



SMARTER PATROLLING:

DISMOUNTED MOVEMENT IN EASTERN AFGHANISTAN

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Basic movement techniques and platoon-level patrolling may be seen by some as antiquated, but in Afghanistan, these “basics” are valuable building blocks. Conducting urban warfare and moving in armored vehicles with cutting edge technology is often how the Army is depicted. Although this might be the conflict some imagine, it is not the fight in rural Afghanistan. Patrolling, as instructed in Ranger School and FM 3-21.8, *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, sounds archaic and simple, but the opposite is true. Terrain, cultural limitations, enemy situation, host nation forces, and a slew of other factors make the contemporary battlefield confusing, but sometimes returning to the basics makes everything simpler.

In the spring of 2007, I served as a platoon leader in Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), and deployed to Ghazni Province in eastern Afghanistan. The

existing obstacles and severely restrictive terrain and enemy situation in this area limited our ability to move mounted and forced my platoon to adapt a traditional way of patrolling.

Andar District, located immediately to the south of Ghazni City, was the most difficult area in A Company’s Rhode Island-sized battlespace. When 26 Korean hostages were kidnapped near there that summer, the district gained international attention. As the security situation in the district worsened, ambushes of local trucks carrying coalition resupply increased. Initially, my platoon occupied a fire base at the district’s government center, and later that year, the company moved to an abandoned Russian base about 10 kilometers away.

The terrain in this area is flat, mostly open, and is only slightly restrictive to dismounted movement. Vehicular movement is severely restricted though by hundreds of irrigation ditches dug by the

Russians in an attempt to revitalize the area's farming. Only two roads in 2nd Platoon's area, which measured over 100 square kilometers, were trafficable by up-armored HMMWVs (UAHs). In the spring of 2007, only one main supply route (MSR) was paved. Ditches belonging to karez systems, which are local irrigation systems, ran several kilometers long and were the most limiting obstacle in the battlespace. They had steep walls and ranged from 10-to-30-foot deep with five-foot berms on each side. Although the ditches prohibited UAH movement, the enemy could move mostly unrestricted on small motorbikes.

There were patches of increased vegetation, usually consisting of aspen trees and fruit orchards, that were just large enough to provide a platoon minus cover and concealment. The fields, which covered a majority of the district, were full of smaller irrigation ditches. The irrigation systems ran between the plots of land and kept the land watered. When plowed, these areas filled with soft dirt, which turned into a slippery mud when irrigated. During growing seasons, they were completely impassable by vehicle.

There were roughly 100 small villages in the area, usually consisting of 20 compounds or roughly 200 people. The buildings were walled mud huts usually one story and never more than three stories high. The walls ranged from 10-foot tall in smaller compounds to 40-foot tall in aging forts. Inside the compound, there were usually two to four buildings used as living quarters. Most families kept livestock inside the home as well as a small garden. Villages usually centered on a mosque and a well, with homes and walled gardens on the outskirts of the town. Each village usually had one main road entering into the village with small alleys and goat paths leading out. Most villages were also centered along an irrigation ditch for farming purposes. These ditches are used by the Taliban as covered and concealed avenues of approach. The walled gardens canalized movement through the villages and provided excellent positions for enemy caches.

The mountains bordering the Andar District were up to 10,000 feet in height with little to no vegetation. The roads into the mountains provided excellent ambush positions, allowing the enemy to overwatch the road. The mountain roads were in poor condition and extremely restrictive to

maneuver. Enemy spotters used the mountains to spot coalition movement. According to the local leaders, these were the same positions used by the Mujahideen against the Russian division that had been in this area.

The enemy knew how to use the terrain to their advantage. They almost always initiated contact at the maximum range of their weapon systems, trading accuracy for standoff. The enemy would place an irrigation ditch between coalition forces and their firing points, using that natural obstacle to deny the coalition forces the ability to maneuver on them. We observed the Taliban retrograding to supplementary positions with cover and concealment. The enemy also used the ditches from the karez system or the walled gardens inside a village as cover during contact and concealment during their exfil.

A Company established several Afghan National Police (ANP) outposts on paved roads, pushing the ANP out into the communities. These outposts enabled the platoon and company to send dismounted patrols across the battlespace. However, the majority of the population was not located along these high speed avenues. Over the last three years, the coalition had focused little aid to this district and no aid outside of the paved road and the district center. U.S. forces had failed to focus a significant effort

off this paved surface.

