

TRAINING NOTES



Preparation for the JRTC The Rifle Platoon Leader

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Having completed one rotation as a platoon leader before my battalion's second rotation to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), I could think of several areas that needed improvement if the platoon was to succeed. I would like to share some areas in which preparations helped me during that second rotation. If you are rifle platoon leader, they should also help you prepare your platoon to "go to war" at the JRTC:

Take the opportunity seriously. Many units scheduled for the JRTC fail to understand the benefits they can expect to receive from the training. It offers leaders and troops alike the opportunity to experience the closest thing to warfare the U.S. Army can offer without risking the lives of its soldiers.

To get the full benefit, however, soldiers need to be informed in advance of what they can expect and what will be expected of them. The opposing force (OPFOR) they will encounter will probably be the best-trained and best-equipped enemy they will ever come up against. The fact that the OPFOR is thoroughly familiar with the ground adds to the challenge.

As a leader at platoon level, never

refer to the rotation as a "training event." Instead, present it as an opportunity for your soldiers to show the OPFOR what they can do. Take every chance you may get to instruct your troops on the OPFOR's capabilities and the way they operate. If you don't know these things, ask your battalion S-2 to brief you; the more you and your soldiers know about the OPFOR, the better your platoon will perform against it.

Don't overlook MILES gunnery. One area that is often overlooked, but one of the most fundamentally important, is MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system) gunnery. Just as each unit goes to the range to zero and qualify on its weapons in preparation for war, so must it implement a plan to ensure that its soldiers know how to zero their weapons properly with MILES before they deploy to the JRTC.

After entering the rotation, your soldiers should re-zero their weapons at every opportunity. Soldiers must understand that un-zeroed MILES is useless, and that the zero moves every time the transmitter makes contact with another object (including a tree or the ground). As a leader, you cannot allow

your soldiers to simply go through the motions of re-zeroing their individual weapons.

Members of the OPFOR at the JRTC zero their MILES gear every day of a rotation. It is not unheard of for an OPFOR soldier to spend as much as two hours confirming his zero. This may sound extreme, but if your soldiers do not do it they will be wasting their time and training trying to fire upon the OPFOR soldiers who do. While it may not be possible for them to re-zero every day, they should try to do it at every change of mission (at least three times per rotation). Through your observer-controller, you can request that a MILES contact team come to your area during the three company after-action reviews (AARs) so your soldiers can confirm the zeros on their weapons.

Tricks that help maintain a good zero include using a piece of cardboard under the MILES laser to steady the transmitter and then using adhesive or engineer tape to further secure the laser. The maintenance of MILES equipment must be incorporated into daily weapon maintenance. Dirt on the lens of a laser transmitter is as bad as un-zeroed MILES.

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Not all soldiers in a rifle platoon understand how to fire MILES-equipped antiarmor weapons effectively. The fourth or fifth day in the training area is not the time to find out that several of your soldiers can't fire the weapon effectively. Given the number of losses an infantry platoon can expect during a rotation, all the designated Dragon gunners may be missing for the antiarmor defense mission.

During the final weeks available before a rotation, time should be allotted for each soldier in your platoon to fire the MILES Dragon and AT-4 weapons. The Dragon can be fired at a company vehicle with a MILES integrated target system kit attached. The AT-4 can also be fired at a vehicle for practice and can even be fired at a soldier wearing a MILES harness and halo.

Practice standard battle drills. Although soldiers and squad leaders who are told to practice them may treat them lightly, battle drills will win or lose squad and platoon contacts in war as well as at the JRTC.

It is during these contacts that the effects of proper or improper individual movement techniques will become apparent. Given the opportunity, platoon leaders and company commanders should set up squad contact lanes that allow a squad leader to fire and maneuver with his squad against an opponent with zeroed MILES equipment. Not only will this give the leader a chance to observe the readiness of his soldiers, it will also give the soldiers an opportunity to see how effective the zeroed MILES can be.

Soldiers cannot simply be "talked through" battle drills and be proficient. Team and squad leaders must practice moving their forces on the ground against an unpredictable enemy element. Only with practice and retraining will soldiers be prepared to react to contact successfully.

Use your indirect fires. A rule I learned during my first JRTC rotation was never to commit my platoon if indirect fires could be used first. Your forward observer is a key asset during every mission. In the defense, he can call in fires

upon advancing troops and armor. In the search and attack, he can lay blocking fires on a retreating enemy.

Your FO can also be relied upon to act as your second navigator. It is his mission, as well as yours, to know where the platoon is at all times. If he does not use a map during every movement, both he and you are wrong.

See that every soldier understands the commander's intent. Too often at the JRTC, leaders are wounded or killed, leaving the platoon with junior squad leaders. So long as each man knows what he and the platoon must do to accomplish the mission, the leaders can be sure of a dedicated and focused attack.

One way to see that this happens is to have a warning order or operations order format laminated for each squad leader. The essential items for a mission can be outlined and filled in during a fragmentary order. Situation, mission, and commander's intent, along with the execution paragraph, need to be briefed to every soldier. Mission and intent are often forgotten in the rush to brief the execution phase of an operations order.

Use mission checklists. Individually, there are several areas the leaders can improve upon to see that missions are accomplished successfully. Mission checklists are among the easiest and most valuable of these, but the least used; they can be completed while in garrison.

While certain tasks may be considered standing operating procedure (SOP), nothing can replace a checklist in preparing for a mission. The conduct of a defense is an excellent example of the need for a checklist. When preparing to meet an enemy force that can be expected to arrive at any time, leaders cannot be expected to remember every necessary detail of a defensive preparation. A written format that lays out company and platoon SOPs is vital to the proper and timely preparation of a defense.

Checklists for priorities of work, mission preparation, the defense, and even a deliberate attack, will fit on two or three 5x8 index cards that can be carried along with your map in a cargo

pocket. These will become a definite advantage if you or your platoon sergeant becomes a casualty. Your map as well as your checklist can pass to the senior squad leader and help him continue the mission.

Enforce standards on every field problem. Also important in preparing for the JRTC are field discipline and understanding the JRTC exercise rules of engagement (ROEs). After a few days, it becomes essential that each leader know and maintain the standards. Tired soldiers (and leaders) will always take the easy way out. If your battalion does not use and enforce the exercise ROE standards as an outline for the field training exercises leading to a rotation, you might suggest to your company commander that this be done.

Platoon classes on the ROEs should also be incorporated into your classes on the OPFOR. While soldiers do not need to know and understand the ROEs word for word, they should know the basics. For example, they should know that a soldier who leaves his helmet off for comfort will be scored as a dead soldier by an observer-controller. If leaders are willing to enforce standards during the train-up exercises at home station, the ROEs will be much easier to enforce at the JRTC.

The JRTC cannot be approached as just another field training exercise. It has to be seen as an opportunity to display your platoon's tactical and technical ability.

The suggestions offered here involve only a few of the hundreds of preparations a leader has to go through to get ready for a rotation. For a rifle platoon leader, however, it is attention to these areas that will make a training rotation much easier and more successful.

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