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# Thoughts For Rifle Platoon Leaders

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When I started out as a new platoon leader, I would have appreciated some type of guide book or tips-and-tricks pamphlet to tell me the ins and outs of the job. This article is an attempt to help platoon leaders solve some commonly faced problems and perhaps learn better techniques for training and teaching their platoons.

For those operating in the field environment, I will share some experiences from force-on-force exercises, specifically dealing with actions on the objective and battle drills. For the garrison environment, I will discuss ranges, physical training (PT), and counseling.

One of the best kinds of training to develop tactical knowledge, experience, and the ability to counter "Murphy's Law" is to conduct platoon force-on-force exercises. A platoon force-on-force exercise consists of two rifle platoons—with zeroed multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES) equipment and good observer-controllers (OCs)—going head-to-head against each other in a free-play environment. Each platoon leader is given a mission to plan and execute as he sees fit. We did this many times when I was in the National Guard and on active duty. I learned more about tactics and what really works from these exercises than from any other type of military training I ever received.

One advantage of force-on-force training is that the platoon is facing another equally motivated and skilled platoon from the same company. For both units, pride and bragging rights are at stake. What comes out of this training is a full-fledged, no-holds-barred battle in which brains, hard work, and superior tactics win the day.

Force-on-force training, like combat, provides a tough, motivated enemy who is just as eager to succeed as you are. This exercise results in two highly motivated and well-trained platoons that are giving their all to succeed. Leaders gain a greater and more immediate understanding of the consequences of their actions and decisions. They are able to see where they need work, whether it is in synchronizing the assault or conducting better pre-combat inspections.

Two examples of force-on-force exercises that we conducted illustrate the benefit of this training.

In one scenario, 1st Platoon moved to conduct a defense of a hill. The 2d and 3d Platoons, with one of the platoon leaders also acting as the company commander, moved to attack 1st Platoon. The company commander and the executive officer acted as OCs, which enabled them to use their expertise to mentor the acting commander. In this scenario, a platoon leader got a chance to run the company and see first-hand the challenges of that job. Acting as company commander also helps the platoon leader understand the way his platoon mission fits in with the larger company and battalion missions.

My platoon learned some valuable lessons from this scenario. As acting company commander, I learned the need for receiving timely and accurate reports from the platoon leaders so that I could coordinate company assets such as mortars and the company reserve. Because I learned how important it was to the company commander and the overall mission, I now take extra time with squad leaders and team leaders in practicing and developing the reporting process.

Actions on the objective—specifically, consolidation and reorganization—proved to be the most confusing and problematic parts of the mission. To counter this and improve our actions on the objective, we constructed a mock-up objective in the local training area, where we could practice various combinations of assaults, focusing on conducting a thorough consolidation and reorganization. The extra training enabled us to perfect our individual movement techniques and bounding styles.

We were also able to determine which task organizations worked best for us. For example, we learned the best place to put our platoon casualty collection point, as well as the most advantageous locations for the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, medic, and forward observer during an attack.

In another scenario, 2d Platoon had the mission to conduct a hasty defense of a hill. Fifteen minutes after the platoon arrived at the site and started its priorities of work, 3d Platoon conducted a hasty attack on it. At the conclusion of this battle, 1st Platoon conducted a hasty attack on the hill against the victor of the battle between the 2d and 3d Platoons.

In this exercise, we learned the value of time management when receiving orders to conduct hasty missions, as well as the importance of executing swift, thorough priorities of work in preparing the defense. Once again, consolidation and reorganization during actions on the objective presented problems that reinforced the fact that we needed to spend extra time on this task.

As platoon leaders, we had to deter-

mine the key considerations in conducting a mission. Was it using surprise to gain the advantage by attacking as soon as possible? Was it taking the time to formulate an intricate maneuver plan? Or was it conducting thorough rehearsals and concentrating on briefbacks and inspections?

We found solutions to many of the problems we had experienced, and developed training ideas that have improved our performance in force-on-force exercises:

In the second scenario, we learned a great deal about the importance of battle drills. Almost without exception, the platoon that executed battle and crew drills quickly and correctly won the engagement. These drills need to be instinctive. When the bullets fly and the soldiers are scared, cold, wet, tired, and hungry, they must rely upon habits formed in training. If it has been drilled into them, it will carry them through the mission.

