

KILL OPFOR: The 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment at the NTC

by Captain Robert B. Brown

Even before tank turn-in is complete, the assessments are well underway. First, did we win? Second, though probably more important, what did we learn? As anyone with NTC experience knows, the won-loss record is always subject to debate, and no observer/controller has ever said: "You won big; don't change a thing." But the assessments of 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's recent deployment to the fictional land of Tierra del Diablo are more important to the Armor Force than mere bragging rights. A brigade combat team rotation speaks to the training level of the specific brigade, but does not evaluate the entire brigade/division model. Every ACR rotation serves to validate the existence of a heavy ACR: as an expensive, unique organization, we are expected to produce results. If the performance is not commensurate with the cost, the leaner Army can't afford to maintain an organization, regardless of its tradition and heritage.

As O/Cs everywhere will tell you, the battle record is less important than the lessons learned. The NTC is traditionally a place where we spend a lot of time focused on how to improve the things we did wrong. In this article, we want to take the opportunity to identify the things we did right. What can the Armor community, and the entire Army, sustain and improve upon, based on the successes of the regiment?

Some of the lessons are neither profound nor new, and are applicable to every unit that deploys to Ft. Irwin, but some successes are directly tied to the organization of the ACR. Of the former, the critical lesson is that there is no substitute for lethal platoons, troops, and companies. NTC battles are won and lost at the company/troop level by effective gunnery, small unit drills, and the tenacity of individual troopers who refuse to quit. The regiment must sustain the training plan that produced its lethal units.

That means giving junior leaders time in the field with their units, and it means focusing their training efforts on a limited number of fundamental, critical bat-

tle tasks that are trained again, and again, and again, until they can be executed routinely. We call these critical battle tasks the "Big 5" at each level. At the troop level, they currently include scout-tank integration, building an engagement area, hasty breach, reporting, and casualty evacuation. We evaluate both our mission essential task list (METL) and our "Big 5" annually at a two-day warfighting seminar attended by all troop commanders, first sergeants, and above. Once we agree on our training focus, we go to work. We live by the motto "Talkin' ain't fightin'."

In the regiment, troop commanders are allocated 25 OPTEMPO miles per quarter for troop-level training. Troop commanders plan this training, establish its basis against METL and "Big 5," brief it to the regimental commander at the QTB, and execute it. Most often, these troop FTXs are embedded in the unit's gunnery exercises. It is in these troop FTXs that junior leaders build the confidence necessary for independent, aggressive operations on the battlefield.

Being lethal in a training environment also means training with the multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES). The regiment uses MILES during crew drills, platoon, and troop EXEVALs, and maintains a MILES gunnery program. Some may question the use of valuable training time developing "non-wartime" skills, but boresight discipline, whether trained with MILES or a muzzle boresight device (MBD), is critical to wartime success. The skills required to boresight with a MBD are generally not at issue, as they are proven at gunnery two to three times a year. The hard part is developing the drill to get it done in a tactical environment. Whether on Table VIII or at NTC, "killer crews" are equally deadly with sabot or MILES because their junior leaders take the time to understand the capabilities of their system, and are disciplined in maintenance and boresighting.

During continuous operations throughout the course of the rotation, individual

tank companies and troops fought seven fights independent of the regiment's major training day battles. These included counterreconnaissance against MRC-sized recon detachments, screens to defeat MRB-sized forward detachments, and economy of force operations to defeat up to MRB-sized attacks. A testament to the lethality of the regiment's small units, the troops and companies defeated the OPFOR in all seven engagements. Sustaining platoon and troop proficiency in fire and maneuver means training under realistic conditions. Simulations cannot replace real terrain, where platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and commanders are forced to deal with intervisibility lines, obscurity, and a live enemy that gets a vote on the plan. Prior to NTC, the regiment conducted platoon EXEVALs in the Ft. Carson training area, and troop and squadron EXEVALs at the Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site (PCMS). The exercise at PCMS was particularly important, as every platoon and troop enjoyed a minimum of eight mission iterations: three zone recon, three movement to contact, and two defend, with CSS tasks embedded in every mission. Multiple iterations provided the time to analyze mistakes and improve performance. Moreover, by increasing the capabilities of the OPFOR (force ratios) and changing conditions on the battlefield (limited visibility, NBC) from iteration to iteration, we challenged each troop in the regiment.

At PCMS, the regiment was able to train METL tasks on difficult terrain at near-doctrinal distances, ensuring we met the regimental commander's intent that we do nothing for the first time at the National Training Center. This included a full fledged deployment to an off-site training area, using rail, linehaul, JAAT, and road march. Deployment was trained using the Reception, Staging, Onward movement, and Integration (RSOI) model, complicated by civilians on the battlefield, a terrorist threat, and force protection requirements. OPFOR and O/Cs were resourced by the non-rotational squadron and other units

from the mountain post, including 1-12 Infantry and 43d ASG. A luxury in an era of limited land and OPTEMPO, this training opportunity represents the difference between winning and losing, whether at the NTC or on an actual battlefield.

