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# The Rifle Company

## Cohesion through Competition

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Every future company commander agonizes over his command philosophy—the principal focus and direction he wants his unit to take during his tenure. Although few of these philosophies contain original thought, all are geared to develop the same thing—warriors who are capable of closing with and destroying the enemy.

In Korea near the demilitarized zone, Company A, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, focused on three simple but essential core areas—weaponry, battle drills, and leader training—with a strong emphasis on physical toughness and foot marching. This focus was based on the idea that the next war in Korea is likely to mirror the one in the early 1950s: The terrain has not changed; the climate has not changed; and the determination and psychological will of the enemy must be assumed to be unchanged as well. It will be a close fight in rugged, compartmentalized terrain where the difference between winning and taking second place will be the physical fitness of the infantryman and his ability to kill

what he shoots at on the next high ground over.

Every member knew the collective focus of the unit, which made it easier for even the youngest private to understand the end state of any training event. This also provided the foundation and baseline guidance for training events the sergeants and platoon leaders were tasked to develop. Before they went off in a corner to develop the training objectives, review the task, conditions, and standards, and coordinate resources, they had to understand how the event related to the company's focus. Before each brigade quarterly training brief, the commander reviewed the schedule for company training time—the time he owned to use as he saw fit—and templated these times with the company focus. The hard rule was that each prospective event had to contain two of the three areas before it could be considered “high-payoff training” and be tasked out to the action sergeant or platoon leader. This is standard stuff for company commanders and easily mastered after

the first quarter or two in the job.

Most units conduct high-payoff training in the bedrock skills of the infantry squad and platoon. But how can the commander get out of his soldiers that extra 10 percent that will be required when the shots are for real? What is that key ingredient in the best of infantry rifle companies? What makes the soldiers of a company truly believe in themselves as a unit, or have that genuine feeling of esprit-de-corps and cohesiveness? The answer is *competition*.

Competition is a concept that most infantry soldiers have grown up with—whether in little league baseball, sandlot football, or high school wrestling—and most are not ready to give it up. The feeling of victory, the disappointment of defeat, or the thrill and satisfaction gained through exerting maximum effort against a worthy opponent toward something important—all of these are hallmarks of the infantry soldier and a must in training. Infantrymen are winners by nature. They need to feel a

sense of accomplishment, receive recognition from their superiors, and be rewarded for exceptional effort and performance. They also need to know what it is like to give their all and still come up short, which can spark healthy discussion in a unit.

Korea can be a tough place to serve, or it can be a 12-month course in infantry tactics techniques, and procedures. Of course, individual attitudes determine the 12-month course, but the company commander can make a major difference in changing those attitudes and developing cohesion through competition.

In Company A, the commander mapped out all of the various training events he could influence in a given quarter, and then worked in some competitive events to build the esprit and cohesion the company would need to fight a hardened enemy who is always only a few kilometers away.

The initial focus was on the M60 machinegun crews and squads. We viewed these groups as our company muscle and wanted them to feel they were chosen for the job on the basis of performance instead of "arrival in country" date. Once a quarter we scheduled a two-day event to recognize the top individual M60 crew and weapons squad. We developed a list of 10 events that were physically and mentally taxing; if they were not difficult or demanding enough, the soldiers would be the first to voice their displeasure. Graders were pooled from the rifle squad leaders, and no grader was allowed to evaluate or test the squad or crew from his own platoon.

The commander and first sergeant served as monitors on each event and participated in the physical events to share the discomfort with the troops and keep them motivated throughout the long two days—but mostly to evaluate the collective will, competitive spirit, and leadership skills. The scoring of events was weighted on the basis of the difficulty of the event, physical demands, or skill required. We always weighted the foot march and live fire portion more heavily. When possible, we staggered physical and mental events to ensure that each soldier had

enough time to rest and drink enough fluids.

The "Best" M60 crew/squad event changed slightly from one quarter to the next to keep the soldiers guessing and to provide variety. The typical two-day event started early in the morning with a four-event PT test (pull-ups included), followed by personal hygiene and a quick breakfast before the 50-question written test was administered. The test questions were taken directly from Field Manual (FM) 23-67, *Machinegun 7.62mm, M60*, and each question required several answers to be entirely correct.