We ran battle and crew drill training so that our platoon became much like a football or basketball team that practices the same plays over and over; each member of the team then has his part memorized and the plays are seamless during the game. We found that these drills could even be done during PT, in PT uniform with helmet, load-bearing equipment, and weapon. This also proved to be a good form of realistic combat PT.

In the second scenario, I learned that the fight tended to break down into groups of separate fire teams fighting each other, instead of being a fight between two cohesive platoons. As a result, the platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and squad leaders were killed first. This left the team leaders with only the guidance they remembered from the order. At that point, what should have stood out in their minds was the leader's intent, the mission, the end state, and the location of the limit of advance. We felt that as long as they understood these four things, the mission would succeed.

A good technique for seeing that this happens is to involve the team leaders in the orders process and ensure that backbriefs are thorough. During squad

level training and exercises, we also found that placing the team leader in charge of the squad for the duration of the mission improved his experience and confidence so that it would not be a new experience if he ever had to do it.

The things we learned and improved on from these force-on-force exercises would not have amounted to much if we had failed to consider one key point: No matter what else we do, or how good it looks, it is all for nothing if we can't hit what we're shooting at. Firmly believing in this principle, we went to great efforts to run small ranges of the highest quality. We found that the key to improving our soldiers' shooting skills in all types of firing positions and situations was intensive premarksman-

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ship instruction (PMI) and incorporating alternate and advanced firing techniques—such as quick-fire drills and firing from a knee and standing—into our ranges.

From our experiences we devised the following range training schedule:

First, we fired only one type of weapon at a time and focused all the company's resources and personnel on that task. On one day we conducted PMI, advanced and alternate firing position classes, and practical exercises, along with the boresighting of our night vision devices. On a separate day, we fired a standard zero and qualification range to include night fire and nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) fire. The following day, we had a make-up firing session and conducted qualification using alternate firing positions, such as qualifying while on one knee or standing. We then conducted advanced firing techniques such as quick-fire drills. On the final day, we conducted maintenance and recovery from the range.

We found that a good PT program was almost as important as marksmanship. Infantrymen must be able to get to

the objective and still have the physical stamina and strength they need to subdue the enemy. No matter how hard it was, I always made sure time was allotted for PT whenever possible. We did our utmost to make it interesting and challenging. We varied our types of PT to include upper and lower body workouts, combat PT, squad PT, and weight training. For upper body strength, we might do push-up improvement exercises, the rope climb, and wind sprints. For lower body strength, we would do a four-mile run and an abdominal workout. Combat PT would include such things as litter and buddy carries or battle drill training. Squad PT involved turning the training over to the squad leaders and letting them choose what they wanted. And finally, we would throw in some weight and aerobic training. We did all of this with the intent of making PT more challenging and interesting for the soldiers. With this varied program we raised our platoon's PT average more than 30 points.

Finally, I would like to state the importance of counseling and tracking soldiers' records. Keeping up with counseling and knowing what is going on with a soldier's career shows that you care about him and his development as a soldier. To make sure we were proficient in these areas, the platoon leadership held classes on how to fill out paperwork—awards, counseling forms, or noncommissioned officer evaluation reports. In these classes, we would also do practical exercises, filling out these forms on fictional soldiers.

We also found that it was useful in keeping track of soldiers to have the squad leaders carry "leader books." These books contained such things as the soldiers' family information, PT and weapon scores, schools, awards, and promotion point status. During a soldier's initial counseling, we also filled out a goal sheet that outlined his immediate and long-term personal and professional goals, including a plan on how to attain these goals. The platoon sergeant also kept track of the platoon master record book.

Counseling should be a continuous process in which leaders counsel their

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men on their positive and negative performance as outlined in their initial counseling and military goals sheets. This keeps soldiers on track and gives counselors a standard to work with. Counseling can be hard to keep up with, but it is a necessary task that shows soldiers what we expect of them.

The advice offered here in no way

covers all the problems or challenges that face a new platoon leader, but it does offer some answers and alternative techniques to help in the training and development of platoons. If we continue to exercise innovative, imaginative training techniques, we will better prepare our soldiers and units to fight and win on the battlefields of tomorrow.

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