Four months into the 15-month rotation, 2/A/2-508 had the ability to move mounted, but because of maintenance and battle damage, we began to move dismounted into the battlespace, a decision that would give us an unforeseen advantage.

Dismounted movement had become slightly foreign to my unit, which had returned from Iraq and adopted different tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). Moving back into a wedge was difficult for some to adjust to, especially when very open terrain forced larger intervals between men. The large open areas did not give adequate cover for any other type of formation, and rehearsals just outside the fire base were key.

Even with the open terrain, some existing obstacles offered the enemy advantages. The dried river beds in the area had banks the enemy could fire from. These areas were particularly dangerous because of the loose sand which slowed down any element that tried to cross it. Any open area that created clear fields of fire in front of ditches were avoided all together if possible.

While training in garrison, we conducted road marches twice a week. The difference was obvious once we started moving in Afghanistan. Moving tactically over difficult terrain, sometimes at high elevations, was much more demanding than a tactical road



Author's photos

Elements of 2nd Platoon, A Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and an Afghan National Army soldier cross an irrigation ditch described above.

march on trails in North Carolina.

What we discovered as the best movement formation by far was bounding overwatch. When the platoon left the firebase, one squad and gun usually remained with the weapons squad leader. Two squads, two gun teams, and the headquarters element usually went on patrol. The guns were attached to squads and would move with them while bounding. This was not just used in times of likely enemy



Dismounted movement was key not only because of the terrain but also to maintain the element of surprise.

contact, but also during summer months where it offered the covering element a break. This was usually adopted when the terrain opened up, and fields of fire 800 meters or more were available.

In training, roads were always treated as linear danger areas, but the idea of terrain as a true linear danger area was slightly foreign. While deployed, the unit treated the irrigation ditches as avenues of approach, especially in areas where we knew that motorbike traffic was uninhibited along the bottom of the ditch.

We modified the use of objective rally points (ORPs) to suit the terrain. Instead of templating our ORPs a few hundred meters from the objective in a traditional environment, we utilized the last covered and concealed position on our route. Due to line of sight, the ORPs could be up to one kilometer from the objective. From this location, we were able to use the terrain to the best of our advantage and conduct the leader recons before we entered the village. Going any closer in this open terrain would have given away our position, which often forced us to use the ORP as the release point. When we carried rucks, we dropped them at the local support by fire.

The cultural constraints often limited us when placing our support-by-fire (SBF) locations. One squad would move in with the ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) to search the house. After we searched the house, we would ask the owner for permission to use their house. (This worked out well in two ways with the populace. First of all, the search was random and different houses are selected when we return to the village. Secondly, Pashtu culture welcomed travelers who passed through requesting rest according to their Pashtun Code.) Here, we placed and organized the rucks. The M240s moved on top of the roof and dismounted patrols departed from the compound. One TTP that we adopted later on was using ANA forces to sit on top of the roof. This quelled several complaints about Americans being visible from outside the compound.

Establishing the local support by fire in a compound also gave a secure place to establish a casualty collection point (CCP) or enemy prisoner of war (EPW) collection point if needed. By engaging the homeowner in comfortable surroundings, and keeping them away from crowds, the villagers were more apt to share information with coalition forces. The homeowner usually gave information that he would not have told coalition forces on patrol.

During operations lasting longer than a night or two, the unit learned to adapt patrol bases to the terrain. Observation posts

worked well at night but were extremely hard to hide during the day. Because of the virtually unbroken line of sight during the day and the amount of herders that move around in the early morning, daytime covert positions were almost impossible unless we were located in higher elevations. The patrol bases my platoon established in Afghanistan were often located around gardens and pump houses in orchards. The patrol base was almost always seen at first light, and the entire area was usually aware of their position by the time daily patrols began.

When the platoon went through patrol base activities, one of the most important steps was terrain analysis. The most challenging terrain feature in Andar, the irrigation ditches, provided unobservable avenues of approach. These areas were usually covered with claymores to resolve the issue.

Since the line of sight compromised our security during the daylight, the platoon would mitigate the threat of being seen by moving to a new location after EENT (end evening nautical twilight). As soon as the platoon was sure that they could be observed, they would move to the next patrol base location.

