

---

# *Not Just Beans and Bullets Anymore ...*

# *THE NEW ROLE OF THE INFANTRY PLATOON SERGEANT*

SFC JAMES R. KELLEY

Upon entering the Army, I distinctly remember my first platoon sergeant, a big imposing man who stood in front of my platoon and led from the front in every aspect. Then came my first platoon live-fire exercise, and the man who had stood in front of my platoon was suddenly behind me — with the weapons squad assisting with the support by fire and identifying possible locations for the casualty collection point. I specifically remember asking my squad leader at the time why the platoon sergeant was not on the assault and being told that while in the rear the platoon sergeant runs the show, but in the field he only needs to worry about “beans and bullets.”

While the proper location of a senior member of a unit during an assault can be argued to great extent, that is not the purpose of this article. I think back to the first time I made contact with an insurgent. My story is not uncommon and has been told and retold a thousand times over. A unit on patrol is engaged, generally by an improvised explosive device or rocket-propelled grenade followed with small arms fire. This elicits an immediate response of suppressive fire by said unit and concludes when the enemy breaks contact and fades into the surrounding civilian populace. Following the reconsolidation and re-organization process, the enemy killed-in-action, if there are any, are processed and the unit continues the mission. It was after this first experience that I noticed what would later become the single greatest challenge I would face throughout multiple deployments — maneuver. Unlike all those live-fire exercises I had participated in, the enemy never stayed around long enough for me or anyone in my unit to maneuver, close with, and destroy him.

## **The 300-Meter Fight and the Battle to Fix the Enemy**

Over the course of my military service, I have attempted to affect this part of the fight, but it wasn't until I became a platoon sergeant that I was afforded the opportunity. Looking back at that first platoon live fire, I should have been able to see this all along. Squad leaders and the platoon leader are more than capable of running the battle 100 meters to the front. I have always believed that given well-trained subordinates, the platoon sergeant should not have too many duties in the fight. It is in this environment that I set out to achieve what I had always hoped to — to affect the 300-meter fight, the fight to fix the enemy. It was during my last deployment that I found what I believed is the new role of the platoon sergeant in the current fight: shaping the fight to give your subordinates the opportunity for success on the modern battlefield.

The old Army model of fixing the enemy exists on the premise that your foe desires to fight and is locked in a conflict of attrition, the fight to the end. Today's counterinsurgency is not locked in a war of attrition but more of a war of publicity, negating the need to fight to the end when the average insurgent can hit hard, fast, and walk away. From a publicity standpoint, one American casualty is just as effective as forcing the withdrawal of the enemy from a strategically advantageous piece of terrain; so why stay and become fixed when your objective has already been achieved? Additionally, the old model of assault-utilized organic fires, generally the weapons squad, to fix the enemy by fire until the maneuver squads could provide their own local support by fire (SBF), then assault. On the modern battlefield, the collateral damage considerations coupled with the conclusion that the majority of engagements are going to be initiated by the enemy renders the process of establishing and utilizing an SBF element in the traditional role obsolete. It is here that I realized as a platoon sergeant with no need for traditional SBF where I would be best situated on the battlefield, bringing any and all necessary assets to the fight in order to afford my squad leaders the opportunity to maneuver and destroy the enemy.

## **Building a Platoon Fires Team**

I set about accomplishing this goal by first separating my fires team (forward observer and RTO) into two separate forward observers. Most fires teams consist of two fully qualified forward observers so the only challenge was obtaining the necessary communications equipment to cover both FOs. Once this was accomplished, the platoon leader and I were now armed with FOs, allowing fires to be called from two areas on the battlefield instead of one. If splitting the fires team had not been an option, I would have made the argument that the fires team should maneuver with the platoon sergeant considering his general positioning on the battlefield should be somewhat removed from the 100-meter fight. My next act was to make a list of all the assets available to me on the battlefield. Crossing the full spectrum of integrated fires (indirect fire, rotary/fixed wing assets, ISR platforms) coupled with the organic fires of my platoon, I then familiarized myself with capabilities and limitations of each asset.

