

Light Support Platoon

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Although the mission of a light infantry battalion support platoon is the same as that of any other support platoon, its operational capability is often stretched to the limit. To someone who has served primarily in mechanized units, this may be difficult to understand. Since a light infantry unit has very little equipment and far fewer people than a mechanized unit, one might think the platoon would have relatively little to do. But those who have served in light infantry units know otherwise. There are several reasons for this:

Resources. By MTOE (modified table of organization and equipment), a light support platoon has only 12 HMMWVs (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles), 2 fuel blivets, 15 motorcycles, assorted sling-load equipment, and 8 trailers. With this equipment, the platoon must go forth to support all of the logistical needs of the 553 light fighters and 35 wheeled vehicles (plus attachments).

The way the MTOE is designed, it is possible for a light infantry support platoon to accomplish its mission with the equipment assigned to it. Problems arise, however, when the battalion commander begins reallocating its resources to other units.

A perfect example of this is the all-too-frequent reallocation of HMMWVs, radios, and trailers from the support platoon to the rifle companies. The MTOE does not provide any vehicles for a rifle company, nor can a light rifle company afford the encumbrance of a vehicle in a combat situation. In fact, it may have to sustain itself for up to 48 hours without any resupply. When resupply is needed, it is pushed forward by the support platoon to logistic release points up close to

the company's location.

Another example is the reallocation of equipment from the support platoon to the combat platoons. To "pump up" the TOW and mortar platoons, for example, some commanders will strip the support platoon. Imagine a light infantry support platoon with only seven HMMWVs (three having been reallocated to the rifle companies and two to the mortar platoon), no motorcycles, and no trailers. With its support platoon in this configuration, a light infantry battalion will starve.

The support platoon leaders do learn to use aerial resupply methods to get supplies to the forward elements. Although sling load operations are an integral part of every support platoon operation, a platoon leader should not rely solely on helicopter support to get the job done. Too often, helicopters will simply not be available to fully support his logistical needs.

Personnel. If a light infantry support platoon is to be successful both in combat and in garrison, the leaders and soldiers who are assigned to it must have an extra portion of initiative, motivation, and common sense. If they do not, their battalion faces a logistical disaster.

Too often in the past, the support platoon has had the reputation of being the dumping ground for the battalion's less desirable officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers—perhaps with some justification. For this reason, a lieutenant selected for the job of platoon leader seldom sees it as a desirable career move.

Fortunately, though, the commander of a light infantry battalion usually realizes that the leader of his support platoon will have more responsibilities, will gain a

broader base of knowledge, and will have a greater effect upon the battalion than any of his other lieutenants. He therefore gives the job to one of the best lieutenants in his battalion.

From the reluctant lieutenant's point of view, he should realize that in the year or so he serves in the job, he will learn many new techniques, tactics, and valuable lessons. He will become a logistician, a truck driver, a fuel handler, a cook, and a mechanic.

Likewise, the support platoon sergeant (a staff sergeant, also known as the battalion ammunition chief) must be one of the best NCOs in the battalion. He and the two ammunition section chiefs (sergeants) are critical to the survivability of the battalion. Although they are ammunition experts, as their titles suggest, they must also be experts in several other fields.

One of the sergeants, for example, is the battalion mechanic. He is responsible for the maintenance of all the rolling stock in the battalion. He is a wheeled vehicle mechanic and must be able to fix anything that moves and recover vehicles from precarious positions and dangerous locations. All three of these NCOs must be dedicated, flexible, resilient, cross trained in all duties, and able to carry out the commander's intent without detailed instructions.

Realizing this, some light infantry battalion commanders have provided incentives for some of the younger soldiers in the battalion (privates first class and corporals) who successfully complete an assignment in the support platoon.

Mission and Maintenance. A good battalion S-3 appreciates and understands

support platoon operations and considers its logistical assets when he develops his tactical plans. A light infantry "seamless web" defense requires barrier materials that must be hauled; an infiltration attack may require caches; and an air assault will require truck backup. Unfortunately, many S-3s simply put together their tactical plans and then tell the support platoon leader to "make it happen."

