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# Cordon and Search

LIEUTENANT JAMES SISEMORE

The attention of the Army in recent years has focused more and more on the techniques of operations other than war, in which both belligerent and non-belligerent civilians play a major role. One technique that is useful in such situations is the cordon and search.

During Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama in 1989, U.S. forces were called upon to conduct more than 150 searches of villages and townships, looking for escaped elements of the Panamanian Defense Force. The staff of the Jungle Operations Training Center (JOTC) in Panama has since incorporated a village cordon and search as one of its training scenarios.

The staff at the JOTC defines the cordon and search as a "populace and resource control operation conducted to isolate a specific area and search personnel, buildings, and terrain. It usually involves civilian agencies and both U.S. and Joint Forces." In the scenario the JOTC uses, the village being searched is not considered hostile, and no enemy forces are expected to be present. The village is considered friendly, and every precaution has to be taken to ensure that the villagers are not mistreated or driven into sympathy with the enemy by unnecessary actions. If enemy troops were known to be present, the plan of attack would be modified to meet a different threat. Whatever the scenario, however, force protection has to be the top priority. Each soldier needs to be briefed on what he must do if he encounters enemy soldiers.

A cordon and search can be used in a variety of light infantry missions. In today's operating environment, the use of brute force to gain entrance to a town

or village and to search it is seldom, if ever, authorized.

The goals of a cordon and search mission are varied—the separation of the enemy from his support bases, the capture or destruction of enemy personnel and equipment, or the collection of intelligence on enemy activities in the area. The mission may also be to liberate civilians who have been forced to live under enemy influence or control.

Friendly forces may also institute cordon and search operations to demonstrate host nation legitimacy to the populace by introducing representatives from that nation into the village or sector. The efforts to gain the trust and confidence of the indigenous personnel can be expanded through the introduction of food, medicines, and other conveniences into the village.

## Organization

The organization of a cordon and search force may vary in size and composition, but the three primary elements are *security*, *search*, and *reserve*. The security and reserve elements can be designated from a standard light infantry rifle company, but the search element may need additional assets from other units.

Depending on the size of the objective, the search element should have at least an infantry platoon attached, but other branch elements should also be dedicated:

- Military intelligence units in the form of translators and interrogation teams should be allocated.
- Military police with scout dogs can be used to identify possible tunnels and escape routes. Military police can also

be assigned to conduct the individual searches of personnel (with female MPs to search female civilians when needed). Additional military police could be assigned to guard and secure confirmed and suspected enemy personnel after interrogations are completed.

- Engineers may be needed to enter certain structures and destroy any enemy equipment that may be found there.

Civilian personnel may also be assigned to the search element or brought in after the village has been secured. Government intelligence and counter-narcotic agencies, depending on the area, may have an interest in the village. International Red Cross, religious groups, or medical personnel may also be useful in gaining popular support and useful information as well.

One group that should not be left out of this type of operation is representatives from the host nation itself. Whether these people are host nation police or representatives of religious groups, they can be useful in offering either comfort to the villagers or assistance in controlling them.

## The Cordon

The first step in this operation is, of course, to establish a cordon, and the commander needs to make sure he has enough soldiers before he begins the operation. He makes this decision on the basis of intelligence that is either given to him or that comes from internal reconnaissance performed by his unit.

The following are important considerations for the commander:

- The size and layout of the town or village.

- Tunnels and roads into or out of the town or village.
- Fortifications in or near the area.
- An exact or estimated population count.
- All avenues of approach into the village.
- Suggested routes to the objective area.
- Any enemy activity in the area of operation.
- The intelligence requirements of the commander's superiors.

The commander can then decide upon the best way to seal off or cordon the objective. Several options are open to the cordon forces:

To seal off the entire objective, he can use either a single security force or a double cordon. The single cordon is the easiest to emplace, but it does not offer the same security as the double cordon, which consists of an interior and an exterior security force. The interior cordon seals off the objective to prevent anyone from leaving, while the exterior cordon keeps any new enemy forces from entering the objective once the search has begun.

The use of stealth in the emplacement of the cordon is essential to a successful mission. The interior cordon, which is the critical force, must completely surround the objective area without being compromised. The exterior cordon does not have to surround the objective completely (which may not be possible in any case), but it does have to be able to establish roadblocks and checkpoints along likely avenues of approach into the objective area.

The outer cordon does not have to be accomplished by infantry forces; it can be conducted by military police who are trained for that mission. The best time to establish a cordon is during hours of limited visibility. The cordon force must be in place before a successful search of the objective can begin.

### The Search

The search of the objective, whenever possible, should be done in the light of day. A plan needs to be established and then rehearsed by the elements



**These 25th Infantry Division soldiers, conducting a cordon and search operation near Cu Chi, Republic of Vietnam, provide security while search elements clear a village**

involved. The key leaders of the search teams, at least, should conduct a rehearsal of the search plan. The unit as a whole should enter the village through a single point in the interior cordon. The entering force needs to be prepared to conduct a search by force in case it meets any resistance.