This gave us several advantages. During the spring and fall the ground would usually freeze at night making it much easier to move across than the slush or mud. Probably the best advantage that moving at this time provided was the ability to overwatch previous patrol bases from several kilometers away. On one occasion, the Taliban engaged a previous patrol base giving the platoon a good idea of enemy composition disposition and strength. Moving at night to new positions kept the enemy guessing about our location, greatly increasing security.

When the unit arrived in country, we attempted to use vehicles to cordon off areas. Although the vehicles gave the gunners a better line of sight, the ditches that ran through most villages and the terrain never allowed for complete isolation. Some villages were just not conducive to mounted movement. The greatest disadvantage to using vehicles when they were available was losing the element of surprise. Even at night, vehicular movement was restricted to the few trafficable roads, helping the enemy detect movement.

Dismounted movement was the only way to keep surprise. Moving to a release point and going to blocking positions gave the element of surprise back to U.S. forces and achieved full isolation. Any enemy lookouts or scouts were looking for vehicles, expecting forces to stick to mounted movement.

Breaching, if necessary, was done with shotgun or bolt cutters due to weight. When moving into an area after setting up a vehicle patrol base (VPB), a door ram could be used, but it was impractical for long movements.

Although dismounted movement was the method of choice, there were several instances where, because of distance of terrain between the fire base and objective, part of the movement is completed by vehicle. Many times a vehicle patrol base was established within five kilometers of the objective, and the dismounted element moved in from that position. The problem with this technique is that that half of the manpower in the platoon is left at the VPB and not where it was required on the objective.

Several other successful techniques can be applied. In one instance, another platoon provided the vehicle crews and 2nd Platoon rode in passenger seats. When the mounted element reached the de-trucking point, one of the lead trucks created a diversion.

During a mission to target an improvised

explosive device (IED) cell, another platoon acted as the drivers, truck commander (TC), and gunners. The de-trucking point occurred at a low water crossing point. The mounted element stopped 100 meters before the point. As the trucks went down into the low water crossing, concealing the truck completely, the dismounts moved 100 meters up the ditch. The truck came out of the low water crossing with doors closed and preceded on what seemed like a routine patrol. Although multiple rehearsals were conducted with the entire element inside the fire base, the rehearsal paid off enormously in execution.

Service and support is a challenging issue when moving longer distances dismounted. There is a tough balance between bringing what is needed and overloading Soldiers to the point of ineffectiveness. While we understood the concept of how a light infantry unit should plan for service and support, there were valuable lessons developed through experiences and after action reviews (AARs).

Tailoring the load for the terrain, weather, and temperature is another challenge. For example, M240B tripods were carried only for planned SBFs or for patrol bases. This being said, tripods in contact were very helpful and increase the weapon's maximum effective range. To ease the burden on the weapons squad, each of the three gun teams were assigned to a squad and their basic load of ammo was distributed between that squad, rather than the individual gun team.

Each rifleman carried his basic load, to include the M203 grenadiers. When moving for several days, we packed a two-day supply of food and water. This was tailored down to one full CamelBak plus eight more bottles of water. Resupply is coordinated for 24 hours after movement begins and was delivered via low cost low altitude parachute or contract helicopter if ground resupply was not available.

Evacuation equipment is always important, and there are several ways to carry these supplies dismounted. We always carried a falcon litter (collapsible rigid litter). The falcon litter is well worth the extra weight, as it allowed us to transport casualties with ease, as opposed to the unbalanced, poleless litter which takes much longer to transport casualties with. In the summer time, we also carried one IV and a starter kit per buddy team.

During the winter, patrols were much shorter in distance. As the winter comes, the packing lists became heavier and heavier. The Army provided the Level VII system to the Soldiers. This gear gave leaders the flexibility to cut weight without sacrificing warmth and react to different levels of cold.

A key problem is battery unit basic load (UBL). In the summer, the weight becomes an issue, and in the winter, battery life causes problems. As an SOP, each Soldier in the platoon carried an additional load of batteries, usually extra AAs.

