

A CYCLE OF VICTORY

MANNING SYSTEM CONTRIBUTES TO 'SPARTAN' SUCCESS IN AFGHANISTAN

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR JAMES REDMORE

Victory proverbially has a thousand fathers, and the success of our brigade in Operation Enduring Freedom VII has well over 3,000. But a share of the credit also belongs to the system that brought the team together.

The 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 10th Mountain Division developed from an ideal into a battlefield reality within a year and a half. The “Spartan” experience demonstrates the utility of the three-year lifecycle manning system and validates, in large measure, the concept of the modular brigade combat team.

The brigade began with little more than a commander and a dream. Fortunately, that commander was the ideal man for the job. Colonel John Nicholson’s office at the Pentagon was incinerated during the terror attacks on September 11, 2001. The colonel escaped with his life only because the arrival of household goods that morning kept him away from his office. His commitment to the mission and the team could not have been more powerful.

I had served with Colonel Nicholson during a previous assignment and knew I was getting not only a motivated commander but one of the finest leaders and tacticians available. Conscious of the possibilities and potential of the new organization as well as the challenges we faced, the commander and I sought to seize the unique opportunity to build a very special team from the ground up.

The colonel had already struck upon the “Spartans” theme by the time we discussed our unit identity in late July of 2004. As we

talked, I grew more and more enthusiastic about the concept. The Spartan ideal embodied everything we hoped to achieve. The ancient Spartan warriors formed an elite class set apart by their training, professionalism, and service. They idealized discipline, loyalty, self-sacrifice, valor, strength, and skill.

When the colonel asked my advice for a motto, I conducted a little research before responding. As I learned about the ancient city-state and its unique warrior class, I came across a Spartan expression that perfectly distilled our ideal: “With Your Shield or On It.” The phrase meant for Spartans that a warrior should return from battle with shield in hand or perish in the fight. Since a warrior’s shield protected the comrades who stood beside him in fighting formation, the motto suggested ideals of sacrifice, solidarity, courage, and teamwork. Once the theme coalesced, the Spartan ethic informed every aspect of our brigade.

We had a commander and a command sergeant major so we had a brigade — at least on paper, and we had one hell of a motto. But that was about it.

The commander and I assembled the Spartan team from a variety of 10th Mountain “legacy” units, preexisting elements pressed into service in new capacities and entirely new organizations. We brought the 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment over from 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain and 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment from the division’s 2nd Brigade. We significantly enhanced the capabilities of a resident main support battalion to form the 710th Brigade Support Battalion. The 4th

Battalion, 25th Field Artillery Regiment formed from the remnants of division artillery (DIVARTY). As the DIVARTY command sergeant major, I watched my organization steadily disintegrate until it vanished entirely into the fledgling BCTs, and then I took my place in the Spartan Brigade.

A new battalion-sized element featured unique reconnaissance, mechanized movement, and targeting capabilities. The 3rd Squadron, 71st Cavalry Regiment relied largely on new troopers to fill its ranks, leaning heavily on brother Spartan battalions for leaders. We established the 3rd Brigade Special Troops Battalion from six separate battalions within the division.

Bringing these capabilities together within the same brigade paid rich command and control dividends. Since the commander and I controlled all assets within the 3rd BCT, we could move personnel among battalions as necessary. They could coordinate activities among all the brigade's organizations, de-conflicting schedules and resolving issues when necessary. Brigade leaders could pass guidance and directions through organization channels rather than coordinate with separate headquarters for support. Instead of negotiating with distinct organizations, they simply passed orders to subordinate units. The modular organization also encouraged cross-talk among leaders and Soldiers from different specialties, enhancing cohesion and understanding across the brigade.

We confronted a number of significant challenges as the brigade stood up. Equipping the new force on a condensed timeline posed enormous logistical difficulties for our supply chain. The most daunting challenges revolved around manning. The establishment of the new brigade brought enormous numbers of new Soldiers to Fort Drum. Our brigade alone received around 2,000 new Soldiers during the run-up to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) VII. This posed significant reception and housing as well as integration, training and equipping problems.

