



Preparing a Battalion for Combat:

Maneuver Live-Fire Training

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the third in a series of four. The author commanded the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), in Somalia in late-1993, and wrote the series at the request of the division commander.

The first article in the series, on physical fitness and mental toughness, appeared in the May-June 1995 issue of INFANTRY, and the second, on marksmanship, in the July-August issue. The remaining article, on leadership lessons learned, will appear in the November-December issue.

High performance in the core areas of physical fitness and mental toughness, along with marksmanship, did more than anything else to give our soldiers the skill and will to win in combat. But individual skills and will alone are not enough. Battles are won or lost by units.

There is no substitute for realistic maneuver live-fire exercises to prepare soldiers and units for combat. Light infantry units must be able to integrate all organic and supporting fires with maneuver to kill the enemy at the point of attack

and accomplish the mission while sustaining the fewest possible casualties. This is the collective core performance area that is the essence of light infantry operations. The best instrument the commander has for this training is a maneuver live-fire exercise.

Beating an aggressive, organized enemy who is trying to kill you is no simple task. It requires a multiechelon choreography of incredible complexity. Squads and platoons play the lead roles, and a lot of things have to come together quickly at many levels.

Leaders have to figure out where the enemy is and what he's trying to do. They need the mental agility to determine whether existing plans will work or will have to be modified. Orders and fire control measures have to be clearly communicated and understood by all concerned. Battle drills must be executed precisely. Each moving piece requires close supervision; higher headquarters and supporting units must be informed every step of the way. And all this takes place amid incoming fire, deafening noise, casualties, confusion, and fear.

As an institution, the Army fully acknowledges the value

of live-fire training. Soldiers do too; they sincerely want to practice in peacetime what they will be required to execute in combat. They will gladly do whatever it takes to make this happen. It's the type of training they joined the Army to do. They crave live-fire exercises; it gets their adrenaline pumping and becomes addictive. The more they get, the better they get, the more confident they become, and the more they want.

While it is impossible for units to completely replicate the conditions of combat in training, they can come close. When

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soldiers experience a realistic live-fire exercise, something wonderful happens. The awesome firepower of a light infantry platoon in the attack, supported by indirect fires and attack helicopters, makes soldiers believe they are part of a destructive machine. When these live fires are stepped up to company level, the effect can be overpowering. The air reverberates and the ground shakes; every sight, sound, and smell tells the soldier it is the enemy who is in big trouble.

Maneuver live-fire exercises provide units with the best opportunity to scrimmage before game day. Simple live fires are the best vehicle with which to practice the Army's doctrinal playbook—squad and platoon battle drills. More complex live fires develop the situational awareness that leaders must have to call the correct audible signals. Constant repetition in training develops at all levels the confidence that leads to quick responses to situational changes with commonly understood variations of standard plays.

Despite widespread appreciation for the value of live-fire training, units conduct it with different levels of frequency and intensity. Clearly, there are risks involved. No one wants a soldier to get hurt. A lot of planning is required. Soldiers need to be at a high level of discipline and training. But if the leaders are committed, a battalion can safely do realistic live-fire exercises and do them to great advantage.

Before assuming command of the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, I believed that supercharged infantry units built their collective training around a centerpiece of robust maneuver live-fire exercises. This belief developed while I was serving under a battalion commander who was committed to live-fire training. In my opinion, that battalion stood head and shoulders above others, and realistic live-fire exercises in training were the principal reason. This early experience convinced me that getting an extra ten percent in this core performance area could make my battalion a great one as well.

Conducting realistic maneuver live fires is a major challenge of battalion command. They require the commander's keen personal attention and persistence every step of the way. Delegating this task to subordinates with less experience probably will not get the job done. But if the

battalion commander truly believes in their value, is genuinely committed to doing them, and focused on his role as the primary collective trainer in the battalion, it is a bill he doesn't mind paying.

Guidance

As an institution, the Army recognizes the value and the importance of live-fire training. An abundance of doctrinal reference material is already in existence to support and assist unit efforts. One of the best single source documents available has been published by the Joint Readiness Training Center's live-fire division. This outstanding manual is full of detailed, yet simple "how to" instructions to help commanders improve the realism of their live-fire training.

