

## **Tomahawks Take on NTC: Strykers in a Complex Fight**

In August of 2015, 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, Second Brigade Combat Team, (4-23 IN) "Tomahawks" began preparations to deploy to the National Training Center (NTC) at FT Irwin, CA rotation 16-03. While at the NTC, the Tomahawks achieved success during urban operations in two of the population centers, Ujen and Razish. The battalion was able to secure both objectives, suffering minimal casualties throughout the operation. This paper documents some proven methods used to train Soldiers for NTC and how to fight Strykers in urban terrain. The discussion centers around the battalion's training, planning preparation and execution for urban objectives, and the lessons learned from fighting in urban environments from a Stryker platform.

### **Set the Team**

To understand how the battalion fought at NTC, a description of the battalion's capabilities is required. 4-23 IN is a standard Stryker Infantry Battalion, consisting of three rifle companies, an HHC, and a Forward Support Company. Each company has 16 Strykers task organized into three platoons with four Strykers each; two Strykers serve as the headquarters element providing mission command and two more Strykers comprise the 120mm mortar section. Each Stryker has a mounted crew-served weapon, either a M2 machine gun or a Mk 19 automatic grenade launcher. The battalion deployed with approximately 90% of their assigned personnel for the January rotation. This created a noticeable shortage of available infantry to integrate with the mounted elements with each platoon fielding only one infantry squad and one weapons squad on average.

The battalion executed a conventional progression of individual weapons qualification, Stryker Gunnery, Squad/Platoon Live Fire Exercise (LFX) and Situational Training Exercises (STX) culminating with company level force on force and live fire (CALFX). In addition to these training gates, each squad in the battalion refined its Battle Drill 6 skills with Close Quarters Marksmanship (CQM) qualifications and squad shoot house LFX. This not only certified the battalion to conduct urban LFX operations, it also enabled the refinement and establishment of company and battalion Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for in preparation for NTC.

### **Getting to the Fight**

Prior to departing for NTC the battalion held a series of LPDs (leader professional development), focusing on topics ranging from indirect fires, maintenance operations, movement to contact, area defense and urban operations. Various subject matter experts presented their material and participated in open forums to define the battalion SOPs, as well as train and certify leaders as part of the eight-step training model. During these LPDs the Battalion Commander established expectations for mission command nodes, reporting requirements, mounted and dismounted maneuver and SOP development focus areas. The battalion leadership at echelon successfully established effective SOPs on the highlighted focus areas and reinforced them throughout the entire training cycle and deployment to NTC.

During After Action Reviews (AARs) following the rotation, the senior officer and NCO leadership within the battalion were in agreement that Company-level Force-on-Force training had the most value in preparing each company for the complex Operational Environment (OE) it experienced at NTC. For this event the 2-2 SBCT reserved approximately 60 square kilometers of training area at the Yakima Training Center, WA. Using Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement

Systems (MILES), companies conducted iterations of movement to contact, area defense, and attack against a sister company. Both the battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and Brigade TOC assisted the companies with replication of fires and enabler support, which facilitated refinement of reporting SOPs at echelon. Additionally, it allowed for senior level leadership to execute mission command in a decentralized environment. A sister battalion within 7 ID (1-23 IN SBCT) provided Observer Controller, Trainer (OC/T) support and they facilitated lessons learned from their rotation three months earlier. Critical to this training event, was allowing commanders and subordinate leaders to conduct mounted maneuver in terrain similar to NTC and in a competitive environment. Soldiers were intrinsically motivated for this training because of inter-company/battalion competition and were invested in the overall success of their unit. Additionally, many of the Commanders felt that this forced platoon leaders to face critical tactical decisions and gained a greater understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Many of the commanders believed that this was some of the best training for synchronizing the battalion-, company-, and platoon-level leadership on mission command.

To develop urban operations capabilities the battalion conducted simmuntion training at a local MOUT (military operations in urban terrain) facility on Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) which served as the culminating training event prior to the battalion deploying to NTC. Each company tailored its urban training to meet it's training objectives, which had been developed during the CQB Live Fire. Units conducted force on force missions, and executed squad and team level operations to refine skills and established SOPs.

Concurrently, company-level training occurred throughout the battalion focused on repetition in order to build muscle memory, tactical PT, and "Sergeants' Time" training focused on the urban fight in order to refine that skill set based on the planned threat. B Company (B CO) took a unique approach to company planned training and developed a training event at the Mission Training Complex at JBLM. Using the programs offered, the company commander war gamed numerous scenarios with his leaders using Tactical Decision Games around maps in the company conference room that allowed his Platoon Leaders to understand his approach to fighting. The B Company Commander believed that this was critical in allowing his subordinates to understand his intent during the actual battle periods. This enabled the Commander to evaluate the decision making processes of his Platoon Leaders and Platoon Sergeants and assess their strengths and deficiencies. This also allowed for him to exercise broad limits to his subordinate leaders confident that they would understand his intent, and allowing him to pair subordinate leaders with missions that enabled disciplined initiative. Additionally, as a commander he was able to execute decentralized mission command among his different platoons, which was essential for him in effectively commanding an urban fight.

