

Improving the Training of Infantry Units Before Deployment

Subject Area Training

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The high operational tempo of Marine infantry battalions over the last four years has severely shortened the amount of time each infantry battalion has to train its Marines for the next deployment. Upon returning from a deployment, infantry battalions generally discharge or transfer nearly half of their personnel. The battalion then must recoup this loss of personnel from the School of Infantry (SOI), integrate the new Marines, and prepare them for deployment. In addition to this high turnover in personnel, the Department of Defense and the Marine Corps have recently fielded a large number of new and improved radios, optics, vehicles and weapons to deploying Marines that they must learn how to use effectively and efficiently. The increasingly complicated equipment, the large diversity of missions across the spectrum of conflict, and the high operational tempo threaten to overwhelm young Marines and prevent them from doing their jobs as well as they can. In order to increase operational efficiency in small units, the Marine Corps should assign Marines within each unit as subject matter experts to accomplish certain individual and unit tasks in depth.

THE FRAMEWORK

Given the increasingly complicated and technical nature of much of the equipment used by infantry Marines and the lack of technical expertise at the rifle company level, it is necessary to give infantry Marines supplemental training. Much like the battalion commander has a staff to assist him in planning operations, a rifle squad leader can also have a "staff" to assist him in preparing for operations. Because of the increased number of tools available to support the rifle squad, it is necessary to set those Marines up for success by enabling them to utilize these assets to their full potential. The development of subject matter experts at the company and below levels will enable small unit leaders to make full use of every asset available to them. By assigning subject matter experts within the rifle squad, platoon and company, the Marine Corps can also ensure that Marines are ready to operate without the requirement to attach Marines from many different military occupational specialties (MOS) attached to each infantry company for support.

An excellent model for subject matter experts already exists within the Army Special Forces. A Special Forces Operation Detachment Alpha (ODA) is organized with a team leader (a Captain), an assistant team leader (a CWO in

charge of intelligence, and second in command), a team Sergeant, two weapons sergeants, two engineer sergeants, two medical sergeants, two communications sergeants, and an intelligence sergeant. All members of the team are initially trained as infantrymen during the first part of the Special Forces Qualification (Q) Course. During the second phase of the Q-Course, they learn their specialty. During the third phase, they form into a team and conduct operations with representatives from each specialty. During operations, each team member is first required to function as an infantryman. When the need arises for the team to do something suited for one the specialties, the soldier who specializes in that area steps forward and assumes the lead in accomplishing that task. Each team member is also expected to have a working knowledge of the other team members' areas of expertise in order to facilitate the conduct of various operations. The manner in which these soldiers receive specialized training in a particular field while still operating as part of an infantry unit can easily be transferred to Marine infantry units, to allow the company to function at its full potential while utilizing all available assets.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Marine rifle company is assigned one actual radio operator to serve as the company commander's radio operator. This Marine has the technical knowledge to provide oversight to the other Marines carrying radios within the company. A rifle platoon radio operator (RO) is an 0311 who receives either on the job training or attends a course conducted by the battalion's S-6 shop. Serving as a platoon RO was not an easy task for an 0311 five years ago when the only communication asset a rifle platoon had was a single AN/PRC-119. In the current operating environment, however, a rifle platoon may be operating with multiple AN/PRC-119's, AN/PRC-148's (MBITR), Personal Role Radios (PRR's), AN/PRC-117's and AN/PSC-5's. These are some of the same radios that a rifle squad might take out on patrol without a formally schooled radio operator. In order to operate and trouble shoot this myriad of communications assets in an austere environment, a considerable amount of time must be dedicated to training.¹ This training can best be accomplished by assigning two communications subject matter experts per squad who would dedicate time each week during training to learn the

¹ 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. "Fallujah After Action Review," 2004, Company K, Page 8.

various radios. They would also be responsible for training the other Marines in the squad on the use of these radios and for preparing and maintaining that squad's radios during operations.

OPTICS

Another area in which the Marine Corps has advanced over the last twenty years is optics. Some of the optics currently used at the rifle company level are PEQ-2C's, AN/PAS-13's, AN/PVS-7B's, AN/PVS-14's, AN/PVS-17's, and ACOG's. In order to effectively employ, zero, adjust, trouble shoot, and clean each of these systems, a certain level of technical expertise is required that can only be gained through training and experience. By assigning two Marines per squad as optics subject matter experts, a squad could have two Marines on hand who are well-versed in the intricacies of the equipment vital to their success. These Marines would be responsible for training the members of their squad on how to use this equipment properly, supervising the zeroing of these systems, and ensuring that each piece of optical equipment is properly cared for and maintained.