Because live fire is merely a condition of training, commanders should not deviate from the guidance outlined in Field Manual 25-101, Battle Focused Training, concerning the assessment and evaluation of this training. Mission training plans (MTPs) contain excellent models to use in developing live-fire scenarios, along with appropriate training and evaluation outlines (TEOs) for all critical tasks and sub-tasks.

The Army's commitment to live-fire training can also be found in every divisional training regulation. Typically, these regulations outline recommended live-fire sustainment training. As an example, recommended sustainment training for infantry units at battalion level and below in the 10th Mountain Division is as follows:

Battalion with combat support and combat service support slice: One combined arms live-fire exercise (CALFEX) every 18 months.

Company: One CALFEX, one fire control exercise (FCX), and one live-fire exercise (LFX) per year.

Platoon: Four LFXs per year.

Squad: Four LFXs per year.

This broad guidance gives subordinate commanders all the flexibility they need to tailor their live-fire training scenarios and tasks to the areas that have been assessed as needing the most practice. Given the amount of discretionary training time a battalion has in a year, these sustainment training frequencies lead commanders toward internal

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live-fire programs with real substance. Indeed, if commanders followed the letter of this law, live-fire exercises would become the centerpiece of their collective training.

If all the appropriate bases are covered in planning and coordination, rarely will a brigade or division commander say "No" to a live-fire exercise that makes sense. They want their battalion commanders to pursue those exercises

aggressively. But they can't do it for you, nor should they have to. This is one ball that is squarely in the battalion commander's court.

Getting the Ten-Percent Difference

Because time is such a precious commodity for every unit, commanders must be judicious in how they use the limited amounts at their discretion. Making the tough decisions concerning the way their unit will train is one area in which battalion commanders wield enormous influence.

To make each day in the field count for my battalion, I wanted to ensure that as many of the component parts as possible were training on their known weaknesses. As a result, we concentrated on situational training exercises (STXs) for most of the collective training we conducted when our time was our own. As a condition of this training, live fire was integrated at every opportunity. We executed countless maneuver live-fire STXs, at home station and in theater, from fire team through company level, both day and night.

In combat, the company team is normally the smallest tactical formation that is given a mission involving the tasks of attack or defend. Platoons often conduct independent ambushes or reconnaissance operations, and squads conduct security patrols. But these tasks are usually performed in the context of the larger company mission of attack or defend. The scenarios used in our maneuver live-fire STXs were therefore derived from tasks on the company's mission essential task list (METL).

Of the tasks on the light infantry company METL, I considered two the most important: the movement to contact-hasty attack, and the deliberate attack (night). By changing the elements of enemy and terrain in the METL analysis (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time), we were able to develop a wide variety of maneuver live-fire STX scenarios that required units to expand their repertoire of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

An important self-imposed restriction for our live-fire training was that no unit could double as the controlling headquarters for the task it was executing. This meant that training was always conducted at least one echelon down.

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The largest formation the battalion could train was the company, the largest a company could train, a platoon, and so on.

The beauty of training at least one level down is that units can conduct high-quality training that is resourced almost exclusively by the unit itself. For example, if the battalion was running company maneuver live-fire STXs, while one com-

pany was in the execution mode, another picked up range support and the third was free to conduct preparatory or remedial training.

To reinforce the combined arms aspects of the fight, at whatever level STXs were conducted, all next-higher level systems and supporting arms that would be present in combat had to be replicated. Leaders were given the same base operation or fragmentary order (with supporting annexes and graphics) that they would normally receive from their next higher headquarters.

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All live fires were evaluated in accordance with TEOs from the appropriate MTPs. For squad and platoon maneuver live-fire STXs, if the company did not have enough observer-controllers (OCs) it was augmented with officers or NCOs from the battalion staff. I was the senior OC for all company level live-fire STXs, assisted by the command sergeant major and a tailored cadre of staff officers and NCOs.

Although OCs doubled in a limited capacity as range safety officers, the focus of their safety charter extended only as far as ensuring that all fires stayed within the range safety fan. Silence from the OC implied consent. As in combat, all fire control within the range fan was the responsibility of the chain of command in the executing unit.

