

# Tactical SOPs

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A well-constructed Tactical Standing Operating Procedures (TACSOP) can dramatically improve the effectiveness of a light infantry rifle company. Conceptually complex light infantry operations can be reduced to a series of less complex supporting tasks. If most of

these supporting tasks are addressed in a company's TACSOP, planning is simplified; leaving more time for rehearsal and preparation. These tasks are easier to execute because effective procedures and techniques are familiar and disseminated throughout the company.

A working TACSOP can also benefit a company in other important but less obvious ways. It can help integrate new personnel (especially new leaders) into the company and provide a reference that explains "how we do it here." This reference can prove critical when the

inevitable influx of fillers and attachments arrives shortly before any deployment. A published TACSOP can facilitate the rapid assimilation of new personnel when time for reception and integration is limited.

A TACSOP can also increase unity, cohesion, and esprit in a rifle company. Distinctive and innovative tactical techniques, personnel markings, and wear of equipment can set a unit apart from others. Soldiers and leaders embrace and rally around characteristics that make them feel special. A company that always wears elaborate natural camouflage, carries tent stakes strapped on top of their rucksacks for expedient aiming stakes, or routinely employs a new and effective method of casualty evacuation (such as SKED litters or Israeli stretchers) will be identified through these actions. If these procedures lead to success, the company will enjoy a notable reputation as a result.

TACSOP entries can be derived from several sources, one of which is doctrine. As an example, Field Manual (FM) 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, requires that commanders and leaders configure their soldiers' loads into combat, approach march, and sustainment loads. The exact components of each of these loads can be prescribed in a portion of a company TACSOP.

Another source for TACSOP development is a higher headquarters TACSOP. A battalion TACSOP may prescribe that each company package and transport its logistical package on a habitually-relate high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV) and trailer from the battalion support platoon. The actual load planning of that vehicle, and inventories of the supply boxes on board, can be included in the company TACSOP.

Finally, a commander may simply formulate an SOP designed to improve the effectiveness of his unit. A rifle company commander may elect to enhance his planning process by including a standardized "fill in the blank" operations order (OPORD) format in his company TACSOP.

A commander may try to base his company TACSOP entirely on his own acquired experience; but he will nor-

mally need to consult with additional references. Peers, subordinates, and superiors, as well as professional and doctrinal publications can provide enough time-proven, combat-tested tactics, techniques, and procedures to build a broad TACSOP. Regardless of the source, potential TACSOP entries should be doctrinally correct. Doctrinal correctness is, of course, a matter of opinion or interpretation in many cases. A commander should apply his best judgment and perhaps seek additional viewpoints as well. The commander should not select SOPs that simply duplicate what is detailed in field manuals. Chapter 3 of FM 7-10 describes company movement formations in graphic detail. To reproduce this in a company TACSOP would probably be a waste of effort. Additionally, a commander should avoid publishing SOPs that run counter to a published higher SOP. If the battalion TACSOP specifies that breach lanes are marked with blue chemlites and the shift-fire signal for the battalion is a green star cluster, rifle company commanders should not establish an SOP that differs from this. Finally, a commander should be cautious of standardizing tasks and techniques that are normally performed at lower echelons. Platoons and squads should be encouraged to develop their own TACSOP for tasks that routinely belong to them. A platoon leader should not be directed to use a particular technique for a patrol-base occupation, as long as his technique is doctrinally sound. Conversely, a commander is correct in distributing to his platoon leaders a pre-combat inspection (PCI) checklist developed by the company first sergeant. PCIs are among the many tasks performed by platoons and squads that are most effective when standardized throughout a company. Additionally, current doctrine lacks needed detail on how to perform PCIs correctly.

To determine what specific facets of company operations should be included in his company TACSOP, a commander can examine his mission essential task list (METL) or battle task list. While the planning and execution of the task *Perform infiltration* (7-2-1137) is

probably too dependent upon terrain, enemy, or situation to attempt to standardize, supporting tasks within this task can be standardized. The task *Perform Infiltration* normally requires the company to occupy an assembly area, conduct troop-leading procedures, conduct a passage of lines, move tactically, and conduct a linkup. Command and control and sustainment functions are required throughout the execution of this infiltration. Once these supporting tasks are identified, it is easy to see that they are components of many other key METL or battle tasks. Because the company is required to perform these supporting tasks repeatedly, the commander could consider standardizing recurring tasks such as *Occupy assembly area* (7-2-1136; or *Perform passage of lines* (7-2-1125).

Once the contents of the TACSOP are finalized, work can begin on developing and writing specific procedures. A commander can reserve this work for himself or delegate portions of the TACSOP to key members of the company with appropriate guidance. The commander should develop the portions of the TACSOP that apply to the company as a whole (that is, a command and control SOP). The commander can task his platoon leaders to develop any SOPs that standardize platoon or squad-level; a fighting position SOP is an example of such a task. Platoon leaders should then develop a proposed SOP with input from their platoon sergeants and squad leaders. Once a draft proposal is complete, a platoon leader can submit it to the commander for initial approval. Once he has reviewed the draft, the commander can staff it through all of the company's senior leaders. This will facilitate rapid acceptance of the new technique and will serve to get all leaders on board with the new procedures. Additionally, "bottom up" refinement can only improve an already good SOP. The commander, of course, should reserve the final approval for himself and his first sergeant. Once successfully staffed and modified as needed, the final version of a particular SOP can be added to the company TACSOP.

