

"A Year of Reforging"

In an era of shrinking budgets and high expectations, when it is increasingly difficult for battalions to accomplish a single primary mission, executing two dissimilar missions simultaneously is downright daunting. This account details how 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment met this challenge in 1997. As an M1A1 tank battalion, 1-37 AR trains to execute high intensity operations and focuses on the fundamentals of offensive operations — movement to contact, breaching operations, and the deliberate and hasty attacks. As part of NATO's rapid reaction corps, however, the battalion's mission also includes a significant commitment to peacekeeping operations. In FY97, we found that innovative training, proactive leadership, and above all, flexibility play key roles in maintaining proficiency in both high intensity conflict and peacekeeping operations.

In August 1997, 1-37 AR was tasked to deploy troops to enforce the Dayton Peace Accord. Seven tank platoons were attached to 1st Battalion, 36th Infantry and spent six months deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of Operation Joint Guard. The year unfolded in three phases. For the deployed units, it was pre-deployment/train-up, stabilization force mission, and redeployment/reintegration. For those remaining at home station, the year began with supporting the train-up, followed by a maneuver and gunnery rotation, and then reintegration of their former detachments.

Peacekeeping operations inherently favor the dismounted soldier and hence posed a challenge to soldiers conditioned to living, working, and fighting on a tank. Fortunately, the battalion was able to draw upon the experience of a number of soldiers who had served a prior tour during Operation Joint Endeavor and were well-accustomed to the unique challenges of peacekeeping missions. Following a sustainment gunnery in July, the battalion assisted 1st Brigade in executing a week-long cycle of Individual Readiness Training (IRT) lanes. By the time the week was up, over 540 soldiers had a basic familiarity with peacekeeping operations, ranging from media interaction to refugee processing to mine and UXO identification. In July, the soldiers followed up their IRT training with a three-week training rotation at the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) at Hohenfels, Germany. The rotation, dubbed Mountain Eagle V, was not what most soldiers were

accustomed to, since it focused on low-intensity missions. Platoons set up checkpoints, patrolled, seized weapon sites — all training events that would soon become real-world operations in Bosnia. Preparation efforts proved fruitful, as the deployed units quickly found themselves utilizing their newfound skills: manning checkpoints, conducting mounted and dismounted patrols, and inspecting facilities. One particularly critical mission assigned to the unit was to ensure the security of the first-ever democratic Serbian National Election. Standing their ground in the face of hostile Serbian dissenters, the unit's soldiers quickly learned first-hand that the price of freedom is indeed eternal vigilance.

Like many other units deployed in the SFOR mission, however, they soon realized the difficulty of maintaining proficiency in their primary MOS. Training opportunities were necessarily limited by mission requirements and the lack of maneuver area. Leaders, however, maximized every training opportunity with creative uses of time and resources. Since actual mounted maneuver training was highly proscribed, proactive platoon leaders and platoon sergeants took advantage of the one allotted maintenance run each week to work in action and battle drills. "More often than not," remarked 1LT Robert Halvorson, an XO with A Co., 1-37 AR, "formalized hip pocket training was the key. Proactive leaders made the training happen."

Back at home station, the rest of the unit's soldiers felt the absence of the detached units, as they were challenged to maintain a high level of training while continuing to carry the full burden of garrison duties and taskings. The effects of an undermanned battalion also became evident on the battlefield. During 1-37 AR's November 1997 CMTC rotation, the unit fought with only three companies; task-organized as two tank and one mechanized infantry. Over the course of the rotation, our chief challenge was to execute not as individual tank killers, but as a cohesive task force. Mission execution revealed that slice elements were not fully integrated, thus limiting the potential of a combined arms team. However, the rotation highlighted strengths as well: leaders were well-versed in the orders process, company level cross-talk steadily improved, and tactical movement was excellent.