The last critical piece of preparation was a battalion focus on recovery and maintenance utilizing a 15-day recovery model in November. During this time the battalion maintenance team executed shift work to facilitate 24-hour operations and bring the Operational Readiness (OR) rate up to 95% prior to departing. With a command emphasis placed on maintenance it presented the subordinate units, maintenance teams, the battalion staff, and signal personnel the opportunity to focus on the details and solve problems that had been overlooked previously and leverage additional resources from across 2-2 SBCT and 7<sup>th</sup> ID. The OR rate of Joint Capabilities Releases (JCRs) was a critical focus area. The JCR was the most dependable means of communication in each Stryker and deploying to NTC with all JCRs mission capable was critical. This preparation

resulted in a significant reduction of maintenance and communication issues that affected the mission in previous NTC rotations.

## **The Ujen Fight**

### **Planning and Preparation**

The town of Ujen was the battalion's objective during the third phase of NTC Rotation 16-03. The terrain around Ujen is extremely open for approximately four kilometers in every direction, there are five high speed avenues of approach ranging out from the objective. The enemy Situation Template (SITEMP) consisted of 50-75 enemy fighters within the Objective, primarily armed with small arms and anti-tank (AT) capabilities. The opposing force's (OPFOR) primary anti-tank weapon was the AT-5 (Russian made 9M113 Konkurs) with a top range of four kilometers. The S2 Section determined that the enemy was familiar with the terrain and would aggressively defend Ujen. For this operation the task force received an additional infantry company C CO, 1-17 IN (Chosin).

The battalion was working on an extremely compressed timeline. The battalion commander brought in all of the company commanders and briefly sketched out a scheme of maneuver on a map. The company commanders collaborated and worked with the battalion commander and S3 to synchronize and refine the attack. At 2200 C CO would leave their Strykers with a minimal force to secure their position and execute a 10 km dismounted movement to the objective for a 0300 Time on Target (TOT) in order to seize a linear foothold on the East side of Ujen. This would provide a "wall" of buildings to protect follow on forces from AT fire. A CO and Chosin would follow and assume C CO, attacking mounted under the cover of C CO's foothold. B CO would execute a mounted feint to the Northwest of Ujen, while staying out of the range of the AT weapons systems to draw enemy forces West and then approach Ujen from the East and follow and assume behind C CO and A CO and Chosin.

Once C CO secured its foothold on the objective it would clear up to phase line Cherokee and hold for reinforcements to arrive. A CO would dismount their Strykers at a Vehicle Dismount Objective (VDO) north of the objective and conduct a battle handover with C CO and maneuver to Phase Line Aruaco, with Chosin Company providing the next follow on forces. Finally, B CO would approach the objective in Strykers from the east, dismount at the VDO and maneuver to Phase Line Braves. Following this all units would move to secure the objective and hold for a follow on mission.

### **Execution**

The companies had very little time to brief their subordinate units but were able to create shared understanding and rapid planning through the simplicity of the operation and effective SOPs. The tactical risk was also mitigated by executing during limited visibility and within hours of arriving within the AO, utilizing speed and surprise to full advantage. C CO initiated movement towards Ujen as planned at 2200. At approximately 0245 B CO initiated their feint and successfully drew enemy forces North and West. It was critical that C CO not be identified while maneuvering dismounted towards the objective to prevent heavy casualties from emplaced machine guns. To ensure they were not detected, C CO moved slowly and deliberately with strict noise and light discipline, taking six hours to move the 10 km. Due to B CO's successful feint, C CO surprised

the enemy and established a foothold in multiple buildings along the Eastern side of the objective. Enemy elements that remained in position then attempted to counterattack C CO's position and as C CO's forces were culminating in vicinity of PL Cherokee A Co was arriving under the cover of 155mm smoke to follow and assume the advance West.

A CO cleared to Phase line Aruaco and held its position, until directed to advance further to support operations. Chosin was the next company to arrive and conducted its forward passage of lines with A CO. B CO then moved into Ujen, conducted a battle handover with Chosin and A CO and cleared the remainder of the Objective. Once Ujen had been cleared, Suspension of Battle Field Effects (SOBE) was initiated by the NTC OCs and the task force prepared for follow-on operations in the town of Razish, the largest population center in the BCT area of operations.

Strykers were used within Ujen as dismounted elements assessed a decreased AT threat on the objective. During this operation the majority of the Strykers remained in the VDO to the north of Ujen providing isolation of the objective area and non-standard MEDEVAC. The Strykers were critical in allowing A CO, Chosin and B CO to move rapidly into the fight and mass infantry on the objective while providing additional protection and firepower during the fight.

