

Training Combat Support

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Training combat support elements to standard has always been a challenge for maneuver commanders, and it probably always will be. But this training can be managed successfully. This article examines an approach that one mechanized infantry battalion took to solving this problem. Some of the ideas and methods may be useful for others units that must come to grips with training "low density" subordinate units.

Successful combat support unit training within a maneuver battalion seems reasonably achievable. Theoretically, the time for planning and the resources to support such training are available. The soldiers who are assigned by the replacement system are supposed to be competent in their military occupational specialty (MOS) skills. The leaders at all levels are expected to be knowledgeable about and proficient in the application of combat support elements—at least enough to envision, plan, and manage combat support training requirements properly.

Unfortunately, though, as most of us know from experience, few of these factors are as they should be at any given time. All too frequently, one or more of them is deficient. The result is often an improperly trained, and therefore not combat ready, scout, mortar, or antitank force within the battalion.

This is unquestionably a direct product of the deficiencies at work, through things done or left undone by the battalion staff and leaders and through forces outside the battalion. For purposes of this discussion, I will call them "training distractors."

Training distractors come in two categories—external and internal. Both have elements that can be influenced

by a unit and its commander and others that cannot. For instance, if a battalion has a significant say in planning for and applying the resources under its control—time, unit personnel and equipment, and others—it can keep the effects of potential internal distractors to a minimum by adhering to a well-thought-out and flexible training scheme. Through a deliberate and systematic planning and coordination effort, it may even be able to improve its access to such training resources as schools, ammunition, ranges, maneuver areas, and critical TADSS (training aids, devices, simulations, and simulators). It is worth noting, however, that access to many of these resources is controlled from outside the battalion and may represent possible external distractors.

EFFECTS

But distractors also come in forms that are less controllable and tougher to identify and characterize, and therefore more difficult to correct or lessen in terms of their negative effect on training.

Most of us are familiar with the crown jewels of external training distractors. Some favorites have been personnel turmoil, "hey, you" support missions, and other last-minute taskers that make a mockery of unit training schedules. Worse, the insidious drain of soldiers from training by myriad mandatory individual training requirements or other administrative "must do's" for individuals or small groups of soldiers can sap the present-for-duty strength of units trying to conduct training. For the combat support training units, one of

a kind and often small in number, this latter distractor alone can be fatal to effective training.

Other distractors that derive from a combination of single or multiple human frailties (such as command and staff ignorance concerning the technical use of a support arm and its capabilities and limitations) can be just as debilitating to training. We have all seen commanders shy away from areas in which they are weak and emphasize areas in which they are strong. Unless such a commander has an unusually dedicated and self-motivated subordinate, the typical result is that "the unit does well only what the boss checks." Without support, even the most dedicated and motivated subordinate can go only so far.

But these distractors can be mitigated. The challenge is to carve out of the granite face of distractor adversity opportunities for low-density units to practice their required battle skills and capabilities to the required standards. Leaders who are not familiar with their combat support units must challenge themselves to know the business of these units and to create the best possible training environment for them. Part of the solution is iron-willed self-education and planning. The following is a case study of what can be done:

Like many units in the Army, this battalion's mortars were in sad shape. The battalion was still organized under the H-series table of organization and equipment and had a 107mm mortar platoon of four mortars in the combat support company and three 81mm mortar platoons of three mortars each assigned to Companies A, B, and C. The 107mm platoon had just failed its Army Readiness Training and Evalua-

tion Program (ARTEP) exercise, and the 81mm platoons were in even worse shape.

The new commander and his operations and training officer (S-3) were determined to turn the situation around. They believed that the mortars were a vital element in the battalion's combat power. This perspective was underscored by its parent brigade's XVIII Airborne Corps mission. The question was how to overcome a mind-set throughout the brigade that did not emphasize proficient combat ready mortar units or create an environment that produced them. (All ten of the brigade's mortar platoons were equally deficient—including the consolidated 107mm mortar squads of the armored cavalry unit.)