During the planning process, my platoon fires team and I utilized imagery of the objective to discuss what assets would be available, when they would be available, and in what areas each asset would be best utilized if contact was made. Going back to the collateral damage considerations, 155mm artillery would obviously not be

very useful in Sadr City or Kabul in an engagement with the “average” insurgent four- to eight-man direct action cell; however, the Guided Multiple-Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) could be better suited for destroying structures in heavily populated areas. Armed with this knowledge, the platoon leader, fires team, and I conducted our own fires rehearsal. Each rehearsal lasted approximately 15 minutes and consisted of one to two mock engagements, what would be utilized, and who would be responsible for the control of each asset. As a group we found it necessary to assign specific duties after one FO juggled mortar and artillery fire on a target while rotary wing assets came on station. Following that engagement I was principally left to control rotary wing assets (generally the easier of all the assets and the one with the least amount of formalized control techniques). While the platoon leader and later the squad leaders were present at these rehearsals, it was never expected that any of them would be required to control assets considering that their focus should be on the 100-meter fight.

**Application of a Platoon Fires Plan**

Utilization of all these assets can be determined on the ground at the time of contact. The following are simply the general guidelines used by my fires team throughout our last deployment to Iraq. The majority of the areas we operated in were small villages (75 to 100 structures) surrounded by farm fields and palm groves. Upon making contact organic mortar fire would be placed behind the enemy in an attempt to prevent egress to the rear and any ISR available (at a minimum a Raven system was always available) to track enemy movement. If on station, rotary-wing assets would be used to either destroy the enemy or “push” them into our assault force and if in range a call to alert higher artillery (155mm and GMLRS) and fixed-wing assets would go out. This early alert would significantly reduce the response times of those assets if they were needed later in the fight. In a perfect scenario rotary wing and the platoon’s organic fires would destroy the entire enemy force and the engagement would end. In the event this occurred, ISR and rotary wing assets would be utilized to conduct a further sweep of the areas outside the engagement

searching for enemy evacuation vehicles and medical evacuation or counterattack teams. If we were not able to push the enemy in the direction we desired, we found that his general tactic was to move to a building and attempt to blend in to the populace. When this occurred ISR and all other available assets would be used to observe the structure (now deemed hostile due to the occupants) and isolation would be emplaced while a “tactical call-out” of the building would occur. Given the opportunity to surrender, a full-scale escalation of force would be applied until all enemy had been detained or destroyed. It is during this phase of the engagement that the initial call for fixed-wing assets and GMLRS can greatly benefit the unit because those assets may be on target by the time you decide in what capacity they are going to be used rather than requesting them after the decision has been made. Once again, these are only examples of how each asset could be used; actual use will have to be determined by each ground force commander.

**Conclusion**

Over 15 months of dismounted combat operations, I observed a significant increase in my unit’s success rate during enemy engagements. What began with a squad being engaged by the enemy and ending with zero to one enemy destroyed quickly

changed to entire enemy direct action cells being destroyed and on occasion the discovery of additional enemy personnel, enemy vehicles, structures, and weapon caches when ISR was utilized to locate pre-positioned support teams across the battlefield. One note is that the duty of fighting the 300-meter fight does not necessarily mean a platoon sergeant has to be present on every patrol. Four squads leaving a patrol base at different intervals does not allow for the platoon sergeant or platoon leader to be on every patrol, nor is their presence necessary. Proper battle tracking and use of available imagery allowed me to bring assets to the squad in contact before I was actually “boots on the ground” in the fight. When I initially became a platoon sergeant, I felt almost as if I was being taken out of the fight. It wasn’t until I decided to shape the battlefield the way I wanted it that I was able to inject myself “into the fight” without overwhelming the leadership of my subordinates.

---

**SFC James R. Kelley** entered the Army in October 1998. After completing Infantry One Station Unit Training at Fort Benning, Ga., he was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky. He has also served with the 2nd Infantry Division in the Republic of Korea and the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., where he is currently assigned as a rifle platoon sergeant.

---



SSG Brent Williams

*A platoon sergeant and team leader from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division discuss potential security risks during polling site security assessments in Baghdad January 28, 2009.*