



FROM BLACKHAWK TO BRADLEY

The 101st Airborne in a Mechanized Role

CAPTAIN CHRISTOPHER HUME

The versatility of the modern American infantryman is evident in almost every report coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Examples abound of young fighting men that adapt and persevere to overcome incredible difficulties, whether through intelligent problem solving or sheer determination. These acts are worth remembering so that the lessons learned can be passed to future war fighters. As the platoon leader for 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment (Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition [RSTA]), 101st Airborne Division, I was fortunate enough to witness one particular example that occurred over a period of several months.

On Christmas Day 2005, three months into their tour, the Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Charlie Company were adjusting to their new forward operating base (FOB) in Muqdadiyah, Iraq, a few dozen kilometers from the provincial capital of Baqubah. The men from Fort Campbell were used to change after undergoing transformation from an infantry battalion to a RSTA

squadron in less than six months. They had already adapted well to the use of armored trucks in daily operations and were keen on the ever-shifting shape of the enemy. Flexibility and versatility were in their best interest since everyone knew that the evolving battlefield did not look kindly upon those who resisted change in the name of tradition. Despite the change that defined their short history, no one could have predicted the next challenge they would face. It did not come in the form of a new deadly enemy tactic, technique or procedure (TTP) or a serious loss of leadership but with the introduction of a new tool: the M2A2 Bradley fighting vehicle (BFV). These air assault infantrymen, accustomed to helicopter insertions and the occasional truck ride, soon learned to operate, maintain, and fight in a fully tracked armored vehicle typically found in mechanized infantry formations. It was a painful transition that many greeted with resistance and doubt, but it did not take long for everyone to realize the advantages of the protection and firepower that the BFV brought to the table. The strengths could

not be ignored, and all became disciples of this unfamiliar beast.

The platoon's story began a year and a half earlier on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Charlie Company had a tumultuous birth and history, considering its short existence. As a result of Army transformation, the former 3rd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, was reduced to one infantry reconnaissance company, consisting of two platoons and a mortar and sniper section. The remaining two companies became cavalry troops, composed entirely of cavalry scouts (military occupational specialty [MOS] 19D of the Armor branch). For various reasons, the infantrymen did not work well with the 19Ds, and this became a huge training hurdle. The officers were more understanding, but friction defined the first several months. There was also a shortage of vehicles and equipment since the modified table of organization and



Soldiers with the 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment conduct a cordon and search operation in Diyala, Iraq, in July 2006.

Tech. Sergeant Ken Bergmann, USAF

equipment (MTOE) had changed. The platoons were constantly sharing the few trucks the unit owned. On a positive note, because of the mass downsizing of MOS 11B, the best Soldiers from 3rd Battalion were kept in Charlie Company, so a large majority of the men were physically fit and extremely competent in their technical and tactical expertise. Unfortunately, the importance of that infantry and reconnaissance expertise was up for debate since the purpose and employment of the Charlie platoons were in question. They initially trained as a line battalion scout platoon, focusing on dismounted reconnaissance and surveillance, hide sites, and long range movement by foot. This was fitting since many came from the now disbanded 3rd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment scouts. However, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Kandarian, who was acutely aware of his unit's reduced manpower, considered them as rifle platoons minus machine guns. The debate was only accelerated when battalion live-fire exercises began, and all platoons in the battalion were expected to execute convoy operations. The infantrymen accepted the challenge and performed superbly, yet they still did not know their role. Finally, one month prior to deployment, the two platoons became three by detaching one team from each and placing the fire support officer (FSO) in the platoon leader position. All platoons in the squadron, as the battalion was now called following re-flagging, would be manned and equipped the same.

The infantrymen's expected resistance to more change was overshadowed by their satisfaction in finally having clear guidance. Of course, the nature of deployments made this comfort short-lived as change would once again define the experience of 1st Platoon, Charlie Company and all the members of 1-32nd Cavalry Squadron.

The first few months of the deployment found 1st Platoon at a small forward operating base near the Iranian border, temporarily attached to the squadron's A Troop. The men were happy to be away from the main body and found comfort in the leadership of A Troop's commander, Captain Sean Brown, a tanker and a solid officer, who took care of his infantrymen. The enlisted men also learned to respect and work with the 19Ds as their knowledge of vehicles exceeded the average rifleman's. Operations at the first FOB were routine and without great incident. The fall elections of 2005 were the greatest priority, and everything went smoothly as a result of solid coordination with the local Iraqi Security Forces. Things were going so smoothly, in fact, that the troop handed operations over to the Iraqis, with military transition team (MiTT) supervision, and headed to their new home an hour's drive down the road in Muqdadiyah. What would be waiting for its Soldiers surprised everyone, most of all the men of 1st Platoon. They would relieve a mechanized infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, Battle Boars, of the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, and keep a few of their toys — M2A2 Bradley fighting vehicles.