An examination of the problem and its possible solutions led to a "walk before we run approach." The first order of business was to give the 107mm mortar platoon another ARTEP after it conducted a carefully laid out training plan that gave the platoon systematic practice in its individual and collective skills.

Because time was short, the plan would emphasize a multi-echelon approach. (The battalion was anticipating its own ARTEP.) All available training resources (TADSS, ammunition, OPTEMPO, ranges and maneuver areas), would be used to full advantage. The battalion's resources in the form of planning, evaluation, tactical operations center (TOC) personnel, and the like would be applied to support the platoon's training. In fact, the S-3 would find the assets that were needed to plan and execute a thorough training program and conduct the ARTEP.

At the same time, it was necessary to solve a leadership problem in the platoon. The platoon leader, for example, was not particularly strong, and had not attended the Infantry Mortar Platoon Course.

The new battalion commander, after weighing all the factors, as well as reflecting on his personal observations of the platoon and its leadership on the failed ARTEP, determined that the platoon's members had little or no confidence in their leaders and felt a

change had to be made before any positive results could develop. He therefore appointed a new platoon leader and designated several NCO replacements.

To pursue the "get well" program for the 107mm platoon, the S-3, in cooperation with the combat support company commander, formed a planning and execution task group led by his primary assistant, the battalion S-3 Air. The guidance was straightforward: Develop a program, coordinate it, and execute it. The ARTEP would be conducted in six weeks.

The S-3 Air developed a plan that was oriented toward the mortar platoon's mission essential task list (METL). His plan put the platoon in the greatest possible number of situations in which it could practice ARTEP tasks at the individual, crew, and collective level to standard in the available six-week period. If the platoon mastered multi-echelon training techniques within the performance oriented training approach, continuous evaluation and improvement would result. Performance to standard would be validated in enough time to restore the unit's confidence in its ability to succeed, if not to excel, on the coming ARTEP.

During the six-week cycle, the platoon was allowed certain periods of preparation leading to the gunners test, then moved to a series of field deployments that exercised the platoon as if the whole battalion were deployed. For instance, a TOC (minus) consisting of an M577 command and control vehicle and select TOC personnel, as well as other necessary support provided the basic slice of command and control and support necessary to implement a scenario that exercised all ARTEP tasks.

The S-3 Air built the program and made sure all the necessary training resources were coordinated and available. The new platoon leader led his platoon through the program. (The plan involved specific periods that came directly under the platoon leader, such as the gunner test.) The end result was highly satisfactory to the battalion; the 107mm mortar platoon did exceptionally

well on the ARTEP.

The experience of putting the 107mm mortar platoon on the right footing seemed to have some lessons that if applied throughout the battalion could benefit all of its low-density units. In effect, it pointed toward a focused program that would exercise these units in increasingly demanding training environments leading to the objective standard—the ARTEP. This problem, of course, would have to be heavily supported by the battalion headquarters.

The major question that had to be answered was whether the six-week program that had been developed could be refined into a regular program to exercise the battalion's four 81mm mortar platoons. If so, this would bring them to ARTEP standard every six to eight weeks in a combination field training exercise (FTX) and combined arms live fire exercise (CALFEX) format. The objective event would be structured on ARTEP tasks, conditions, and standards but could be conducted as a TOC (minus), mortar platoon pure, exercise as if the entire battalion were deployed for 48 to 72 hours.

The S-3 Air believed that the concept could be fully supported and, in fact, would yield the desired results. The battalion commander made his decision and directed the S-3 to plan and execute a first cycle for all of the mortar platoons. As with the 107mm mortar platoon, the S-3 Air would then plan and execute the operation.

