

The Support Platoon Leader In A Light Infantry Battalion

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The most challenging and demanding job for a lieutenant may be that of support platoon leader. As a young officer, you focus on tactical operations and use Field Manual (FM) 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, as your reference guide. But it's not until the battalion commander tells you you're going to be the next support platoon leader that you even begin to realize the importance of this position within the battalion and on tactical operations.

Previous articles have outlined some of the jobs and duty descriptions of the light infantry support platoon leader. This one is intended to help the incoming platoon leader with some of the problems associated with the job, to help him organize his platoon, and to point him in the right direction.

According to FM 7-20, *The Infantry Battalion*, the support platoon leader is the assistant S-4 but is supervised by the headquarters and headquarters (HHC) company commander and is located in the brigade support area (BSA). When the battalion is operating as part of the brigade, the battalion field trains are located in the BSA. The support platoon headquarters and a section of the platoon are located in the BSA, while several of the platoon vehicles are in the combat trains under the control of the support platoon sergeant.

The support platoon leader is the one person designated by the battalion commander to resupply the battalion during combat operations. This resupply includes all classes of supply and the transportation of units to the battlefield

to continue the fight or refit for another mission. The support platoon leader must have good time management and organizational skills and a high degree of initiative.

As with any new job, you need to immerse yourself in it and learn as much about it as you can. Some of the key organizations you will be working with outside your unit are the movement control office (MCO), the division ammunition office (DAO), and the division's troop issue subsistence activity (TISA). If you will set up appointments with these representatives, you can learn

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the local regulations, some of the areas that are constant problems, and people to call in case you have problems or questions.

Some of the key personnel within your unit are the battalion executive officer (XO), the battalion S-4 (usually your boss), the HHC commander and XO, your unit motor officer, the battalion S-3 Air, and, of course, the outgoing support platoon leader. You will get most of your guidance from the battalion XO and the S-4, so make sure you get as detailed a briefing as possible from them before you assume respon-

sibility for the platoon. Keep in mind that some of these officers were probably support platoon leaders themselves. If you talk with them during the transition phase, you will be better prepared for the difficult job ahead.

During the transition phase, you will need to do an inventory of your platoon's equipment, which amounts to more than most officers realize. Vehicles, fuel blivets, and air delivery systems are only a few of the items for which the platoon is responsible. Set aside a couple of days to do a complete change-of-command inventory with all parties involved. After you do the inventory, give the outgoing platoon leader a couple of days to resolve any problems that may have come up. Then reinspect and sign your platoon's hand receipts with the HHC supply sergeant. It is a good idea to have your section leaders present at that time so you can sign appropriate items of equipment over to them. Make sure all the equipment you have just signed for is properly hand-receipted to the appropriate user and marked accordingly.

One of the first things you must do as the new platoon leader is to review the platoon's internal organization, as prescribed by the modified table of organization and equipment (Table 1). Look at this organization and determine how best to use your assets to accomplish the missions assigned.

When I was a battalion support platoon leader, the platoon was organized as shown in Table 2. I found this organization an effective way to use the platoon's resources to accomplish the

**SUPPORT PLATOON (LIGHT)
CURRENT MTOE**

HEADQUARTERS

Platoon leader, 1LT
Ammunition chief, SSG
Radiotelephone operator, PFC
One vehicle assigned

TRANSPORTATION SECTION

Ammunition section leader, SGT (authorized 2)
Light wheel vehicle mechanic, SP4 (authorized 1)
Ammunition specialist, SP4 (authorized 2)
Vehicle driver, PFC (authorized 5)
Ammunition handler, PFC (authorized 5)
12 vehicles assigned

MESS SECTION

Food service sergeant, SFC
First cook, SSG
Cook, SGT (authorized 2)
Cook, SP4 (authorized 6)
Cook, PFC (authorized 5)

Table 1

assigned missions. When the unit is deployed, your platoon is split between the field trains and the combat trains, and this platoon organization maintains section integrity. The mess and ammunition sections are in the BSA with the platoon leader, and the transportation section is in the combat trains with the platoon sergeant. All the soldiers in the platoon need to be cross-trained so they understand how your platoon supports the battalion.

The biggest headache for most support platoons is that it has more missions and taskings than it has soldiers, equipment, or resources to accomplish them. If you conduct a detailed mission analysis and then task organize the platoon, you will have accomplished the hardest part of your mission. The next step is to rank order the missions and taskings to meet the battalion's priorities. This can be done in a number of ways, including first-come, first-served, or by order of complexity, but neither of these methods addresses the battalion's missions. The best and safest way to do the missions effectively and efficiently is to sit down with the battalion S-4 and XO and tell them your plan for completing the work. You will be surprised at first with the guidance they give you. Take that

SUGGESTED MODIFICATIONS TO CURRENT MTOE
<p>HEADQUARTERS</p> <p>Platoon leader Platoon sergeant (old SSG ammunition chief) Driver, PFC, for platoon sergeant Radiotelephone operator driver, PFC, doubles as the platoon leader's Light wheel vehicle mechanic Three vehicles assigned</p> <p>AMMUNITION SECTION</p> <p>Ammunition section leader, SGT Ammunition clerk, SP4 Ammunition handlers, E-3 (4) Three vehicles assigned</p> <p>TRANSPORTATION SECTION</p> <p>Transportation NCO, SGT (old ammunition team leader) Transportation clerk, SP4 (old ammunition specialist) Transportation drivers, PFC (5) Six vehicles assigned</p> <p>MESS SECTION</p> <p>Food service sergeant, SFC First cook, SSG Cooks' assistant, SGT Administrative NCO, SGT 1 vehicle and driver assigned during field operations</p> <p>All personnel in the support platoon are licensed operators.</p>
Table 2

guidance and apply it to the next set of circumstances. You will find that the people you work for will have more confidence in you and be less directive in the future. Eventually, you will come to understand the commander's intent and priorities and will be able to operate with much less guidance and oversight.

