

# TRAINING NOTES



## The Omega Force

CAPTAIN JAMES D. McCONNELL, JR.

“Lead by example” is a commonly preached, less commonly practiced, military aphorism. It was my good fortune, though, while serving as a lieutenant in the 172d Infantry Brigade at Fort Richardson, Alaska, to serve under a battalion commander who practiced at least as well as he preached.

Chief among his leadership tools was an organization officially known as the Omega Force. Unofficially, it was known—at least among the battalion’s lieutenants—by several less flattering names as well. But even those of us who suffered most by it agreed that it was an invaluable enterprise, and one that had applications at several different levels.

I believe the lessons learned from my days as an Omega platoon member may be useful to present and future battalion and company commanders.

The Omega Force concept was developed and implemented by Lieutenant Colonel William C. Ohl III, who used it with great success during his command of the 4th Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment in Alaska and of what is now the 3d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, at Fort Benning.

The Omega Force was a platoon, in name and in reality (the battalion commander had the unit activated on a set of orders, complete with a guidon). It was composed of the battalion’s officers: The battalion commander was the platoon

leader; the executive officer was the platoon sergeant; the communications-electronics officer (CEO) was the radio telephone operator (RTO); the battalion surgeon was the medic; the battalion fire support officer (FSO) was the company FSO; the company commanders were M60 machinegun and 90mm recoilless rifle gunners and crewmen; and the platoon leaders and assistant staff officers filled out the platoon as squad leaders and riflemen.

The leadership and training concept was beautiful in its simplicity. (I use both “leadership” and “training” deliberately, because, like most worthwhile exercises, it is difficult to cleanly separate the

two.) Once a quarter, the Omega Force, led by the battalion commander, conducted platoon missions for a period of 36 to 48 hours, during which the battalion commander showed us (not told us) how it was done. None of the missions were easy. All were noted for their exceptionally high standards, their physically demanding requirements, and the insights they provided to each officer in the battalion on exactly what was expected of him. The sequence of events for a generic mission would be something like the one shown in the accompanying table.

This sort of training offers a considerable number of benefits, not the least of which is an opportunity for lieutenants to

### SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

MONDAY	0530	Physical training led by Omega platoon leader.
	0830-1100	Operations order.
	1100-2400	Day and night rehearsals and instructions.
TUESDAY	0001-0200	Night rehearsal.
	0200-0600	Rest.
	0600-1400	Day rehearsal and backbriefs.
	1400-1500	Inspections.
MISSION	1830	Night insertion.
		Move to objective through tough terrain—2,000 meters.
		Assault.
THE UNEXPECTED		One casualty designated per squad; casualties must be carried 3,000 meters.
WEDNESDAY	BMNT	Squad enter friendly lines.
		Truck to battalion.
		Debriefing and critique.

work closely with their battalion commander (who is to them a sometimes remote, frequently threatening figure), and to observe him doing *their* jobs—exactly the way they ought to do them.

By watching the battalion commander, we learned his *standard* (and so, ours) for the following:

- Timely, detailed warning orders.
- Operations orders that were, if anything, superior to those we learned to give in Ranger School. (They were also a good way to compensate for the often radically different backgrounds and training of the lieutenants.)
- Solid day and night rehearsals, conducted until every man in the platoon was capable of leading a mission.
- Inspections that actually identified and corrected deficiencies. (Sometimes they caused embarrassment; more often they prevented disaster.)
- Probing, comprehensive backbriefs that helped ensure success.
- Navigating under difficult conditions (night, waist-deep snow, showshoes) and keeping everyone together and oriented.
- Stealthy movement and reconnaissance.
- Positioning and using crew-served weapons.
- Using wire (yes, wire on offensive operations) to reduce FM radio traffic.
- Assaults that made the most of all weapons and ensured complete coverage of the objective.
- Thorough and methodical actions at the objective, with a minimum of voice communication.
- Orderly and controlled withdrawals following status reports.
- Debriefs that were near mind-numbing in their thoroughness, but unquestionably productive.
- Tough, unsparing (some would say *vicious*) after-action reviews, from platoon leader on down, noting everything that affected or could have affected mission accomplishment.

In isolation, any one of these lessons would have justified the Omega Force as a leadership and training tool. But we platoon members learned more than just techniques and standards. We learned understanding; we learned empathy; we learned humility.

Company commanders learned just

how much effort it takes to carry an M60 or a 90mm all night through waist-deep snow. And they learned that if they wanted to prevent breaks in contact during movement and arrive at the objective with conscious crews, they'd better plan for the relative difficulty of crew movement.

The CEO learned just how much stuff, including an AN/PRC-77 radio, you really can cram into an arctic rucksack, and his classes to our RTOs began to reflect some of his new knowledge.

We lieutenants discovered the true "delight" of spending time in subfreezing suspense in an objective release point (ORP) while the platoon leader conducted his reconnaissance. We began to appreciate that every minute we could save in our platoons through good planning and the proper use of our subordinate leaders would have a direct effect on our soldiers.

### COHESION

Just as important, perhaps—although we all enjoyed our own private miseries on these missions—we knew that our suffering was only a part of a much greater communal agony. The missions were intentionally rigorous and sometimes exacted a heavy toll on the less fortunate or the ill prepared. But the inevitable by-product of that stressful training was a cohesion that could not have been generated by the one-hour officer personnel development sessions or Friday afternoon officer calls.