Using as a baseline the strategy developed for the 107mm mortar platoon, the S-3 Air adjusted this package to accommodate the 81mm platoons. Within a week, the battalion's four mortar platoons were engaged in a focused training program. That program was aimed at deploying six weeks later on an exercise that would measure the unit against ARTEP standards. The fact that all four platoons were in the field being reviewed (the direct support artillery battalion provided additional resources for the observer-controller function) added a degree of competitiveness and heightened interest.

The results of the first battalion combined mortar FTX were so encour-

aging that the commander chose to put his mortars on a continuous program in which they deployed once every six to eight weeks on the capstone FTX. The design of the exercise (scenarios and terrain) was such that other battalion elements could be integrated as desired. Company headquarters could participate with the mortars, for instance, or the TOC (minus) could fill this role. The key point is that the mortars were exercised on a regular basis up to a "live shot." Thus, for ARTEP or readiness missions, they were proficient.

As the battalion moved into the second and third iterations of the mortar shoot, the effect on the mortar platoons became more apparent. The soldiers began to view themselves as being something more than an appendage of the companies and the battalion and increasingly as a vital and "elite" combat multiplier. They were mortar men and proud of it! The next round of 81mm and 107mm ARTEPs were proof. The mortars excelled despite soldier and leader turbulence. They were a respon-

sive and reliable combat asset of the battalion.

Although this program can certainly find parallels in many quarters, in my experience the battalion's approach was not typical. First, the leaders were willing to rise above the limitations in their past service experience and to focus on a specialized part of the organization that normally did not determine the day-to-day success or failure of the commander in traditional U.S. Army garrison routines. Second, the authority and responsibility given to the S-3 Air approached a company command level. But most impressive was the commander's vision in realizing how much fully trained and proficient mortar platoons would add to his warfighting capabilities. The happy combination of these and other factors produced a highly effective training program for a low density combat support arm of the battalion.

The battalion eventually applied this model to all of its combat support elements and, to some degree, to its

combat service support elements as well. Certainly success was not always achieved, but the unit always had a sound awareness of its strengths and weaknesses in the combat support and combat service support areas. It also had an effective system for improvement. It may be added that an aggressive effort to get officers and sergeants to the Infantry Mortar Platoon Course was another battalion trait.

This story illustrates what committed and resourceful leadership can do. There is no excuse for poor combat service support. This battalion validated that premise.

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SWAP SHOP



Thermal TRP

Ever since the Army adopted a thermal sight for our modern weapon systems, there has been one major problem with their tactical employment. That problem is how to set up a thermal target reference point (TRP) that will easily pick up an oncoming enemy without being totally obvious to him.

When the 24th Infantry Division deployed to Saudi Arabia for Operation DESERT SHIELD, my company commander tasked me to figure something out for our company to use as a TRP. He gave me two guidelines:

- Make sure the Bradley crews can clearly see the TRP at the maximum engagement lines (MELs).
- Don't let the Iraqis know it's there.

After experimenting with several solutions, I came up with a simple solution that any mechanized unit can adapt without having to obtain any special equipment or burn petroleum products that are needed elsewhere.

EQUIPMENT REQUIRED:

- 1 7.62 or 5.56 ammunition can.

2 8-inch sections of quarter-inch cotton web rope.

1 5-gallon antifreeze or oil can.

1 long engineer picket.

2 feet of WD-1 wire.

1 gallon of diesel fuel.

CONSTRUCTION:

Punch two holes about four inches apart in the top of the ammunition can. Run a rope section through each hole. Fill the can with the diesel fuel and close the lid. Wire the ammunition can to the engineer picket, about a foot from the top. (The picket should already be driven in the ground.) Place the antifreeze can, lid removed, onto the picket, covering the ammunition can.

When lit, the burning ropes will heat the antifreeze can, creating a large thermal target but will not produce a lot of light. A few holes punched into one side of the antifreeze can will also turn it into a good TRP for use with night observation devices.

(Submitted by Lieutenant William E. Owen, 3d Battalion, 15th Infantry, 24th Infantry Division.)