The internal administration of the platoon will be one of the hardest areas to balance while trying to accomplish the platoon's many assigned tasks. It is generally recognized that the support platoon works longer hours than almost any other organization in the battalion. One way to get a handle on your platoon is by direct, effective counseling of your NCOs and section leaders concerning their mission and goals. Table 3 outlines some of the direct jobs for which the NCOs of my platoon were responsible. You can focus your section leaders' efforts by giving them specific guidance.

SUGGESTED PERSONNEL RESPONSIBILITIES
<p>PLATOON LEADER: Responsible for the overall leadership of the support platoon. Personally handles all emergencies and is the chief coordinator in dealing with all outside agencies. Executes the logistical plan developed by the battalion S-4.</p> <p>PLATOON SERGEANT: Responsible for the internal administration of the platoon, overall maintenance of the platoon's equipment, and internal platoon logistics.</p> <p>AMMUNITION NCO: Responsible for all appointments for draw, turn-in, and issue of ammunition, and is responsible for setting up all appointments for future ammunition requirements. Responsible for making sure all regulations are met in accordance with the unit and division ammunition policies concerning field ammunition supply points, the issue and receipt of ammunition, and the inspection of Class V.</p> <p>TRANSPORTATION NCO: Responsible for all vehicle requirements in the battalion; for the administration of any transportation needs external to the unit; and is the instructor and administrator of driver training within the battalion.</p> <p>FOOD SERVICE SERGEANT: Responsible for all activities related to subsistence and the employment of the field mess kitchen (mobile kitchen trailer).</p> <p>AMMUNITION CLERK: Responsible for all paperwork that deals with ammunition and its handling.</p> <p>TRANSPORTATION CLERK: Responsible for keeping driver training records and schedules; responsible for making sure all paperwork dealing with transportation is turned in and distributed.</p> <p>RADIOTELEPHONE OPERATOR: Responsible for maintenance of the platoon's equipment and any necessary training within the platoon.</p> <p>VEHICLE MECHANIC: Responsible for all organizational level maintenance; works directly for the platoon sergeant to ensure that anything needed for maintenance is ordered and logged properly.</p>
Table 3

To put this in perspective, when I was a support platoon leader, my platoon sergeant was responsible for the maintenance of the platoon. Each day he updated me on all maintenance that needed to be completed and on future maintenance problems. Although the ammunition section had three vehicles, I held the platoon sergeant responsible

for their maintenance, not the ammunition NCO. Likewise, the transportation NCO was responsible for driver training; if I had a question concerning a driver's license, I called him, not the platoon sergeant.

The support platoon may be the most difficult and challenging job in a light infantry battalion. Most officers do not realize how important the job is until they are responsible for or associated

with the platoon. The challenges of operating the support platoon are ever-present. You must be able to maintain the focus of supplying the battalion's needs so its soldiers can survive on the battlefield.

Your job is vastly different from any other job in the light infantry battalion. But by keeping the lines of communication open in all directions and advising all leaders of upcoming problems and

solutions, you will be better prepared to accomplish the battalion's logistical mission.

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Light Infantry Weapons Platoon

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In the past decade or so, the U.S. Army's light infantry battalions have been operating under the J-series tables of organization and equipment (TOEs). One of the organizations deleted from the old H-series TOE to save slots was the company weapons platoon.

With the restructuring of the Army, many of the reasons that drove the designers of the 10,000-man light division and the J-series TOE to drop the weapons platoon organization (unit end strength restrictions, space restrictions) are no longer valid. The question of a weapons platoon organization at company level should therefore be reexamined.

The weapons platoon in the H-series light infantry consisted of a mortar section and an antitank section. The mortar section had three 81mm mortars, with their prime movers and fire direction center (FDC) or ammunition vehicles, and the antitank section had two TOW antiarmor systems. The platoon headquarters had a platoon leader and a platoon sergeant with a radiotelephone operator and a driver. Although the new TOE did away with

the platoon and its headquarters slots in the company, it retained both the mortar and the antitank sections, although in dismounted form.

The most glaring inadequacy in the new TOE is the manning of the mortar section. At full strength, the section has only six men for two 60mm mortars, and the new M224 mortar is heavier than the previous 60mm mortar, the World War II-vintage M19. An M19 squad was authorized five men to carry and serve a single weapon. Yet today we are asking three soldiers to operate a heavier system.

I have spent six years (four as a light infantry controller at the National Training Center and two as a light infantry battalion S-3) watching mortar sections and company commanders struggle with this issue, and the six-man mortar section simply does not work.

The most common solution for light company commanders is to take only one mortar along on anything but extremely short-range offensive operations. The only time both mortars are used is in the defense.

The antitank section is rarely

employed as a section in its primary function of antiarmor warfare. Instead, the six Dragon teams are usually attached down to the rifle platoons. Little doctrine is available for the employment of the Dragon section in an environment where there is no armor threat. (The fielding of the Javelin should not change the basic 13-man structure of the antitank section; each company will still have six two-man teams.)

What I propose is a return to the weapons platoon, along with the addition of eight personnel slots in each company. These slots would consist of platoon leader, platoon sergeant, mortar section sergeant, and one RTO for the platoon headquarters as well as two additional members for each mortar squad. The antitank section would stay the same. (The organization would look something like that shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3.)

Each mortar section would be organized into two squads, each with squad leader, gunner, assistant gunner, and two ammunition bearers. The platoon sergeant (MOS 11C) would be