Next, the crews put on full battle gear, rucksacks, helmets, and load-bearing vests, drew the entire M60 weapon system and personal weapons,

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and departed for the top of "Magic Mountain" on a timed foot march. Nicknamed "Magic Mountain" by the troops, and spoken of only with the utmost respect, this towering and majestic hilltop rises 400 feet from its base with numerous vehicle and foot access routes, all going up, of course. We tried to include the hilltop in as many competitive events as we could and once executed the foot march with full gear in military-oriented protective posture (MOPP) IV.

One of the more popular events was the combat run. The uniform consisted of kevlar helmet, weapon, load bearing vest, and protective mask, and the course required the soldiers to negotiate a ridge line leading to the peak of the mountain. Along the course, the crews had to react to various targets, followed by the standard transition fire. Once the gunner fired his iteration, the assistant gunner executed the same scenario with the gunner's zero, just as he would have

to do in combat. When enough ammunition was available, the ammunition bearer fired the 10-meter course for record. This was followed by a timed "shoot the log in half" drill, in which each crew had 200 rounds to shoot a railroad tie in half at the center as its ends rested horizontally on sandbags approximately six inches off the ground. The ammunition bearer had 90 rounds to help with his M16A2. The gunner would start with the first 100 rounds and then roll out of the way to allow the assistant gunner to fire the second 100 rounds. This event was timed, and the first crew to split the tie won. Second and third places were determined by the next two crews to split the tie. If three teams did not split the tie before their ammunition was expended, the commander and three weapons squad leaders determined the ranking on the basis of the amount of wood removed from the rear of the tie and the tightness of the shot group.

One of the greatest benefits from competition in the company was that the sergeants had to perform to standard and set the example in front of their men. It is a humbling experience for a 35-year-old staff sergeant—whose previous four years may have been spent working at range control back home—to be struggling to get up our favorite ridge line leading to the top of the mountain, while his men were carrying more weight than he was.

The youngest soldier is often temporarily forced into the role of the leader, having to motivate and encourage his squad leader because the clock is ticking and another gun crew or squad is passing them by. Competition is a great equalizer, and the leader who fails to prepare his men or himself will suffer professional embarrassment in front of his peers. The leader who fails to perform to standard during the competition will quickly lose his soldiers' support, and will be a liability to the entire unit in combat. It was very encouraging to see the change in attitudes after just the first competition. The gun crews and weapons squads now had something to focus their training on during the next quarter.

We wanted to ensure that the young

platoon leaders were not forgotten and that they also endured some of the same stress we were placing on their soldiers. Platoon Leader Jeopardy, a modified version of the television show, was designed to square off the platoon leaders simultaneously against each other. We mustered the company to watch its platoon leaders perform and display their knowledge of machinegun tactics and techniques. The simple fear of having their men lose confidence in them was enough to ensure that they used their preparation time wisely. This event was a great professional development tool for the commander. All the platoon leaders became "book smart" in employing the M60 before serving as range officers in charge or before a collective training event.

Young warriors like to see their names in the headlines, and they enjoy, as long as possible, the bragging rights that come with winning. We covered this by purchasing a large plaque to hang just inside the entrance to the mess hall—the one area that every member of the company passed by three times a day and that was easily seen by all visitors. The plaque was complete with a 10-inch plastic replica of the M60 machinegun and a dozen brass plates. After each competition, we had the winners' names, gun team number, and platoon engraved in one of the plates for all to see. After seeing the excitement and healthy competitiveness enjoyed by the weapons squads and the M60 crews, the rifle squads were itching to test themselves against each other for the right to call themselves the "Best" rifle squad in the company.

Because of the high overhead in training resources and time, we decided to execute this two-day event semiannually. The events were similar to the M60 competition, and the weapons squads provided graders and support personnel. We added to this event a night land navigation course that was designed by the platoon leaders on their off time and during morning PT hours. This was executed in fire team groups and in severe cold weather as low as -5 degrees wind-chill. Of course, the navigation point with the most value was on the very top of "Magic Moun-

tain." By the time the best rifle squad competition ended, each soldier had been up the mountain three times—once during the foot march, once during the combat run up the ridge, and finally during the night land navigation. Keeping the event results hidden from the participants throughout the two days was key to sustaining maximum effort from each individual.

