

Company-Level Search and Attack

Sharpening Warfighting Skills at the JRTC

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To succeed during low-intensity conflict, a company must have an established, but flexible, plan for conducting the *search and attack*. Because of the fluid environment, it is difficult to establish a single method of conducting a company-level search and attack. But with an understanding of the elements of *find*, *fix*, and *finish*, a company can establish standing operating procedures for planning, movement, and fire support that can be applied in almost every situation. Training and rehearsals before deployment are the keys to success because a search and attack mission tests all of the collective, leader, and individual tasks a rifle company must be able to execute.

In preparation for a JRTC rotation, my platoon leaders and I researched numerous sources on conducting the search and attack and spent an entire intensive training cycle refining the method we considered the soundest. The result was a combination of the *search and attack* and *approach march* techniques with two basic rules: Our unit would move as a company during daylight hours, and at night—with the exception of reconnaissance and surveillance (R&S) patrols—would limit movement to platoon-size units or larger.

Before deploying to the JRTC, the company trained for almost two weeks on search and attack operations. We started with the fundamental squad and fire team battle drills and the tasks of *Reaction to Contact*, *Perform Ambush*, *Reconnaissance*, and *Move Tactically*. Once the squads were proficient at these tasks, we progressed to platoon and company level operations. Using multiple training areas and a controlled op-

posing force (OPFOR) element, we were able to conduct long movements on different terrain each day, and I was able to decide when and where contact occurred. Thus, we were able to conduct quick after-action reviews with input from the OPFOR and then repeat the engagement if any problems were cited.

During the train-up, we refined the occupation of platoon patrol bases and the company assembly area. We also concentrated on determining a tactical formation for company movements that would provide adequate security, firepower, and ease of control. We eventually chose the company, platoon, and squad wedge formations. Although this formation was sometimes difficult to control, with practice the squads and platoons became comfortable with it. The company wedge allowed us to cover a substantial piece of ground without any portion of the formation losing the ability to provide or receive support from another element. The formation prevented the enemy from conducting a box attack because he could never flank the element in contact without running into another fire team or squad. To add more flexibility to the formation, the company's 60mm mortars moved in split sections. One gun was positioned with the headquarters element of the lead platoon to provide immediate suppressive fire from the direct lay or handheld mode. The other gun was positioned to the rear of the company headquarters, allowing the section enough reaction time to establish a firing position and place accurate fires on a predetermined target.

The training that proved the most worthwhile was a rigorous road march

program. By integrating road marches with marksmanship training, we provided the soldiers with the confidence that they could move over long distances and then fight and shoot accurately. Initiated almost eight months before the JRTC rotation, the program required soldiers to carry rucksacks weighing one-third of their body weights (no less than 50 pounds, and no more than 70) on a weekly basis; the program entailed six-mile marches weekly, a 10-miler each month, a 15-miler every three months, and a 30-miler every six months. Every two weeks, the road marches ended on live-fire ranges where the squads would immediately move into a tactical formation and conduct a *React to Contact* engagement.

Field Planning. A detailed intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and a terrain analysis are the key parts of the planning that take place at company level. Using data provided by the battalion S-2 as a guide, the platoon leaders and I examined the terrain in the company's sector and applied our basic knowledge of the way the enemy operated. The size of the company's sector, the number and the degree of restrictive and key terrain features in the area (rivers, swamps, large open areas, roads, trails), and the templated enemy positions guided the planning of the company's march objectives, route, and positioning of the assembly area and 60mm mortars. Although templated enemy positions were naturally designated march objectives, we planned other march objectives along the way—river crossing points, creek beds, and high ground. These objectives allowed an effective reconnaissance of the sector

and a determination of how much enemy activity had taken place.

We designated checkpoints along roads and trails throughout the sector to serve as casualty collection points as well as resupply points. We also pinpointed open areas in the sector as air medical evacuation pickup zones.

Movement. The size of the sector and the duration of the company's operations in it determined when and how deeply we infiltrated into our sector. Routinely, we moved at dusk approximately 200–300 meters into the sector, established a company assembly area, and pushed out two squad-sized R&S patrols. The patrols searched the immediate area and then lay in ambush along possible enemy travel corridors until midnight before rejoining the company main body. The area chosen for the assembly area was defensible and accessible to within 200 meters by vehicle for resupply operations. This area also served as the firing position for the company mortars in support of the next day's operation.

Unless augmented by a heavy weapons platoon (which is organic only to airborne and air assault battalions), the company's task organization resulted in two platoons traveling in a company column, platoons in wedge. The third platoon, acting as a fixing force, would move out of the company area each night when the R&S patrols returned and then situate itself in squad-sized ambushes along key terrain and likely enemy avenues of approach corresponding with the march objectives. The plan was that the ambushes would either catch enemy moving into the sector during the night or catch the enemy reinforcing or breaking contact with our company main body during daylight. When the company was augmented by a heavy weapons platoon, the third infantry platoon joined the company, which traveled in the company wedge, platoons in wedge. The heavy weapons platoon was used to block designated enemy infiltration and escape routes into the company's sector with a secondary mission as a quick reaction force.