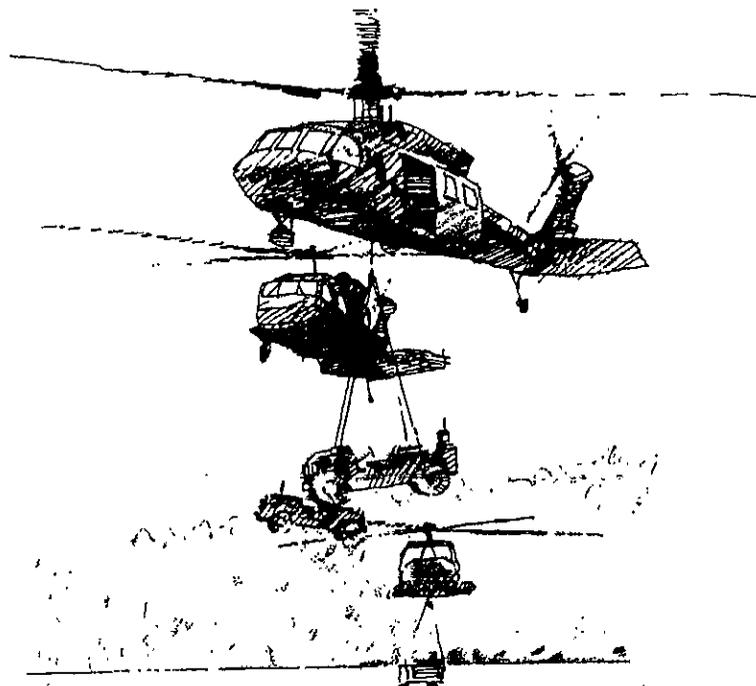
Just as all tactical plans must consider the peculiarities of the support platoon, all garrison training must consider the maintenance and care of vehicles. On many occasions, a light battalion has gone from its tactical mission to its garrison mission without considering the proper maintenance of its vehicles.

In a light battalion, it is easy enough to lose sight of the importance of proper maintenance, but it is the support platoon leader who usually takes the blame when the vehicles begin to falter and break down. He may have sounded the warning the minute he saw the long range training calendar, and he may have worked his platoon well into the night and on weekends, but he will still be accused of not having a sound maintenance program.

The smart commanders have made the motor pool an area of command emphasis and stress command motor stables religiously. It is only with this kind of command emphasis on maintenance and a "maintenance-smart" S-3 that the support platoon leader can balance his mission with his maintenance requirements.

Combat Focus. A light infantry support platoon's combat focus is critical to the survivability of the battalion. To provide resupply under combat or simulated combat conditions, the support platoon must be trained in several specialized skills. Too, independent decision making is an aptitude that all support platoon members must acquire.

One problem that any light infantry support platoon encounters is a lack of applicable references. There are many references that pertain to specific support platoon missions—FM 55-30 describes convoy operations; FM 55-450-1 explains sling-load operations; and FC 7-13 gives general logistical guidance. But the information the platoon needs to conduct resupply operations in a combat environment cannot be found in the manuals.



In the absence of references, the light support platoon must first develop a mission essential task list (METL). This list is critical to the combat focus of any unit that expects to operate in combat. From the platoon's METL, the platoon leader can then plan his training, concentrating on the tasks that are on the list.

Each support platoon leader should also develop a tactical SOP (TACSOP) that can be used for quick and easy reference during field exercises and training missions. The items a support platoon TACSOP should include are the following:

- Preparation for Combat Operations: Convoy order, vehicle loads, rucksack packing list, sensitive items, camouflage, maintenance, troop leading procedures, and alert notification procedures for emergency deployments.
- Movements: Order of march, speed and distance, convoy control, actions at enemy contact, actions at halts, close air support, NBC operations, breaching obstacles, and stand-to procedures.
- Command and Control: Communications, chain of command, and reports.
- Support Missions: Sling-load operations, refueling operations, ammunition handling procedures, recovery, maintenance, and logistical release points.

Every soldier in the support platoon

should be familiar with all the SOPs laid down by their leaders. The TACSOP will not only give the soldiers an easy reference to the other platoon SOPs, it will also make learning easier for newly assigned soldiers.

Even with a comprehensive TACSOP to improve the combat readiness of the support platoon, there is still no substitute for firm leadership and good hard soldiering.

In short, the support platoon deserves the same respect and attention the combat platoons get. This means that it must have strong leadership and top-notch soldiers; the equipment assigned to it by MTOE must be kept in the platoon; the battalion S-3 must be sensitive to the capabilities and vulnerabilities of his logistical chain; and vehicle maintenance must be incorporated into every training event. Only then will the battalion's survivability and combat effectiveness be assured.

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