Tailoring communications equipment is also another big challenge, as communications gear required the most space and weighed the most. Communications was a constant problem in Afghanistan because of the terrain. In the mountains, any line-of-sight system had difficulties. The most reliable and battery smart piece of equipment was the PRC-148 Multiband Inter/Intra Team Radio (MBITR). The MBITR performed the same as an ASIP and 117 in most



A Soldier with A Company, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, watches village activity from an overwatch position. The Soldier is carrying a falcon litter.

situations, and being only a quarter of the size was much better for dismounted patrolling. On long movements, the RTO connected a tactical satellite (TACSAT) antenna to his ruck sack, and simply faced the antenna in the appropriate direction to make a call. This was especially effective in contact. A majority of our contacts were made outside of FM range and the MBITR was the only mode of communication.

The MBITRs had different battery configurations, which made it especially useful. Using a special battery adapter, 5590s were attached to the MBITR. In patrol bases, the additional 5590s were used to run the MBITR through the night. During the day, another adapter, which used 12x 3v lithium batteries, was used. The lighter 3v batteries also cut down on the amount of weight that had to be carried.

At first the ANSF (Afghan Security Forces) did not respond well to our TTPs, but the ANSF eventually became a valuable asset. The ANSF would develop bonds with the local populace when we were on patrol by visiting mosques, sharing meals, and using local wells.

During missions, each ANA soldier had his own ruck sack and packed some winter clothing. While entering villages, the ANA stayed with the acting weapons squad leader, using their RPKs and RPGs at the local support by fire. However, the ANP were kept on a short leash with the clearing element. Although they were good at movement, ANSF had to be integrated into rifle fire teams during contact. Towards the end of the deployment, their staff showed great improvements in their ability to plan for totally independent resupply missions. During the winter, the Kandak (Afghan battalion) even issued cold weather gear to its troops.

As time progressed, the ANSF even led formations back on approved paths. This put the ANSF up front, making them visible in high traffic areas, such as bazaars. When conducting cordon and searches, the ANSF were an integral part of the search and placed an Afghan face on operations.

Moving dismounted had a large effect on the population. People were shocked to see Americans walk to remote villages that had not been visited before. Even when the coalition forces were just moving through a village, it had a much greater effect on the people than a UAH rolling past them on a road. Dismounted movement had an immense psychological effect, especially at dawn, when locals would find Soldiers moving through their fields. When the coalition forces walked into villages, the people treated them with hospitality, due to the Pashtun code. On several occasions, locals were actually startled when they stumbled upon an ORP established early in the morning. Several local nationals told us that the fact that we walked separated us from the Russians. Our dismounted movement helped us move covertly and retain the element of surprise.



In colder temperatures, Soldiers carried/utilized special equipment such as ice cleats, additional uniform items, and medical items for cold weather injuries.

Coalition forces identified several disadvantages to moving dismounted as well. The enemy was very quick to adapt. We received reports of IEDs designed to target dismounts but fortunately never encountered them. The biggest shift was how the enemy moved away from IEDs and was forced to resort to direct fire engagements.

The enemy also realized that we would not be able to close the distance as quickly. Although we would try to move as fast as possible, it took time to maneuver. U.S. weapons systems helped in this somewhat. The M240B, especially when on tripod, could effectively suppress the enemy far beyond their effective range, allowing U.S. forces to maneuver. The M203 proved to be an excellent weapon while dismounted. The 40mm grenades were used to cut off the enemy exfil routes and reach behind

their covered positions. Another excellent weapon system was the M14, carried by the squad designated marksmen. The M14 with Leopold sights enhanced our ability to not only fire at targets but to observe areas as well.

Eventually the enemy became familiar with our battle drills and TTPs. In one far ambush, the Taliban emplaced a security engagement in order to prevent a bold flanking flank. This required more thoughtful execution when in contact. They also developed the TTP to try and draw U.S. forces out, separating the SBF and maneuver element away from each other with sporadic fire in different directions. This was also attempted on formations in villages. This again requires careful consideration from the leader on the ground and good command and control of all subordinate units, especially ANSF.

Many of the subjects discussed are derived from basic infantry tasks, FM 3-21.8, and Ranger School TTPs. These techniques took time to develop in country and many of them were painful to learn. Infantry tasks have been referred to as “easy to learn, but impossible to master.” This is very true in that the basics are taught, but they must be adapted in every situation. Ultimately, unless U.S. forces continue to hone, develop, train, and execute these basics, they will be re-taught by our enemies.

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