



BREAKING CONTACT

Tips to overcome common weaknesses

BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN R. SCALES

Imagine a small patrol deep in enemy territory, intent upon getting to their objective. Patrol members are lulled by routine, fatigued by nervous anticipation, and moving with heavy rucksacks. Suddenly, shots are fired — a chance contact with an enemy force! Patrol members are transformed from their prior state of fatigue into a state of intense fear. Sure, they talked about chance contact and rehearsed battle drills, but what is really going on? Where is the enemy, how many are there, what are they up to, and what does the terrain look like? This is probably not like the rehearsal, but it should be.

This patrol is facing the most dangerous situation possible. Surprised, possibly outnumbered, no help nearby — destruction is imminent. The patrol must act, by either attacking immediately or breaking contact. The idea of an immediate attack has merit — often the enemy is more surprised than the patrol — but, unless the patrol already has taken casualties, the better choice is usually to break contact. After all, the patrol has another mission, and continuing the engagement may result in casualties that prevent the accomplishment of that mission.

Because chance contact is so dangerous, infantry, Ranger, and Special Forces units practice this contingency often. They rehearse battle drills on varying terrain and in different circumstances, culminating in live-fire exercises. Unfortunately, the loss of many seasoned veterans and the curtailment of training time and resources in recent years have left some Soldiers unsure of how to execute this difficult operation properly.

During the past several years, I have witnessed numerous training events conducted by small units of both the Active Army and the Army National Guard that were centered on breaking contact. In every

case, I noticed actions that probably would have led to unnecessary casualties for the unit.

The tips below are my suggestions on how to overcome the weaknesses I have seen in the past three years. Each tip addresses one of these weaknesses.

Prior to Contact

A key determinant of the outcome from a chance contact is the training conducted beforehand. Thorough and practical rehearsals and standing operating procedures (SOPs) are essential. Also essential are the individual, leader, and collective skills exercised while the patrol is moving, which prepare the patrol for success.

Rehearsals should address as many different situations as possible in the time available. Contact may take place at danger areas, and breaking contact should be a part of the rehearsal for crossing each type of danger area. Because contact may also occur elsewhere, a selection of other situations — different terrain, enemy situation, and friendly status (moving or stationary) — must be used. There will be no standard answer for every situation, because all are so different. The purpose of rehearsal is to develop a repertoire of actions that the patrol leader can apply to meet whatever comes up.

The patrol leader is key to putting the patrol in the right posture to meet a chance contact. He must choose routes that minimize exposure, offer easy ways to bypass or avoid the enemy, and avoid likely ambush sites. He should direct the use of proper techniques, such as bounding overwatch to cross large danger areas that cannot be avoided. He ensures that his point element remains alert and not tired, and that they keep him informed of danger areas or signs of the enemy.

The point man must be intelligent, alert, and well-trained. And he should carry a lighter load than the rest. Although he is under the observation and control of the patrol leader, his actions determine his own fate and that of the entire patrol. Moving too fast is a common mistake. The point man is a bird dog — he moves a little, then sniffs the air and slowly scans the area before moving again. His body movements are slow and fluid, not jerky.

The rest of the patrol emulates his movements. They also move slowly, from one point that could offer cover to another, then stop and scan their sector. In particular, a right-handed Soldier who must monitor a sector to his right should force himself to pause every few steps and slowly sweep his sector with weapon and eyes, just as the rear security sweeps the rear of the patrol. (Some recommend that the Soldier with a sector on the right carry his weapon left-handed, but I'm not convinced this is effective). Soldiers are properly camouflaged for the area so they blend into areas that offer cover.

The terrain, lighting conditions, and weather in the area determine the proper interval between Soldiers. This interval is the maximum distance at which each Soldier — having taken cover because of incoming fire — can still see the Soldiers on either side of him. In some cases this may seem too close (one grenade will get them all), but the disadvantages are outweighed by the ability to pass along orders and coordinate actions — and by the psychological support Soldiers get from not feeling alone when the bullets are flying. (A technique I used to train proper interval was to blow a whistle periodically — meaning take cover — while practicing movement techniques, then having the Soldiers evaluate the positions they had assumed.)



Private First Class Hugo A. Baray-Vasquez

Private First Class John Brandon of the 2/22d Infantry Division, provides security during a patrol in a village in Afghanistan.

During Contact

Upon contact, Soldiers instinctively take cover and then consider what to do next. The patrol leader will assess the situation, then issue orders. Soldiers will fire on known or suspected enemy positions, but only if the situation is clear to them — they will be concerned about firing into friendly troops and about giving their position away.

The patrol leader must make a quick decision. Given what he knows and what he sees and hears around him, he must choose a battle drill. If he established a base of fire before contact (as in bounding overwatch) — and did not inadvertently mask its fire by bounding in front of it — he may be able to use fire and maneuver to break contact. If his lead element is in a wedge, he may already have a base of fire; if not, he must establish one, using his crew-served weapons, if available. If some or all of the patrol is pinned down, fire and movement by individuals or buddy teams may be the only viable battle drill. If terrain restricts the patrol to a narrow lane such as a jungle trail, he may elect to initiate a peel. If the patrol is lucky enough to be within range of supporting arms, then mortars, artillery, or aircraft can be a welcome addition to this base of fire. Given a base of fire and the terrain, lighting conditions, and apparent enemy situation, he then orders the patrol to conduct a battle drill that takes advantage of all these factors.