VEHICLES

As Marines continue to operate independently over larger areas, small units are increasingly reliant on

tactical vehicles to accomplish assigned missions. Given the small number of actual motor transport operators in an infantry battalion many infantry Marines have been employed as HMMWV and truck drivers. Infantry units need to increase the number of trained drivers to support operations.² With some extra training, these Marines could be taught to conduct minor repairs, rig vehicles for tow, drive on optics in restricted terrain, and/or while in contact with the enemy, and execute other combat driving skills. When a Marine graduates from the HMMWV driver's course, he has the basic skills necessary to operate the HMMWV. However, that does not mean that the Marine has the requisite skills to drive that same vehicle on a midnight raid in Ramadi as part of a twelve vehicle convoy. In order to perform advanced missions, Marines need extra training. Therefore, ideally one Marine per fire team would be assigned to receive detailed vehicle training. These would be the Marines who, during the immediate action drill conducted with a disabled vehicle in the kill zone of an ambush, would quickly rig that vehicle for tow or make a quick adjustment to move the disabled vehicle out of the kill zone. Because of the complexities of operating with

² 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines. "Operation Iraqi Freedom After Action Review," 2005, Company I, Page 1.

vehicles in a combat environment, having designated vehicle subject matter experts at the rifle squad level is vital to mission accomplishment.

MEDICAL

The relationship between Marines and Navy corpsmen has always been a close one. These sailors have saved countless lives over the last 230 years. Unfortunately, there are never enough corpsmen to go around once casualties begin to mount. When sailors assigned to Marine units are either wounded or killed in combat, there are rarely replacements readily available to fill-in. In the last four years Marines engaged with the enemy have confirmed what most have known all along: if Marines are trained to conduct basic life-saving skills, more lives will be saved. While units strive to have as many Marines as possible attend the combat life saver's courses, many units have been unable to get every Marine to attend this course due to the rapid deployment cycle. While every Marine needs to have some basic life-saving skills, specifically designating subject matter experts who attend the combat life saver's course and receive advanced training can potentially save lives.

INTELLIGENCE

With infantry battalions and companies widely dispersed across the battlefield in remote locations, there are simply not enough Marines with intelligence training to process the sheer volume of information collected quickly enough to allow that intelligence to be exploited. Given the isolated nature of some forward operating bases, intelligence analysts located fifty kilometers or more away from the firm bases frequently have difficulty understanding the value or nature of the information received on a specific area. With some additional training, infantry Marines can be taught to collect useful information and turn that information into intelligence. Marines who operate in the same area for months on end can be taught to conduct intelligence preparation of the battlefield, to document people encountered on patrols, to build databases that support intelligence collection, to conduct hasty interrogations, and to use that same intelligence to drive operations. Many Marines have learned these skills through painful trial and error in both Iraq and Afghanistan. If units dedicate time to train these Marines prior to deployment, operational reach can be extended and operations will be more efficient and based on well-developed, specific intelligence.

REINFORCING OUR EXISTING SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

Although infantry companies already have some subject matter experts on-hand, they require more extensive training in order to really perform all that is asked of them. For example, the 0351s of the assault section are ideally suited to conduct many tasks that have traditionally been accomplished by combat engineers. With some extra training, these anti-tank assaultmen could be used to enhance defensive positions at firm bases independent of the battalion. By training these Marines to operate Bobcats and some moderate heavy equipment, the units could ease the burden placed on combat engineers and focus those Marines on tasks that could help support an entire battalion or regiment. 0351's should also be given enhanced demolitions training to support operations.³ While 0351s could never completely replace the combat engineers, they could definitely ease the burden on the constantly busy combat engineers and by performing the less intensive, non-engineering tasks, free up the combat engineers to perform engineer specific tasks that only they can handle. By focusing on improving some of the existing skill sets already available in infantry units, the infantry battalion

³ 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. "Fallujah After Action Review," 2004, Company I, Page 10.

will be able to make better use of non-organic units such as the combat engineers.

CONCLUSION

While, many units are using Marines for jobs outside of their MOS and those Marines are doing fantastic work with minimal formal training, formalizing this training would enable units to maximize personnel organic to the infantry battalion. Developing these subject matter experts will take time, but will not force units to deviate greatly from regular unit training. On average, a rifle company will be in the field training from Tuesday to Thursday. That company could block off four hours a week on either Monday or Friday and dedicate that time for Marines to focus on their designated subject matter expert field. In order to have the requisite oversight of each group of subject matter experts, a company would assign an NCO, SNCO or officer to take charge of a particular group of subject matter experts, focus their training, and ensure that they met the commander's desired end state.

By focusing Marines' efforts on specific areas of expertise, infantry units can drastically increase their ability to fully utilize all of the assets available. By increasing the pride of ownership in specific areas for individual Marines, units can improve their collective

effort. One primary goal of any organization should be to increase its operational efficiency. By assigning Marines within each unit as subject matter experts, the Marine Corps could not only extend its operational reach, but it would also be maximizing the abilities of its personnel.

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