Reconnaissance in the Desert

LIEUTENANT ROBERT FRIEDENBERG

Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM went a long way toward validating the doctrine that we infantrymen have followed since the inception of the AirLand Battle. The concept of outmaneuvering the enemy and hitting him violently and decisively proved justified. As an airborne infantry scout platoon leader, though, I found that much of the doctrine I had been using and relying upon had to be altered to fit the change in topography.

A light infantry scout platoon trains to conduct dismounted reconnaissance missions forward of the FLOT (forward line of own troops) and send any information it finds back to the battalion S-2 and S-3. They in turn inform the battalion commander so that he can make a decision. And in a fluidly changing AirLand Battle situation, information must be transmitted quickly.

While training the platoon at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, I emphasized a squad's ability to move quickly to the objective and conduct aggressive reconnaissance while also using stealth to avoid compromising the mission. In the dense pine forests and thickly vegetated low grounds in and around Fort Bragg, moving undetected was relatively easy. The platoon became used to conducting reconnaissance close to the objective, sometimes even getting within the enemy's perimeter.

Once the squads completed their missions, they could pull back to the safety of the dense woods. The headquarters element could resupply the squads so they could operate for extended periods. During every field problem, the situation was similar, and our SOPs for insertion, extraction, and resupply were all based on operating in a woodland environment.

Soon after our arrival in Saudi Arabia, I realized that those tactics were going to be useless. The desert provided much less security, and we quickly learned that we had to conduct reconnaissance farther out from our objective.

During the scouts' first mission — a static screen as part of a battalion antiarmor defense — problems soon became apparent. The area we operated in contained flat salt lakes interspersed with low rolling dunes. The only vegetation on the dunes was sparse date palm and scrub brush. With little natural concealment, the squads had to dig deep into the sand, lowering their profiles as much as possible.

STUDY TERRAIN

Although high ground is usually the best place to establish an observation post (OP), in the desert it is vulnerable because it is such an obvious place and is so easily spotted by the enemy. We had to study the terrain more carefully and choose less obvious OPs while still maintaining good fields of observation.

Resupply also posed a challenge. We found the most effective method was to set up cache points behind the OPs (usually about 500 meters) and to establish times for the squads to move to the caches to pick up water and food. Moving the resupply vehicle any closer to the OPs would have risked compromising them.

The next obstacle to be overcome was long distance dismounted movement. During an external evaluation (EXEVAL) that included movements of as much as 15 kilometers, we discovered that the squads needed to disperse much more than normal. Movement could be conducted only at night, and the squads had to be in place before sunrise to avoid being caught moving in the open during daylight. Dismounted reconnaissance in the desert requires that the squads look at the objective from a greater distance. Moving too close risks compromise, and evading capture is difficult in the open desert.

Although we accomplished our missions during the EXEVAL, I learned that dismounted movement in the desert was not efficient. Using vehicles was quicker, and we could cover much more ground and increase our survivability at the same time. Without natural concealment, dismounted movement over long distances risked compromise, and the use of vehicles was a tremendous asset. There is nothing in the Scout Mission Training Plan that covers reconnaissance operations in the desert, however, and I had to look elsewhere for guidance.

I approached the Special Forces liaison officer to the 82d Airborne Division, who commanded an "A" Detachment in the 3d Special Forces Group. This Group trains extensively in the desert. Its SOP leaned heavily on the lessons learned by the Long Range Desert Group, predecessors of the British Special Air Service, which had conducted effective mounted reconnaissance missions in the desert of North Africa during World War II.

He and I then planned a field training exercise (FTX) to learn and practice some of the techniques. Along with the

scout platoon, an antitank platoon from Company D equipped with TOW HMMWVs (high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles) participated in the exercise.

The topics covered during the FTX included mounted land navigation using compass and odometer to cover long distances, desert survival, hand to hand combat, and medical training. Over the course of three days, we navigated to pre-designated points, identical to a dismounted land navigation course. We learned that long-range navigation in a vehicle is more effective when certain techniques are used:

- An azimuth should be taken outside the vehicle first (with the engine off), then inside, and the difference noted. Because of the magnetic effects of metal and radio interference, compass azimuths can be off by as much as 20 degrees when taken in vehicles. Each compass and vehicle will vary in the azimuth differences.
- The vehicle odometer is effective in measuring distance, but 10 percent should be added to the map distance to make up for wheel slippage in soft sand.
- It is best to use a primary and an alternate compass operator, with the primary operator sitting in the passenger side front seat and the alternate (if in a cargo HMMWV) in the back, midway between the driver and the commander.

Using these techniques, we were able to navigate legs as long as 15 miles with little error in azimuth or distance.

The FTX culminated in a final area reconnaissance mission. The objective was a resupply point in open low ground surrounded by several large hills. The plan was for three vehicles to move the three scout squads to dismount points, each about 1,000 meters from the objective. The squads would then move on foot to the objective, and the reconnaissance would be made from three different directions.

I placed a TOW HMMWV equipped with a thermal sight on high ground about 2,000 meters from the objective to act as an early warning for the squads against possible enemy counter-reconnaissance patrols. The thermal sights were effective, and the squads now could be given advance warning to pull back if necessary. The squads dismounted at pre-designated points and, when they had finished their mission, moved to pre-coordinated exfiltration points. (They could also move to the exfiltration points in case of trouble.)

Once a squad was in a vehicle, its survivability increased dramatically, and it could quickly get out of danger. The TOW vehicle in overwatch could take out any enemy armor that threatened either a dismounted squad or a vehicle. The use of vehicles and dismount points combined both the mobility of vehicle reconnaissance and the stealth and close observation of dismounted patrolling.

My initial observations of dismounted reconnaissance in the desert had led me to believe that it was ineffective. But after trial and error, and a little improvisation, I came to believe that leaders can combine mounted and dismounted operations to conduct effective reconnaissance missions.

Lieutenant Robert Friedenberg was scout platoon leader of the 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry, 82d Airborne Division, during Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, and is now a company executive officer in the same battalion. He also participated in Operation JUST CAUSE. He is a 1988 ROTC graduate of the University of Texas

Tactical Night Climb

LIEUTENANT COLONEL WILLIAM M. MENNING
LIEUTENANT COLONEL STEPHEN R. SANDS

When most people think of military mountaineering, they picture soldiers making dramatic bounding rappels and mules patiently carrying ammunition boxes. Military mountaineering, in fact, includes a broad spectrum of individual and unit skills.

The Army's only mountain battalion — the 3d Battalion, 172d Infantry, Vermont Army National Guard — has the mission of conducting offensive and defensive operations in mountainous terrain under all climatic conditions. This means it must be able to destroy either dismounted or armored forces in any weather conditions, in any season, day or night, and in all types of operations.

Individual military mountaineering skills that support these missions include operating in extreme weather conditions and in steep terrain; establishing and negotiating fixed ropes, alpine ladders, suspension traverses, and rappels; moving over snow, ice, and glaciers; and conducting basic rock climbing.

Unit military mountaineering skills