All units must recognize that soldier attitude is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some units enter the NTC overawed by the reputation of the OPFOR, and it shows in their performance. They attack tentatively, then stop and die when engaged. A frequent comment from O/Cs and the OPFOR was the surprising tenacity of 3d ACR troopers: they absolutely refused to die. Instead of relinquishing the initiative to the enemy, the regiment's crews, platoons, and troops carried the fight to the enemy, disrupting his decision cycle. Individual tanks and Bradleys would not accept defeat, and were confident in their ability to outshoot, outmaneuver, and outfight the OPFOR. There is a reluctance in many BLUFOR units to talk about winning, and yet the OPFOR's motto remains "Kill BLUFOR." We adopted the philosophy that "if somebody's keeping score, we want to win." During each training event, we also worked to develop a distinct dislike for being "killed." Although it is MILES, and we can re-key, we never want our troopers to be complacent about losing a confrontation with an enemy on the battlefield.

An ACR, even with two ground squadrons, possesses inherent organizational advantages over a standard BCT package. Obviously, the 166 combat systems (82 M1A1s, 84 M3s) deployed with two ground squadrons outnumber the 116 assigned to a two-battalion BCT. But doctrinal distances and cavalry missions reduce numerical advantages. Rather than massing fires of multiple battalions, as a BCT does, an ACR is designed to fight multiple squadron engagements over a broad front. It does not synchronize fires on squadron objectives or engagement areas, but allocates resources to weight the main effort, and uses artillery and attack aviation "deep" to attrit enemy formations. The regiment, with two ground squadrons and one aviation squadron, fought the entire battlespace of the National Training Center. In most battles, this battlespace included the Valley of Death, the central, and northern corridors. In the final battle, the regiment fought from the Drinkwater Valley to the "turtle fence." The responsibility for four major avenues of approach forced the regiment to disperse reconnaissance and

security assets, then to maneuver quickly to mass killing fires, demonstrating the flexibility of the ACRs "hunter-killer" organization and organic air-ground integration.

At every level, the regiment is designed to find, fix, and destroy the enemy using hunter-killer teams. Regimental assets "hunt" the enemy, and squadrons "kill" it. At the regimental level, the MI company possesses an Analysis and Control Element (ACE) with real-time downlinks from strategic assets, as well as a Collection and Jamming Platoon and EH-60 (QUICKFIX) aircraft to provide initial intelligence. Regimental Colts and ADA Sensor Scouts confirm ELINT hits and trigger initial fires of attack aviation, direct support, and reinforcing artillery. For the squadrons, first contact is made by the OPCON Air Cavalry Troop Scout Weapons Team (SWT), with the OH-58C as the hunter, and the AH-1 as the killer. The SWT, in turn, is the hunter for the cavalry troop. The cavalry troop uses habitual scout platoon-tank platoon hunter-killer teams to develop the situation for the squadron, which maneuvers the tank company to kill elements identified and fixed by cavalry troops.

Air-ground integration provides the flexibility to fight across extended frontages. As the situation dictates, the regiment uses habitually task-organized air cavalry troops to provide recon pull, or uses the entire aviation squadron forward for security and early warning. Attack aviation can quickly react to penetrations or flank threats, attriting enemy formations and providing time to reposition ground assets. During the rotation, the aviation squadron was often augmented with a ground cavalry troop, and assigned a maneuver corridor as an economy of force. During one such mission, this air-ground team delayed an entire MRR for 90 minutes, enabling the regiment to reposition forces and defeat the MRR attack well forward of its objectives with no penetration.

While the Army has long accepted such advantages of task organization and "fighting as a combined arms team," it can be argued that the BCT organization sacrifices readiness for dollar efficiency. Centralizing armor, infantry, aviation, and artillery saves money by reducing redundant support systems, and appeals to branch parochialism by allowing officers to be rated by others in their own branch. The cost in readiness is the time required to develop teamwork, esprit, and confidence once task-organized.

While at home station, individual battalions will train task-organized during major events, but will always operate under distinct training schedules, conflicting SOPs, and different agendas that reflect the personalities of their commanders.

The regiment does not suffer these problems. With the exception of DS artillery and engineer battalions, the tankers, scouts, artillerymen, and CSS belong to the squadron and troop commander with whom they deploy. Every daily fight, from command maintenance to squadron EXEVALs, is fought with organic combined arms. Personalities, SOPs, and battle drills are understood long before deployment begins, eliminating the growing pains experienced by BCTs when they initially deploy. By entering the NTC at a higher training level, the regiment can avoid that first confused, embarrassing defeat that can sometimes snowball into a rotation which fails to meet training objectives.

None of these comments suggest that the 3d ACR enjoyed a flawless rotation. The regimental and squadron staffs struggled with synchronization and massing effects of CAS, indirect, and direct fires, achieving success after several battles of trial and error. Tellingly, we climbed a learning curve when integrating our DS artillery, engineers, signal assets, and other off-post units. We identified holes in our SOPs and training. We steadily improved initial shortcomings in obstacle planning, preparation, and reporting. We learned that FM communications across doctrinal distances do not just happen. But there is a common feeling in the 3d ACR that, for all the mistakes and room for improvement, we know "what right looks like" in an armored force, and it looks a lot like an armored cavalry regiment.

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