## **The Razish Fight**

### **Planning and Preparation**

The timeline for Objective Razish, allowed for a longer and more deliberate military decision making process (MDMP) at echelon. The terrain around Razish is different than Ujen, with Razish having canalizing terrain and limited visibility on three sides because of large ridgelines surrounding most of the objective. There is also a large hill mass, called "the Rock Pile" located in the center of Razish which offers clear visibility over the entire objective. The task force identified the Rock Pile as decisive terrain as it provided any unit that occupied it dominance over the entire objective. Located to the south of the Rock Pile is a small prison complex which was designated key terrain by the S2 section, as it controlled the main Avenue of Approach from the south. Razish had a similar enemy force composition to Ujen with 55-75 OPFOR expected on the objective with AT capabilities. The S2 section predicted that the enemy also had mounted capabilities with 1-3 BRDMs (lightly armored Russian APC) expected in Razish.

As a BCT mission-set, Second Battalion, First Infantry Regiment (2-1 IN) would be first in the order of movement to conduct an attack from the northwest, while the main attack would come from the southwest. B CO would maneuver into Razish from the south, clear the prison, and secure the Rock Pile. It would then lay down suppressive fire on objective Aruaco from the Rock pile. Once B CO had seized the Rock Pile, A CO would maneuver to secure Objective Aruaco. Once A CO had secured Objective Aruaco, C CO would conduct a battle handover and maneuver to clear Objective Aruaco II.

While 4-23 IN cleared the southern half of Razish, 2-1 IN cleared the northern half of the Objective. The BCT created a Restricted Firing Line (RFL) dividing Razish into northern and southern halves, allowing both battalions to operate in concert throughout the Objective.

### **Execution**

2-1 IN initiated their attack, with the majority of the OPFOR in Razish oriented to the northwest when the operation began. B CO maneuvered towards Razish and utilizing dismounted

infantry, cleared through the Prison and established a support by fire position on the Rock pile. B CO identified a BRDM from the Rockpile and monitored its movement throughout the mission. A CO then maneuvered to Razish and dismounted its Strykers adjacent to the prison. A CO was immediately fixed by enemy fire while maneuvering towards Objective Aruaco. Advancing one Stryker up the main avenue of approach, A CO suppressed the enemy and allowed freedom of maneuver for the company. During the fight, the B CO's Fire Support Officer employed an GLMRS Round (Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System) on the central building in Objective Aruaco, enabling A CO to occupy the complex with minimally casualties. A CO began suppressing the remainder of the Razish, firing below the RFL on the core of city. A CO and C CO Commander conducted a battle handover and began clearing towards Objective Aruaco II. Once C CO had begun maneuvering towards Objective Aruaco II SOBE was initiated by the NTC OCs as all enemy fighters were killed or captured.

Enemy indirect fires were effective at destroying some Strykers after the infantry had dismounted. The battalion also lost several Strykers to an anti-aircraft gun mounted on a technical vehicle but overall suffered minimal losses of Strykers. During this operation Strykers were critical in providing protection and firepower as squad maneuvered through city blocks to clear enemy AT threats ahead.

### **Lessons Learned.**

One of the key tactical lessons from both of these phases at NTC was a focus on setting the conditions to allow for the proper implementation of Strykers. In both of these fights Strykers were not maneuvered out of cover and concealment until dismounts or enablers had minimized the risk of an AT threat. An example of this was C CO securing a foothold in Ujen, and B CO providing suppressive fire on Razish from the Rock Pile. In both Ujen and Razish, A CO was able to rapidly approach the objective mounted and engaged the enemy because conditions were set to mitigate the AT threat. This also required time-distance analysis during planning, and tactical patience on the part of commanders during execution, such as allowing C CO six hours to approach the Ujen undetected. This is a drastic change in tempo from what is typically expected in a mounted unit, but it was necessary to allow for the task force to leverage infantry on the objective. By focusing on setting conditions it allowed for the battalion to execute using organic element and external enablers with an end result of mission accomplishment with minimal casualties.

Another major takeaway was the unit's focus on the enemy anti-tank capability. Because of the nature of Stryker units, a successful anti-tank attack on a Stryker will make a platoon-sized element combat ineffective; it is up to commanders to understand the enemy capability and work to mitigate tactical risk. The task force created conditions that allowed them to exploit the inherent advantages of the Stryker, primarily speed and mobility in approaching objectives. By commanders focusing at all levels on understanding and mitigating the enemy's capabilities, successful units are able to exploit the initiative.

The Battalion was successful not because of unconventional tactics, they were successful because it understood the Stryker and its capabilities and limitations. The Tomahawks did not fight as a heavy armored unit, and they did not function as a light unit; they operated as a Stryker unit that fully integrated the dismounted and mounted elements of the unit. At all levels the command team understood the strengths and weaknesses of the Stryker platform, and tailored their training and tactics to capitalize on those capabilities. Therefore, the successes of the battalion can be

credited just as much on the tactical abilities of its Soldiers but also to the in-depth knowledge they had of their own formation.

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