Battalion hail and farewell ceremonies capitalized on this hard-earned camaraderie, including the presentation of awards to those who had "distinguished" themselves on the latest mission; receiving one was considered a special honor. (For example, I earned the Sir Edmund Hillary Memorial Award for the "easy" grace with which I traversed a 200-foot escarpment during a withdrawal from one objective—a process that required one person to push me, one to pull me, a tank of oxygen, and about half an hour. The pusher, the puller, and I experienced what sociologists refer to as "bonding.")

The Omega Force also generated a considerable amount of mutual respect

between the battalion's officers and soldiers. We officers certainly gained a greater appreciation for what their lives were like, and we seemed to grow some in their eyes, too, because they knew that we knew, first hand, what we were talking about.

The troops delighted in the horror stories that came out of those missions and enjoyed knowing, if only for a while, that we all shared the same footing. The Omega Force also became part of their bragging rights in the inevitable comparisons that occur between battalions. Whether this was intended or not, I don't know, but it is instructive to note that an officer's tactical training program became a source of pride and morale for the whole unit.

Those who are unconvinced that this is a good program—who may say, "It's a good idea, but it just can't be done here"—will usually offer several specific reasons why not:

- "We can't just cut a whole battalion's worth of officers loose for three days."

Yes, you can. Our Omega Force missions were typically conducted at the end of battalion field exercises, so the Force went into action during the recovery phase. Control of the battalion was turned over to the NCOs, who, believe it or not, were able to handle it. I'll grant that there may be some risk involved, but the battalion was always there when we got back.

- "I guess it might be a good idea at battalion level, but it won't work at company or platoon."

Yes, it will. Although battalion is probably the best level for Omega training, with a little imagination it can be used at company and platoon level as well. I conducted one phase of my preparation for platoon external evaluations using the Omega model (with modifications), and enjoyed great success. Properly trained corporals and privates first class can run a platoon (history will support me on this), and many actually do it extremely well. My soldiers responded readily to the opportunities to lead; after this training they understood my intent, my standards, and my rationale on platoon missions far better and performed successfully. Running Omega missions at com-

pany or platoon level does require imagination and enthusiasm.

• "What if the Omega platoon leader blows the mission?"

Unquestionably, this is the biggest risk in Omega training. (I would also venture to guess that it's also the fire behind the smoke of many of the other objections.)

I won't deny that Omega Force training is tough—it's tough on the platoon, but it's tougher on the leader, because he is responsible not only for flawless execution but also for the planning and legwork that is involved. And it is difficult for him to pontificate on the flaws of his subordinates after he has just led them on a pointless two-day walk in the woods. But as a leader, doesn't he run that risk reg-

ularly anyway?

Small mistakes here and there won't be fatal (in training is the place to make them), and an officer may actually gain an appreciation for the difficulties involved in his subordinates' jobs as well.

Of course, the converse is equally true—if an Omega mission is flawlessly executed, not only will the soldiers see how it is done, but now the leader's standards for them can become that much higher. Most important, Omega missions let a leader move from a "tell me" to a "show me" emphasis in his training, and the value of the training, cohesion, and mutual respect that this engenders can't be overstated.

I won't try to tell anyone that our

Omega missions were eagerly awaited or that we enjoyed them once they started, but we did learn from them. We learned how to run a mission, but just as clearly, we learned our battalion commander's theory on how to run a unit—in short, "from up in front." After all, isn't that the only place from which a leader can say "Follow me" and have it make sense?

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# The Deep-Battle Surgeon

MAJOR GEORGE W. CHAPPELL

An aerial fire support officer (AFSO) is *your* deep-battle surgeon. He is an artillery lieutenant or an artillery sergeant first class who, with an Army aviator, operates from an OH-58D helicopter.

The field artillery's use of an aerial observation platform is not new. Hot air balloons, for example, were used during the American Civil War to adjust artillery fire, and some type of aircraft has been used by U.S. artillerymen in every war since. In fact, the first home of Army aviation was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

The OH-58D is a great improvement over balloons, of course, and even over the Vietnam-era observation helicopters. Basically a flying computer, or several computers, it leaves conventional aircraft system design behind. Using this advanced weapon system, an AFSO can acquire targets, and shoot, move, and communicate better than any artilleryman of the past.

The OH-58D is a high performance

helicopter with more than twice the horsepower of the OH-58A and OH-6 helicopters. The four-blade main rotor and the larger tail rotor give the pilot an agile machine. It is designed to operate in the nap-of-the-earth (NOE) terrain flight mode. In the battle area, the OH-58D can maneuver and survive better than any other U.S. Army helicopter.

The OH-58D is the first Army helicopter designed from the start to operate at night using light-intensifying night vision goggles. Too, the cockpit has special lighting so that the crew easily can see outside the aircraft and read the aircraft instruments in the dark.

The most obvious feature on the OH-58D is the addition of a mast mounted sight (MMS). The sight is positioned above the rotor system, and this allows the crew to operate below masking terrain features. Coupled with the small size and reduced heat signature of the airframe, the MMS also permits the crew

to operate for extended periods without being detected.

The MMS has both television (TV) and thermal imaging sights (TIS) that permit the AFSO to acquire targets at ranges beyond seven kilometers, both during the day and at night. The AFSO therefore has little trouble seeing a target; his problem is finding the right fire support system to use on a particular target.

The well-stabilized sights give the AFSO several operating options. The MMS can point in any direction, regardless of the helicopter's orientation, and can point automatically to a preplanned location. When a target is detected, the MMS can lock onto it and continue to track it without further operator intervention.

Both the TV and thermal sights are used during the day, usually with both TV and TIS images displayed on two cockpit television screens. The heat signatures from armored vehicles and