The new arrivals stretched the infrastructure around Fort Drum to the breaking point. Base housing facilities for married and single Soldiers alike were soon exhausted. Virtually every property in

nearby towns was rented, sold or leased in short order. While post leaders initiated construction projects designed to increase the housing capacity at Drum, leaders and Soldiers resorted to increasingly remote locations in the near term. Significant numbers of brigade Soldiers commuted 45 minutes to an hour each way every day from regional towns. Some lived as far out as Syracuse, a commute that typically began at 3 a.m., including privately owned vehicle (POV) and shuttle bus legs.

Fortunately, the brigade's senior NCOs acted energetically and decisively to mitigate the problems. Spartan sergeants major and first sergeants met personally with incoming Soldiers as they completed in-processing Friday afternoons. They discussed the post, the area, the division, expectations and standards. They also discussed Soldiers' experiences and backgrounds, and any personal or family issues that could impact the team. The personal interaction allowed our leaders to make informed decisions about who to place where rather than randomly assign incoming Soldiers to units and housing areas. If two out of six guys had to live in Syracuse, who among them were best prepared to handle the situation responsibly? Who needed a strong, directive



Photos by Sergeant First Class Michael Pintagro

A fueler with F Company, 710th Brigade Support Battalion serving as sergeant of the guard in a force protection detail, monitors traffic at a vehicle entry point in Afghanistan.

leader to impose discipline? Who was prepared to accept greater responsibilities, perhaps move into a leadership position?

The relative youth and inexperience of our incoming Soldiers pushed enlisted brigade leaders to their limits. Many new Soldiers required close supervision, vigorous mentorship and remedial training. Platoon sergeants and squad leaders devoted enormous energy to developing junior leaders, identifying young Soldiers with leadership potential and providing the mentorship necessary to create tactically and technically proficient team and section leaders.

We sought from the earliest stages of the brigade's existence to inculcate a common Warrior Ethos. One aspect of the Warrior Ethos was conceptual. It revolved around esprit de corps, discipline, and mental toughness. Another aspect of the Warrior Ethos revolved around combat training, instilling skills that complemented the Warrior spirit and produced Soldiers capable of taking the fight to the enemy.

The combat training also ensured our Soldiers saw themselves as — and they were in fact — Warriors first and technicians second. The training instilled tactical, weapons, and self-defense skills.

A brigade-wide combatives program instilled self-defense skills while encouraging physical fitness and discipline. The program contributed enormously to the effectiveness of our Soldiers in close-quarters combat with the enemy. It helped us inculcate not only the proficiency but the aggressiveness, confidence and fighting spirit necessary to confront and defeat the enemy on the battlefield.

We strongly emphasized marksmanship throughout the train-up for our rotation. The emphasis on marksmanship reflected our commitment to fundamental Soldier skills, our philosophy of conducting training “across the board” and our determination to inculcate the Warrior Ethos throughout the brigade. On a practical level, it also reflected situational awareness. Our analysis proved correct. Many of our Soldiers — and not just infantrymen — fought during small arms engagements against the enemy in Afghanistan during OEF VII.

We adopted a small arms master gunner model. Much of the marksmanship training

broke down conveniently into modules. This allowed us to conduct training in self-contained blocks, maximizing flexibility and ensuring everyone reached an acceptable level of warfighting proficiency. Short-range marksmanship training prepared Soldiers to confront the enemy with confidence, skill and deadly accuracy on the battlefield. We maximized participation in squad designated marksmanship and advanced rifle marksmanship training programs. The training typically culminated in react-to-contact live-fire drills, convoy live fires and combined arms live fires.

The universal marksmanship effort complemented, but did not replace, service-wide schools and programs. It provided a baseline of competence on widely employed weapons systems, ensuring a large proportion of our Soldiers could apply lethal force on the battlefield. Whereas previous efforts focused on honing the skills of select “trigger-pullers,” usually infantrymen, artillerymen and cavalrymen, we made mechanics, cooks and medics “trigger-pullers” in their own right.

We also took advantage of formal marksmanship courses designed to refine the skills of our finest shooters. We sent select Spartans to Sniper School and brought in mobile training teams (MTTs) to reach others.