This was an extremely important facet of the way our training was conducted. While there were risks involved, because of the level of detail in our planning and rehearsals, I was confident that this structure would be enough to maintain the balance between safety and realism. As a result, it prevented our live-fire exercises from becoming "canned" events with too many safety considerations.

What it did was to take the primary responsibility for safety off the OC and put it on the chain of command where it belonged. I credited this training procedure with being a significant systemic contributor toward embedding internal company fire control standing operating procedures (SOPs) down to the lowest level.

Whether a live-fire STX was designed as a day or night operation, the first iteration was always conducted as a daylight blank-fire force-on-force run using MILES (multiple integrated laser engagement system). After the after-action review (AAR), the senior OC decided whether it was safe to go "hot" or another MILES iteration was needed.

For night live-fire STXs, a daylight live-fire iteration was also conducted. All signals and fire control aids to be used at night were rehearsed. After the AAR for this iteration, the senior OC made the call to go "hot" at night, or to conduct another daylight run.

Before executing any maneuver live-fire STX, we planned and coordinated in considerable detail. Company com-

manders had to do their homework before I allowed them to brief a live-fire exercise at a training meeting as a scheduled event. First, they had to work out all the resourcing issues with the S-3. If the exercise could be resourced, they had permission to do further planning.

Commanders were then required to brief me personally on all facets of the training before any live-fire exercise was approved for execution. I wanted to see operations graphics overlaid on range fans, detailed objective sketches, and plans for targetry, safety, risk assessment, support, and evaluation. Once I approved it, the range packet was given to the S-3 for final coordination at the training support meeting.

While some might criticize this as micromanagement, I saw these briefings as an integral component of the mentoring process. Because of the Army's policy on the assignment of company-grade officers, most captains who come to light units after their advanced course have only mechanized infantry experience. Even officers who arrive in the battalion with Ranger qualification lack an appreciation for the level of detail it takes to plan and control light infantry operations at company level. Although they are quick and ready learners, they simply do not have enough light infantry experience at this point. They need to be taught many of the things more experienced light infantrymen take for granted.

I viewed these sessions as the heart of commander's business and used them as professional tutorials. They were my quality time with the company commanders. The meetings were very informal, usually over a cup of coffee at a table in my office. They were one-on-one with a lot of give and take. Our discussions usually went far beyond the live-fire STX they were trying to get approved. We also discussed how I wanted them to fight their units and therefore how I expected them to train.

The company commanders came to know how I thought through operations, and I learned how they did it. I tried to

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give them the benefit of my past mistakes. We frequently hit on larger tactical problems within the battalion that needed resolution. These meetings were mutually beneficial. I never failed to come away from them without learning something new. As I reflect on my command tour, I think of these meetings as the most important things I did.

Any echelon of command has the resources to create a high-quality training environment for the unit below. For training squads, platoons, and companies that are prepared for the challenges of combat, there is no better tool than the maneuver live-fire STX. An abundance of doctrinal material is available to support this effort, but it all starts with the bat-

talion commander. He must be committed to doing these exercises the right way, persistent in overcoming obstacles, and unwilling to settle for anything less.

The Payoffs in Combat

Having realistic maneuver live-fire STXs as the centerpiece of collective training was the critical factor that enabled us to defeat the enemy in all of our tactical engagements in Somalia. Squads, platoons, and companies were able to con-

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duct fire and maneuver confidently, aggressively, and safely. Supporting direct fires were routinely placed within five meters of advancing soldiers, both day and night.

This did not happen through luck. Live-fire exercises gave units the opportunity to perfect internal fire control SOPs so they were clearly understood by all. In most respects, the fire and maneuver we executed in combat were done exactly as we routinely did them in training. Constant repetition made it seem natural. Given the intensity of close combat, this is not a lesson that can be learned on the spot once a unit is in contact with the enemy.

As the ground element of the quick reaction force of the United Nations command in Somalia, the task force always had to be ready to respond to crisis situations. In these cases, our planning time was severely limited. Once the initial concept of the operation had been hastily sketched out with the company commanders, there was never enough time to make sure it was clearly understood at the lowest level. And because situations were often unclear, we had to rely on our professional judgment to fine-tune our concept of the operation once we were in the objective area. Much of this was done on-the-fly.