The search plan should be simple and should include both personnel and buildings. It is still important, however, to consider the village friendly during the operation.

Every soldier must understand that the intent of the mission is to rid the area of subversives and not to cause the villagers to join the enemy by choice. The villagers must be treated with the respect desired by the host nation. Every effort must be made to reduce the inconvenience of the search and not to insult the inhabitants of the village in any way. If possible, each search element should have an interpreter to inform the inhabitants of the intentions of the search.

The force has several possible search options upon entering the village. One is for the inhabitants to be rounded up in a central holding area and taken away one by one to be interrogated while a simultaneous search of the village is being conducted. This plan eases the

problem of controlling the civilians and is the easiest way to conduct the search. It does not, however, allow the searcher to identify the person being searched with his house, which is also being searched. If something is found in a certain house, no link to an individual can be made.

A second option is to force each civilian to remain in his or her house. This plan calls for every house to have an assigned guard when the force enters the village. The search of each house can then be carried out separately in the presence of the occupant.

Each villager should be allowed the right to observe his house being searched, with an interpreter explaining exactly what is going on and why. It can also be useful to observe a person's reactions, which may give away the location of important items or information. When the search of a house is completed, each person or family can be led to a central holding area to be questioned. The problem with this plan is having enough personnel to guard each house as the search goes on. Interpreters are essential during this period. Otherwise, junior soldiers may have trouble containing hostile personnel in a particular house.

A way to solve many of the possible

problems is to enter the village before first light when most of the people are still in their homes. Once the forces are in the village, interpreters can use a megaphone (from an attached psychological operations team) to call for the inhabitants to leave their houses. The houses and the people are then marked with engineer tape, and the people are led to a central holding area where the plan of searches and interrogations can be explained to the group as a whole. As each house is about to be searched, the occupant can be brought up to observe the search as well as to be observed. At the same time, an interpreter should explain what is happening. Upon completion of the search, the villagers can then be interrogated and segregated into friendly and hostile groups.

These interrogations should be conducted in separate buildings, not in view of the holding area. After questioning, each person should be placed in a separate holding area, again out of view of the initial area. Here, medical aid as well as a hot meal can be offered.

When the interrogations and searches are completed, those suspected of illegal

acts should be evacuated before the rest are released. When this is completed, a final briefing should be conducted by the commander of the search element (through an interpreter, if necessary), or by a host nation representative to the villagers. All actions should once again be explained, along with the reasons for the search.

The reserve force may or may not play a large role in the mission. It serves as a reaction force in case of trouble inside or outside the village. The reserve can help the search element secure the villagers, or it can be released to assist the cordon element.

The keys to the success of a cordon and search operation are much the same as in any other mission, including a thorough mission analysis, proper task organization, strict control measures (inside and outside the objective), good intelligence, precise timing, and rehearsals. Contingency plans have to be carefully considered and prepared. Things that may help a unit convince the civilians include candy, cigarettes, hot food, medical aid, and host nation representatives.

Again, if the mission is to succeed, the inhabitants of the village must be treated with dignity and respect. Religious considerations must be honored; for example, churches and cemeteries should not be damaged or searched without good reason.

The cordon and search mission can go hand in hand with peacekeeping operations or noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs). In today's world, this type of mission is not unusual for a light infantry unit, and the need for such a mission may be just around the corner. Commanders need to be well-briefed by their S-2s on the traditions and beliefs of the area and must have a solid, well-rehearsed plan before they attempt such a mission.

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**Lieutenant James Sisemore** is S-1 2d Battalion, 325th Infantry, 82d Airborne Division. He previously served as a rifle platoon leader and deployed to the JOTC with the regiment. He is a 1990 ROTC graduate of Southwest Missouri State University, from which he also holds a master's degree.

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# Company Reconnaissance

**CAPTAIN JOHN K. CAROTHERS**

I agree with Captain Kevin Dougherty's article, "Leaders Reconnaissance," in *INFANTRY*'s September-October 1993 issue (pages 12-14). Sending the company leaders on a reconnaissance can be detrimental to a mission, and it takes time the leaders could better use in planning and supervision. Still, company level reconnaissance must be done.

Lessons learned from combat operations and training exercises have shown that company leaders often neglect

reconnaissance. The battalion scouts do an adequate job of providing the battalion commander the information necessary to assess his plan, but they do little to help the company commander. Just linking up with the battalion scouts is a tough mission, and I have never believed a battalion scout who points into the darkness and says, "It's right over there, sir." A well-run reconnaissance can confirm or deny the commander's tentative plan. (Yes, the comman-

der should already have a plan before he starts his reconnaissance and then use that plan to guide his reconnaissance effort.)

After serving as an observer-controller for the 7th Infantry Division's Bold Thrust program, and observing our own battalion at the Joint Readiness Training Center, I actually began to think that "movement to daylight, then fire and maneuver" was an actual form of maneuver. As I approached company