Two months of intense Level I and II gunnery preparation paved the way to 1-37's return to Grafenwoehr in February '98. Across the board, it was evident that soldiers were well prepared at an individual, crew, and platoon level. Every tank in the battalion qualified on the new M1A2 tables, with one crew shooting Top Tank in USAREUR. The mortars paid a fitting tribute to their aging 4.2-in. mortars by excelling at Grafenwoehr during a five-day MORTEP. Citing a lack of realistic training due to budgetary constraints, MSG Steve Sosebee said, "Many of the younger soldiers had never touched a real live round." Despite this, the mortars walked off with top honors in the brigade competition. The scout platoon fared just as well, earning the right to be called the best scout platoon in the brigade.

While the battalion was busily engaging targets in Grafenwoehr, the long awaited redeployment of the forces in Bosnia finally occurred. Recovery of the vehicles and long-overdue services proved to be relatively painless. While the vehicles had remained in remarkably good shape, the warfighting skills of the soldiers required attention. Continuous, day-to-day peacekeeping operations, however, had taken its toll on the tankers' ability to fight in a high-intensity conflict. The battalion's first objective in rebuilding a cohesive fighting task force was to refresh basic tanking skills. Crews trained on individual and crew skills during Soldier's Time training. The next step was to again familiarize soldiers with the fundamentals of fire and maneuver. Companies began at the crew and section level, utilizing the limited local training area to conduct FTXs. Once platoons had the chance to exercise their tanks, all companies spent one week in Schweinfurt utilizing the Platoon Gunnery Trainer (PGT) and the Close Combat Tactical Trainer (CCTT) in Grafenwoehr. PGT honed cross-talking, platoon fire distribution, but most importantly, the ability to achieve first-round kills. All platoons qualified on multiple scenarios under degraded conditions such as night fire and simulated chemical warfare. The week culminated with several days spent in the CCTT, executing offensive missions at the platoon level.

1-37 AR concluded FY97 by renewing friendly ties with its German partnership unit, the 143th Panzer Battalion. Soldiers and their families attended a German-

American friendship festival hosted by their German counterparts. Reaching out to foreign militaries extended past the host country's borders as well. Reflecting the ever-changing political landscape, a contingent of 1-37 AR soldiers briefed M1A1 capabilities and swapped war stories with former-Warsaw Pact Hungarian soldiers as part of a Partnership for Peace exercise. Finally, 1-37 AR officers conducted a staff ride to retrace the remarkable journey of Captain Abe Baum's task force during his famous, doomed raid on the Hammelberg POW camp over fifty years earlier.

With commands averaging a duration of 12-14 months for commanders and 10-12 months for platoon leaders, the development of tactical SOPs to standardize garrison and field operations has been critical. Lack of training resources was another significant obstacle to regaining warfighting skills. Situated in the rustic town of Friedberg, the local training area has been continually shrinking due to German reclamation and construction efforts. What little is left becomes hotly contested by the numerous combat arms companies stationed here, especially before maneuver rotations. 1-37's response has been to maximize the use of trainers, simulators, and especially the semiannual CMTC rotations. Finally, 1-37 AR is beginning to keep pace with the technological advances long enjoyed by its stateside counterparts. In May, the aging fleet of M106A2 mortar tracks was replaced with new M106A3 120mm mortars. Although not yet tested since they were fielded, the unit has high expectations for the expected vast increase in lethality, range, and responsiveness in organic indirect fire. In addition, a new Vehicle Intercom System (VIS) was installed in every M1A1 in the battalion. The new system, which replaces the old 1780 intercom, is more reliable, programmable and, as soldiers are quick to point out, feature excellent sound quality, compliments of the Bose speakers.

The Bandit Battalion continues to draw from its extensive experiences in peace-keeping operations, as well as a proven record for aggressive training in high intensity conflict missions, to become a cutting-edge, highly mobile and lethal force ready to deploy, close with, and destroy the enemy in any theater.

Editor's Note: *This article was prepared by 1LT Louie B. Cheng, S3 Liaison Officer, HHC, 1-37 AR, Friedberg, Germany.*