We implemented perhaps the most comprehensive and dynamic universal observer program conducted within a maneuver organization. Our philosophy was simple: we provided basic training on fire procedures to anyone who might go “outside the wire” on patrol or mission. We weren’t the first organization to implement universal observer training, but we conducted the training on an unprecedented scale. Soldiers from other artillery job specialties, infantrymen or armored cavalrymen might practice calling for fire, but how many logisticians, staffers or personnel from outside the organization typically receive universal observer training? We trained mechanics, cooks, members of other governmental agencies and even Afghan National Army allies in basic fire procedures.

We established the Spartan Responder program to ensure maximum proficiency in buddy aid. This went far beyond the conventional combat lifesaver model. Rather than train a couple guys at a time as slots opened up, we turned our subject matter experts into trainers. Medics trained each other and then turned to the rest of the force. By the time we deployed, 100 percent of our companies had received basic emergency medical training.

Meanwhile, a quiet revolution in battalion support unfolded in the frozen woods of northern New York. The modular configuration of the brigade afforded a unique opportunity to disperse support assets. We attached a forward support company (FSC) to each maneuver organization. Support Soldiers integrated almost immediately into their battalions and squadron. This not only established unprecedented cohesion and camaraderie but ensured we would truly train as we fought. Training alongside infantrymen, artillerymen, and cavalry troopers also afforded 710th personnel unique opportunities to learn from the men they supported. Soldiers serving in FSCs trained to the same standards as the combat arms troops they supported, developing in the process into some of the Army’s most lethal mechanics, logisticians and medics. Combat arms Soldiers, in turn, benefited enormously from their exposure to subject matter experts in a wide array of support specialties.

Training progressed through individual and small group phases to squad, platoon and company exercises. Company training gave way to battalion-level exercises conducted at home station. Elements from all of our battalions participated in capstone live fire and fire support training events, setting the stage for our mission rehearsal exercise (MRE), which was conducted in June at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Our mission identified early on, capstone training events and the MRE focused specifically on escalation of force (EOF) scenarios.

As the deployment approached, we conducted final training missions and participated in team-building activities. Senior NCOs conducted a staff ride to Fort Ticonderoga, New York. The staff ride allowed me and battalion command sergeants major a final opportunity to interact with and mentor senior brigade NCOs. An already tight senior NCO corps emerged from the staff ride even stronger and more cohesive.

Practicalities dominated our final weeks at home station. We packed outbound equipment and received theater-specific gear. We sent Soldiers to the numerous mandatory theater briefings and conducted cultural familiarization training. Soldiers completed final administrative and medical screenings and spent valuable time with their families.

As the torch party departed in January and advanced parties and main bodies prepared to deploy, the commander and I could reflect on enormous achievements. Had we merely constructed and deployed a brigade within 18 months, the achievement would have been remarkable. Yet we had accomplished much more. We had assembled one of the most highly trained and cohesive maneuver brigades to serve



A Soldier with the 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment peers across the Pakistani border with the aid of an Improved Targeting Acquisition System from an observation point in Paktika Province, Afghanistan.

in the war on terror. Few brigade-sized elements featured such versatility or such comprehensive capabilities. Seldom if ever had a higher proportion of Soldiers within a brigade possessed such a wide range of capabilities. Prior to transformation, how many brigades contained mechanics and clerks trained to infantry standards of marksmanship? How many truck drivers and radio technicians in other organizations could call in fire missions with deadly accuracy?

The lifecycle system aided our efforts in a number of critical ways. First, it brought the team together relatively early on. Key leaders came to know their Soldiers early in the cycle, allowing them to identify and mentor potential leaders in the earliest stages and train to the strengths and weaknesses of every troop. This helped leaders turn Soldiers into combat multipliers. A strong shooter might develop into a mentor for weaker ones; a skilled fire supporter might teach less proficient Soldiers to call for fire. Playing to Soldiers' strengths created valuable subject matter experts, enhanced confidence and developed leaders.