One important complication occurs if the contact has resulted in a friendly casualty, particularly if the casualty is not ambulatory. Patrol members must make sure the patrol leader is told immediately

when someone is hit so he can make the proper decision. In this case, there is little choice. The patrol must attack if at all possible and secure the area around the casualty. Often the casualty is the point man, closest to the enemy. The designated medic quickly treats the wound while the patrol leader evaluates his options: Can he secure the area and get a medevac, or must he have the wounded Soldier carried out? If the latter, how will the Soldier be carried, and where will he be taken? Must the patrol leader abandon equipment and possibly the mission itself? Although he would have discussed these options during the patrol order, the detailed circumstances may change the answers. In any case, the leader executes one battle drill to secure the casualty and may then have to execute another to carry out the evacuation.

Usually the first step of either battle drill is to inhibit enemy target acquisition and suppress enemy fire with a barrage of grenades, both fragmentation and smoke. This works well, as long as those who use smoke keep the wind direction in mind. One technique is to throw smoke first, then fragmentation grenades, so the smoke will have time to build a screen. Soldiers initiate movement upon frag detonation.

Individual and buddy team movement techniques form the heart of executing a successful break in contact. Buddy teams are important because the two buddies can work together, one moving while the other provides covering fire. This greatly reduces the need for the patrol leader to manage individuals, and it cuts down on the shouting of commands with the possibility of misunderstanding or of not being heard at all. Each Soldier must take short bounds, three seconds or less, moving from one piece of cover to another. Bounding too far not only exposes the Soldier, but also puts the other patrol members at risk because — unlike fire and movement during an attack — the withdrawing Soldier turns his back to the enemy and to his buddy as he moves. A long bound may cause the Soldier to become confused as to his buddy's position and may shoot him by mistake.

Soldiers use micro-terrain, perhaps a fold on the ground only two or three inches high as well as the more visible tree trunks, logs, and bushes. Whenever possible, the new position should be chosen before starting movement.

Often during an attack, you will see Soldiers who are bounding on line converge to the center of the objective and bunch up as they get there. The same holds true when withdrawing. Soldiers will tend to merge into a clump, particularly if they were in a file when the contact started. Members of the buddy teams on the flanks of the formation must remember to keep their distance. Leaders need to keep their Soldiers spread out to avoid presenting too lucrative a target, and to prevent masking each other's fires as well.

After Contact

Unless otherwise designated by the patrol leader, the patrol will withdraw to the last rally point, a terrain feature back along the route of movement. Here the patrol will regroup, redistribute ammunition, and receive the fragmentary order on what they will do next. Although time here should be kept to a minimum to avoid any pursuers, the patrol leader needs to check his Soldiers quietly

TRAINING NOTES

and transmit his orders for movement to an alternate route. Orders need to cover the route, tentative rally points, and directions on how to disguise the patrol's trail. Shouting or loud noises may give away the position to an aggressive enemy.

It is here that training and combat diverge. In combat, the leader continues the mission. In training, the leader must visually check all weapons to ensure safety. After the rest of the training, the after-action review (AAR) begins.

The AAR is led by the patrol leader, or preferably by an experienced outside observer but without dominating it. He sets the stage and then brings each patrol member into the AAR to discuss his actions. Each segment of the rehearsal, from start to finish, should be covered in detail. If possible, he should walk through the lane again, discussing each phase in turn. The patrol leader should take particular care to explain each decision he made and each order he gave. All patrol members need to understand the rationale behind the decisions and any artificial limitations imposed (such as range limits, practicing night tactics in daylight before night execution, etc.). Further, each SOP item, every action taken by a patrol member, and every decision needs to be open to challenge and discussion. If the training is to succeed, everyone must understand what happened, what they did, how individual actions fit in the overall picture, and how all these can be improved.

Recommendations

Our Soldiers must spend more time working on dangerous situations such as chance contact. They need to perform evolutions such as breaking contact on different live-fire ranges and in varying terrain types. Crawl, walk, run, sprint — depending on the particulars of the unit and typical missions, which might be day, night vision goggles, stretcher casualty, night without goggles, etc. A small set of battle drills known to all is far better than trying to develop a different procedure for every imaginable situation. The real key to success is to develop that repertoire of battle drills by practicing them under varying and difficult conditions.

The most important asset in a successful training program is the experienced Soldier from outside — such as the battalion command sergeant major — who monitors and critiques the patrol's actions. Even with his help, we will never be perfect, but we can meet the goal of continual improvement.

The following are some suggested battle drills:

- Patrol bounding overwatch.
- Setting up a base of fire from the patrol formation after contact.
- Fire and maneuver to withdraw (given a base of fire).
- Fire and maneuver to attack and secure

a friendly casualty (given a base of fire).

- Fire and movement to withdraw.
- Fire and movement to attack and secure a friendly casualty.
- Reaction to effective near ambush.
- Specialized techniques appropriate to mission or expected terrain.

Brigadier General John R. Scales, served as the Deputy Commanding General (RC), U.S. Army Special Forces Command from January 1997 until his retirement in February 2001. He was commissioned in the U.S. Army in 1970 after completing Reserve Officer Training. He served with the 1/58th Infantry in the Republic of Vietnam from December 1971 until May 1972.

EVACUATION CHECKLIST — BREAKING CONTACT				
TASK	YES	NO	NA	COMMENTS
Designate viable rally points				
Proper route selection				
Appropriate patrol movement formation				
Alertness to sector and movement of patrol members				
Proper camouflage				
Technique and individual actions at danger area				
Maintain proper interval				
Take good cover on contact and return fire or other action if dictated by SOP				
Adoption of appropriate battle drill by patrol leader quickly				
Clear orders by patrol leader				
Proper use of crew-served weapons and/or supporting arms if available				
Mask position with smoke				
Fragmentation grenades to initiate move				
Movement controlled by buddy team				
Even rate of fire				
Use of micro-terrain				
Short bounds				
Maintaining dispersion and interval				
Consolidate at rally point				
Clear, timely further orders				
Leader clears weapons				
Good, detailed AAR				
Universal participation in AAR				