The derivative benefits of extended maneuver live-fire training were most prominent in these operations. If the battalion had not focused so heavily on live fire, I do not believe our tactical execution would have been nearly as good in these situations. As a consequence, we might have suffered fratricide or friendly fire injuries on more than one occasion.

Maneuver live-fire training acclimates soldiers and leaders to this environment. Because we concentrated on making our live fires as realistic as possible, leaders developed a keen battlefield awareness that made a lot of radio transmissions unnecessary. Repetitive training in a variety of different situations helped leaders visualize what was happening at lower levels.

The training fostered the confidence that lower echelons were doing the right things, even in the absence of radio traffic, and this greatly simplified command and control. Orders

could tell subordinates what to do without wasting time on how to do it. Without superfluous traffic, the net was clear for reporting. Most important, it gave me and the company commanders the freedom to perform our most critical personal tasks.

When confronted with changes in the tactical situation, we could think through the cycle of action, reaction, counteraction. As a result, we avoided a lot of knee-jerk decisions. On more than one occasion, having the freedom to think kept us from making snap decisions in the heat of battle that, in hindsight, may not have achieved their intended aim and may have been very costly as well.

None of this could have occurred without realistic maneuver live-fire training. An old lesson relearned once again is that units will perform in combat exactly the way they are trained to perform. Conducting realistic maneuver live-fire exercises was the best thing we did to prepare our soldiers and leaders for the conditions of combat.

Because of its live-fire training, the task force achieved overwhelming tactical success in its first engagement and only got better afterward. While soldiers and leaders always maintained a healthy respect for the enemy, they had no doubt as to which was the superior force and which would win in any firefight. The unit was truly an aggressive team with supreme confidence in their abilities. Because they felt they could not be physically defeated, they were never mentally defeated either.

All of these factors played a big part on 3 and 4 October 1993 in the few short hours the task force prepared for combat following our first, unsuccessful effort to rescue the Rangers. Every soldier had clearly heard the din of fighting above the city since the battle began earlier in the day. Ears strained as radios crackled with emotional situation reports that were barely audible above the noise of incoming and

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outgoing fire. There had already been many U.S. casualties and as long as the battle raged there were bound to be more. No one believed it would be an easy night.

In the darkness, a couple of soldiers held flashlights aloft, and the orders group crowded in on all sides as I talked them through a simple concept of operations from a map stretched over the hood of a vehicle. In the background was all the discordant noise of a unit trying to make something complex and difficult happen very quickly. Helicopters raced low overhead. Executive officers and platoon leaders scurried around, positioning armored personnel carriers (APCs), tanks, and trucks from various units into march order for-

mation. The shouts of first sergeants, platoon sergeants, and squad leaders moving men and equipment filled the air.

When the orders group broke its huddle, there was not enough time for any detailed briefback. Nevertheless, I was confident that the company commanders understood both the plan and my intent. This understanding would be less clear at platoon level, and at squad and individual soldier level, there would be at best only a rough idea of the situation, mission, and fire control measures. The situation com-

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pelled us to rely on the TTPs we had developed in live-fire training to carry us through.

Soon after the task force left the staging area, it began receiving intense RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) and automatic weapon fire as it had earlier in the day. With most of our soldiers now riding in more survivable APCs, however, we were able to fight our way through. Once in the vicinity of our objectives, soldiers dismounted from their APCs and carried the fight on foot.

Our hastily developed plan survived enemy contact with only minor modifications. Even though they did not understand the full situation, squads and platoons executed their pieces of the operation exactly as planned. Although there were several grim moments before the mission was accomplished, the end result should not have come as a surprise. What these men were asked to do that night was, in many ways, merely a variation of what they had done so often in training. Further, the task force did not suffer a single fratricide or friendly fire injury. The linkup with and extraction of the Rangers was a success. Extensive live-fire exercises in training were the key to that success.

In every interview after the experience in Somalia, the soldiers and leaders of the task force confirmed what we already knew: In their minds, what best prepared them for combat was the extensive live-fire training the unit had conducted as a matter of routine at Fort Drum and in theater. As I had done years before, they also had come to believe in the importance of this core performance area.

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