After the jump from foot to trucks, the next leap to tracked vehicles did not come to anyone as a complete surprise. The rumor



Courtesy photo

Despite being new to the Bradley fighting vehicle, the Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Charlie Company quickly learned how to navigate in restricted terrain.

had surfaced prior to deployment, and a few of the 19Ds who had Bradley experience had conducted driver's training at Fort Campbell. Despite this now obvious indicator, none of the men in 1st Platoon ever thought it would be they who rode in such a vehicle. Most of them couldn't tell the difference between the Bradley and an M1 Abrams tank, referring to anything with tracks as a "tank." However, the commander could not afford to exclude any of the small force currently posted in Muqdadiyah and demanded that each platoon of A Troop attend the train-up. So, in between left seat and right seat rides for the area of operations orientation, the 101st men went to Bradley school, courtesy of the Battle Boars. During four days of training, the Soldiers learned everything from loading and unloading the weapons systems to changing track. The designated drivers drove, the designated gunners fired, and the platoon leadership soaked up as much as they could. The 3rd ID Soldiers were excellent teachers and answered a fair share of what must have been ridiculous questions. The training culminated in a condensed gunnery and "road test" out in sector. Some in the platoon received extra training on their road test thanks to a well-concealed 155mm artillery shell that exploded off the right side of the platoon leader's vehicle. It was a scenario that would repeat itself two dozen more times in the platoon's eight-month relationship with the Bradley, yet this first incident was most remembered as the one that sold the infantrymen on the advantages of armor. The Bradley performed as advertised.

Once the Bandits of 1-32 took over their new battlespace, they lost no time in getting the Bradleys into the fight. Route clearance became an obsession of the commanders, and as a result, the men of A Troop (1-C included) spent many long hours out on the roads. The vehicles also proved an excellent conveyance for sniper teams and other dismounted assets that needed insertion in sector. As the men's experience grew and they became comfortable with the vehicles, the missions became more complex and coordinated. Many times, the Bradleys were used to support patrol bases in sector, dismounted surveillance platforms, raids, and cordon and searches. The vehicles proved to be excellent for insertion of small dismounted patrols. The survivability and the carrying capacity allowed a complete element to ride together and get on the ground quickly without compromise. These techniques, of course, did not come right away, and the lessons learned by the men of 1st Platoon could fill volumes. Fortunately, the platoon sergeant, Sergeant

First Class Ricky Elza, made sure the lessons were implemented, and his relentless pursuit of Bradley knowledge only further inspired the men to learn as much as they could.

Maintenance was a vertical learning curve. As stated before, every man in 1st Platoon had a light infantry background. Most had never even seen a Bradley. The few A Troop 19Ds with mechanized experience helped tremendously, and a mechanic was attached to the troop. However, this did not prevent the inquisitive infantrymen from breaking, and then learning how to fix, just about everything that bolted onto the vehicle. The most comedic incident involved the lug nuts for the road wheels. The Soldiers soon discovered that when the wheels came loose, they would shoot off the side of the vehicle at high velocity. Several wheels later, they finally learned that the lug nuts were to blame. They were onetime use only and could not be reused as on a truck: another problem solved by experience.

Since each piece of equipment in the Army has its own specific characteristics, it requires its own standard operating procedures, load plans, and crew drills. The platoon devised contingency plans for vehicle recovery, casualty evacuation, modified fuel loads, and down-weapon drills. Additionally, the gunners learned how to implement the Integrated Sight Unit, which was a very useful optic, and incorporate its thermal capabilities into

route clearance. The drivers learned how to maneuver in restricted terrain, but not before several painful yet useful lessons were taught, which included: ground that looks dry isn't necessarily so, bridges that support trucks don't always support Bradleys, and house walls are closer than they appear. Despite all the mistakes and challenges, the men of 1st Platoon, more than any, became masters of their new trade. Through a tireless commitment to learning mechanized operations, they brought a valuable weapon to the fight. In mission after mission, the skills of the light infantry were combined with the skills of the Bradley crewmen to accomplish tasks otherwise beyond the normal capabilities of either a purely mechanized force or a purely light force.

In late spring of 2006, the remainder of Charlie Company finally linked up with 1st Platoon in Muqdadiyah. Thanks to a close relationship among its young leaders, due in part to the fact that many of the Soldiers were previously in 1st Platoon, the 3rd Platoon was given some rudimentary instruction on Bradley operations and successfully incorporated the vehicles into their own patrols. Once again infantrymen proved their ability to master new skills and demonstrate their undying flexibility.

The integration of mechanized and light infantry operations came to a head during the last month of the deployment. Tireless

intelligence gathering through patrols, interrogations, surveillance and informants finally produced a mature target list for an IED cell in a nearby village. The number of objectives demanded that all of Charlie Company would participate. The plan called for a mounted Bradley insertion followed by foot infiltration. Coordination among all the units was imperative to avoid compromise. If anyone in the village suspected anything besides a normal route clearance mission, the targets would flee. Once all three platoons were set in their respective assault positions, the Bradleys withdrew to the FOB for quick reaction force duties. At H hour, all three dismounted elements moved across the large canal encircling the village and hit three objectives simultaneously. The local nationals were caught by surprise, and the targets were quickly detained after only a brief fight. Once the initial assault occurred, the Bradleys returned to provide security and prisoner transport. The integration was flawless and the mission a success. The firepower and speed provided by the Bradleys and the stealth and situational awareness of the dismounted Soldiers combined to form a lethal and versatile team.

Flexibility is a virtue of all Soldiers, especially infantrymen. Some units learn how to adapt early, and others drag their feet and resist the very mention of change. Initially, the men of 1st Platoon were reluctant to veer from their predestined path. Yet as their training and then their deployment progressed, versatility came to define the very nature of their identity. From dismounted infantry battle drills, reconnaissance work, and foot patrols; to truck maneuver and finally mechanized operations, their willingness to learn and adapt was ever-present. It was a privilege to witness.



Courtesy photo

Soldiers with the 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, gather for a unit photograph in front of one of platoon's Bradley fighting vehicles.

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