in the 7th Infantry Division (Light) as a brigade assistant S-3 and as a company commander in the 2d Battalion, 32d Infantry. He is now assistant Inspector General, U.S. Army Recruiting Command.