Fire Support Plan. The company covered its movement through the sec-

tor with indirect fire by designating priority targets on march objectives. For the most part, this resulted in a priority target every 500 meters along the company's route. Phase lines corresponding with the minimum safe distances of the weapon system covering the targets in front of the company were used as target turn-off/turn-on points. As a back-up, the platoon leader and forward observer (FO) of the lead platoon entered the targets as "waypoints" into their precision lightweight global positioning system receivers (PLGRs), allowing them to calculate the precise minimum safe distance and adjust the guns to the next target as the lead elements of the company moved within that distance. As a result, the company in contact could immediately isolate or fix the enemy with indirect fires by firing a priority target and then destroying or suppressing him with adjustments.

To facilitate accurate fires, we used either a platoon FO positioned with a squad ambush or the heavy weapons platoon as observers for the registration of the 60mm mortars at first light each morning.

Sustaining Combat Power. Because search and attack missions involve constant physical activity throughout the day for extended periods, the company must have a plan to ensure that soldiers maintain their levels of strength and alertness. To reduce combat fatigue and protect the force, the company moved with only mission essential equipment. Rucksacks were cached in the company assembly area. Soldiers carried assault packs containing two MREs (meals, ready to eat), four quarts of water, a basic load of ammunition, a poncho, and poncho liner. Following the day's mission, the executive officer pushed the rucksacks and necessary supplies forward to a link-up point.

This same technique was used for pushing the mortars forward to the company at day's end; but when vehicle transportation was not feasible, the company moved back to the mortar position just before nightfall, made link-up, picked up rucksacks, and infiltrated into the next sector.

The company maintained 50 percent

security throughout the night in the assembly area and in ambushes. By rotating the ambush platoon and restricting night movements, soldiers were able to get four hours of sleep per night and recover from the rigors of the day's operation.

Actions on Contact. The typical daily conduct of the search and attack began 30 minutes before morning nautical twilight (BMNT) in an attempt to catch the enemy sleeping. The company would move within the vicinity of its first march objective, halt, and position crew-served weapons in overwatch. Each platoon would then push out reconnaissance elements to search the immediate area, all the while remaining within supporting distance of the platoon and company main body. Each squad leader was thoroughly briefed on the battalion's priority intelligence requirements, the suspected use of the area, and the sign that designated the area as a possible supply point, cache, or mortar site.

During chance contacts with the enemy, the lead platoon's task was to fix the enemy by establishing a base of fire. It did not chase the enemy, knowing that the rest of the company was there for support to its flank or rear. Immediately, the lead platoon's FO called a fire mission to the 60mm mortars, which placed fires on the nearest priority target to isolate the enemy. The FO then worked an *adjust fire* mission, using his PLGR and laser infrared observation set for accuracy. The enemy's size and actions determined whether bold adjustments were made to destroy him or fires were shifted onto a position immediately behind him. As the lead platoon established a base of fire and sent back a SALUTE report (size, activity, location, unit, time, and equipment), one of the trail platoons (finishing force) maneuvered to flank the enemy, and the other repositioned to provide security to the company's rear with a *be prepared* mission to reinforce either the support-by-fire or the assault element. Upon receiving the contact report, the heavy weapons platoon moved to block key routes into the area and stop the enemy's escape with a *be prepared* mission to reinforce and, if

needed, to evacuate casualties.

Following the contact, the company established a perimeter forward of the battle site for consolidation and reorganization and forwarded the results of the contact to the battalion tactical operations center. If friendly casualties were taken, the company first sergeant consolidated them and moved them to a check point for evacuation by the company executive officer and battalion medical assets or by the heavy weapons platoon.

When the company was not augmented by a heavy weapons platoon, the actions on contact were essentially the same, except that the flanking platoon left a squad as rear security before it moved. The proximity of the squads in ambush as well as the enemy situation dictated whether I committed them as reinforcements, directed them to another location to isolate the enemy, or simply kept them in position. As the company closed on a squad ambush position, we performed a link-up with the squad and integrated it into the company formations.

Control Measures. During a search and attack, mutual support must exist within the battalion as well as within the company. A system must be in place

for an adjacent company to reinforce a company in contact. By establishing checkpoints along company boundaries, integrating copies of the company's graphics, and forcing companies to report their locations every 500 meters, or every 30 minutes, the battalion commander is always aware of his force distribution, as are the battalion fire support element and the fire direction center. The battalion commander's ability to direct two or more companies against an enemy position is enhanced, and the process of clearing fires and directing battalion assets, such as OH-58D Kiowas, is faster. Company commanders are also aware of the location of the other companies, and by cross-talking on the battalion net, can easily direct another company to a check point for link-up or to block enemy reinforcements or withdrawal.

A battalion commander may choose to control his companies' rates of movement by numbering march objectives in sequence and having each company stop as it reaches the first one. The company then waits until the others have reached their march objectives, and then begins movement to the second march objective. Rehearsals are the key to this method. Although a com-

pany commander may feel hampered by it, it reduces the chance of a company becoming isolated while in contact with an overwhelming force. Again, with the battalion commander and the company commanders aware of each unit's location, the problems of clearing fires are significantly reduced.

Although the low-intensity conflict portion of a JRTC rotation lasts for only five to seven days, it should receive most of a company's training focus before deployment. The *search and attack*, more than any other operation, tests the inherent abilities of a light infantry company—moving long distances under combat load, reacting to contact, and positioning to repeat that sequence. *Search and attack* is not just walking through the woods, hoping to bump into the enemy. Success requires a well-thought-out plan that allows you to meet and fight the enemy on your terms—not his.

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