Colleagues, in turn, helped Soldiers remedy deficiencies and turn weaknesses into strengths. A skilled fire support team member, for instance, might learn buddy aid from a medic he taught to call for fire. A gifted marksman might be a mentor on the range and a student in the motorpool.

Second, the lifecycle ensured maximum predictability throughout the planning, training and execution phases of our mission. This allowed for highly effective medium and long range as well as near-term planning. Key leaders arranged cumulative training events that built on previous instruction. One level of training built on another, beginning with individual, team and squad events and culminating in integrated large scale exercises. The predictability of the lifecycle also allowed us to integrate individual schools, temporary duty missions and advanced training opportunities into our battle rhythm. Rather than send Soldiers to schools haphazardly as opportunities arose, we consciously selected dates that dovetailed with unit calendars and the broader brigade training plan.

Predictability worked to the benefit of the individual Soldier as well as the team. A Soldier who knows with a reasonable degree of certainty when he can attend BNCO, pursue educational opportunities or take leave stands a much better chance of accomplishing personal and family as well as unit goals. Leaders and Soldiers planned for major training events and missions and scheduled personal activities accordingly. Family members knew when brigade and unit activities permitted free weekends and leave opportunities with their Soldiers and when they did not.

The continuity provided by the lifecycle also yielded important advantages to our brigade. Under the individual manning system, Soldiers and even key leaders arrived and departed sporadically — often at the worst possible times. Transitions frequently occurred during the run-up to important activities or missions, leaving Soldiers without proven leaders and trusted colleagues when they needed them most. The lifecycle helped in two significant ways. First, it kept most of the team intact throughout the cycle. Second, it allowed us to prepare for the transitions that did occur and mitigate their impact.

By encouraging cohesion, stability and continuity, the lifecycle

contributed to morale and esprit de corps. Soldiers developed tight bonds with their leaders and with each other. Despite an intense mission and a high operational tempo, our brigade has enjoyed robust retention rates, particularly among those opting to remain with their organizations. While a number of factors influence retention, the cohesion encouraged by lifecycle manning clearly played a role. Indeed, the cohesion of one infantry squad was so strong that its members reenlisted on the same day for similar terms in order to keep the squad together.

Critics of the lifecycle often fault the system's inflexibility. Since the lifecycle deliberately aims to lock a team into place throughout a major mission, it is certainly less flexible than the individual manning system. But it bears reiterating that the advantages of continuity generally outweigh the disadvantages incurred by limiting flexibility. The inflexibility of the lifecycle, moreover, is often exaggerated. When leaders find it absolutely necessary to "bust the cycle," they can. I've done it myself in order to place the right man in the right position to accomplish the mission. With sufficient coordination and support from brigade and higher echelon leaders, a lifecycle unit can indeed move Soldiers into and out of its organization. The threshold of justification for such a move and the effort required to complete it are simply greater.

The lifecycle, some critics warn, has the potential to lock NCOs into positions that hinder career development. This critique is not entirely without merit. Battalion command sergeants major not assigned a brigade could find themselves trapped at the same level for consecutive lifecycles. Other senior NCOs, particularly those promoted during the lifecycle, might well serve part or all of a cycle in positions below their grade. These problems are, in some cases, mitigated by career developing opportunities within the brigade or, more rarely, by busting the cycle, but they cannot be denied.

The replacement system for lifecycle units requires further development. Originally, the system's architects expected a package of personnel configured according to brigade needs and likely attrition patterns to fill vacancies over the course of the lifecycle. This package never materialized for us. Instead, we ultimately obtained backfills from other 10th Mountain organizations on an individual basis, an imperfect solution at odds with the entire concept of the lifecycle.

On balance, however, the lifecycle system represents a vast improvement over the individual manning method. The continuity, predictability and stability inherent in the lifecycle definitely helped us create a winning team. The lifecycle system significantly and directly improved our cohesion, our technical and tactical proficiency, and our warfighting capabilities. Our pride, esprit de corps and cohesion — our drive for excellence in everything we do — was significantly enhanced by the unity built during our lifecycle. The lifecycle contributed heavily to Spartan success during OEF VII. I'm convinced it will play a similarly constructive role in the development of other brigades.

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