A commander may choose to wait

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until all portions of the TACSOP are complete before distributing the finished product. Or he may elect to distribute each portion of the TACSOP as it is completed, making the TACSOP a living document. The latter strategy enables leaders to begin training their troops immediately on the published portions of the TACSOP, saving the company from the inevitable shock brought on by the sudden arrival of a thick new TACSOP.

The effectiveness of a TACSOP can be enhanced in several ways. First, a graphics-based approach is arguably the best for a company level TACSOP. Clear, bold text military graphics and symbology arranged to explain a particular technique are more descriptive than several pages of text. Leaders and soldiers are constantly bombarded with text messages, such as policy letters, regulations, and forms. A TACSOP that consists of reams of text could end up at the bottom of a platoon leader's in-box as another morass of information he and his leaders must wade through. In the case of TACSOPs, the pictures are indeed worth a thousand words.

Checklists also serve to improve a TACSOP. In many cases, warfighting doctrine is relatively simple when described in field manuals but exceedingly complex in execution. The execution of a task can be simplified if it is recorded as a series of actions, and each of these actions is assigned to an individual or sub-element. Once a task is formatted in this manner, a leader can consult a checklist in the TACSOP during an operation and figure out his next step. Tactical checklists are remarkably useful to leaders who are fatigued or functioning under adverse conditions.

A company TACSOP must be a "go to war" document. This mindset encompasses many different considerations. A TACSOP should be portable and weatherproofed. The most comprehensive, well-designed TACSOP becomes worthless as a reference if it falls apart in a downpour or if it is left at home station because it is too bulky to fit in a rucksack flap pocket. Some installation print plants will accept reproduction work orders from commanders, some will not. A commander

may find it necessary to raise funds internally, or appeal to his higher headquarters for a small slice of a battalion's operating budget.

A TACSOP should include various subjects that units normally do not consider in training because of peacetime safety constraints and limited training resources. Examples are numerous but not always obvious. Minimum safe-distances for indirect fire in a combat situation are different from those observed during live fire training; leaders need to include "real world" procedures like this one in any TACSOP. Additionally, the standardization of soldiers' loads and the conduct of PCIs need to

**A sample TACSOP, containing the various aids mentioned here, is available on request from *Infantry Magazine*. Write to Editor, *Infantry*, P.O. Box 52005, Fort Benning, GA 31995-2005.**

account for the host of items that are routinely issued during combat deployments but issued in small amounts or not at all during peacetime. Examples include full unit basic loads of service ammunition, mines, pyrotechnics, hand grenades (smoke; fragmentation, thermite, concussion), demolitions, and nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) contingency items. Additionally, standardized individual and unit packing lists should reflect the worst-case scenario in terms of sustenance, expendables, and comfort items. Many deploying soldiers come to realize the need for such considerations when they try to cram nine MREs (meals, ready to eat) into a rucksack already bulging with ammunition, water, and antipersonnel mines, and 60mm mortar rounds. Forethought by a commander and his key leaders can result in SOPs that make a company more effective once it gets on the ground in a combat zone.

A commander may reserve a portion of the TACSOP for specifications, standards, and requirements that do not fit easily into any doctrinal niche. A list of "Standing Orders" placed at the fore of TACSOP will supply leaders and soldiers with tactical *do's* and *don'ts* prescribed by the command group. Matters

of field discipline, uniformity, and fieldcraft may be established as standing orders for any tactical operation, mission, or task. Some of these standing orders can easily become unique and identifiable characteristics that set the company apart from other like organizations.

If a TACSOP is to remain an effective tool, it must be trained on frequently and revised as needed. TACSOP training must be integrated into all tactical training events. This is easy if the TACSOP supports the company's METL task list, and the platoon, squad, and individual tasks nested within it. If the company deploys to conduct live fire ambushes, the commander can direct that the company occupy a company assembly area by SOP. The company can execute training on that particular SOP before sending platoons down-range to begin their walk-through and blank-fire iterations. Packing lists for any training event should be based on standard loads in the TACSOP, with modifications by exception. Any deliberate deviation from the published SOP should be identified as such, to avoid inadvertently adopting a new standard. After any training event, portions of the TACSOP that were exercised should be reviewed. The company leaders should, at least informally, determine whether the TACSOP describes the best way to perform the task that was trained. If it does not, a new procedure should be developed, disseminated, and included in the TACSOP.

An effective rifle company TACSOP can serve a commander and his organization well. Collecting and applying time-tested, combat-proven techniques and procedure—and melding them into a codifying document—can make what is routine excellent, and what is excellent routine.

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