Competition worked so well for the company that we began including a little of it in each training event. While executing room and building clearing battle drills at the live fire tire house, we developed a force-on-force scenario in which a downed Air Force pilot in North Korea was being held prisoner. The mission was to enter the building, clear the rooms, secure the black box and the pilot, and exfiltrate with all friendly personnel and precious cargo. This quick fragmentary order to the platoon leaders was all they needed to prepare a plan, brief their men, execute a few generic rehearsals and briefbacks, and be in the assault position. The scenario remained the same for each platoon, and the evaluation was done from the catwalk looking down under night vision goggles. The commander, first sergeant, fire support officer, and executive officer all evaluated from different positions on the catwalk and pooled their comments after each platoon iteration.

We came up with a short list of things to key on while evaluating each platoon: close quarter battle techniques and fundamentals, teamwork, accomplishment of the mission, leader control, and situational awareness. The rewards for this competition can be as simple as recognition by the commander and first sergeant in the company formation before foot marching back to camp, or it can be a three-day pass for the entire platoon.

Another event at the tire house was recognizing the shooter with the best understanding of and ability to perform the reflexive firing techniques and fundamentals required in an urban environment. After two days of firing the requisite reflexive firing static tables in accordance with various close quarter battle standing operating procedures,

the soldiers understood the importance of firing a controlled pair, or "double tap" at each target. As each fire team or squad conducted a live fire assault on single or multiple rooms, we kept track of each soldier's shot group. After the day's events, we had the top five soldiers with tightest shot groups throughout the day compete for the title of "best reflexive firer" in the company. Each soldier was required to enter the room and engage a target in his immediate sector of fire with a controlled pair. He then had to transition to three subsequent enemy targets as he collapsed his sector of fire and moved to his point of domination. Partially inflated balloons were placed on the targets as aiming points, helping the soldiers aim and giving them immediate feedback. Executing this event required only 40 rounds of 5.56mm ball ammunition and 15 minutes and gave every soldier something to strive for throughout the day.

While in garrison, we scheduled a company sports day in conjunction with our quarterly company party. Again, the sergeants and junior officers were tasked to take charge of certain events. Every event we could think of was given serious consideration. Besides the standard basketball, volleyball, and bench press, we included horseshoes, table tennis, pool, tennis, racquetball, and several others—anything to ensure maximum participation and effort. Again, the simple recognition, in the company formation, as the top platoon of the quarter was reward enough.

As a result of the massive monsoon rains in July, we were forced to remodel the day room after it was submerged in mud. We decided to recognize the many artists in the company by holding a contest to recognize the platoon that could paint the best mural on the new walls.

A quick review of the way each event supported the company focus of weaponry, battle drills, leader training, and physical toughness justifies the effort and training time expended. Every event required an action officer and NCO to develop a complete memorandum of instruction (MOI) five weeks before the event. Before the MOI was

## TRAINING NOTES

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approved and signed by the commander, the action officer had to conduct all the required coordination, develop a time schedule, and undergo a briefing and critique of his draft with the commander. Once it was approved, the action officer had to gather the resources, conduct a rehearsal with all supporting instructors and demonstrators, and then execute the event. All of this was significant leader training. The M60 competition included evaluating the weapons squad in occupying a support-by-fire position and executing crew drills during the live fire scenario. Both the M60 and rifle squad events included strenuous physical events and weaponry event in understanding zeroing procedures, fundamentals of firing, and live fire marksmanship. Obviously, the list

of events related directly to the company focus.

This kind of competitiveness would be disruptive if it ever were allowed to create dissention or animosity among the platoons. But this should not be a concern as long as everything is kept in perspective and the rewards do not outshine the events. Of course, the company must be a close-knit organization before embarking on this many events, and this closeness is often the contribution of the previous commander. As a result, Company A is a cohesive, ready force that has been built on healthy competition over the past year and a half.

A company commander controls many variables and intangibles that can make his company one of the best in the

Army today, but he should start out slowly and build up to it. He will be pleased with the results from one quarter to the next and will be a true believer when he leaves command and has a former member of the company visit to tell him how great it really was. This will confirm the emphasis on "cohesion through competition" and your personal feelings about the company you once commanded.

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