Airborne Light Cavalry Gunnery

The Army's only airborne ground cavalry troop deploys to Fort Knox

by First Lieutenant Brian W. Oertel and Captain Francis J. H. Park

While many believe that Armor's presence at Fort Bragg, North Carolina ended with the inactivation of the 3d Battalion (Airborne), 73d Armor in July 1997, there is still a ground cavalry troop within the 82d Airborne Division. In February, these 66 paratroopers of Troop A, 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry, the Army's only airborne ground cavalry troop, jumped into Fort Knox, Kentucky, where they conducted their light cavalry gunnery.

Soldiers of Troop A, 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry parachute into Fort Knox's Godman Army Airfield. The Fort Knox visit took advantage of the post's multi-purpose ranges with computerized target arrays.

The troop's primary mission is to execute forced entry, reconnaissance, and security missions in support of the division (air) cavalry squadron, or as part of its habitual infantry regimental combat team. The troop consists of three scout platoons with a headquarters platoon. Each scout platoon of six HMMWVs is armed with two Mk19 grenade launchers, two M2HB heavy machine guns, and two M41 TOW Improved Target Acquisition System launchers. Each Mk19 and TOW system in the platoon also has a secondary M240B medium machine gun which can engage close-in targets, essential in the light and dismounted environments where the troop usually fights.

Every weapon in the troop also has a night vision capability. The machine guns are equipped with AN/PVS-4 and AN/TVS-5 night vision sights, and there is an AN/PAQ-4C aiming light for every rifle in the troop.

Most significantly, the entire troop is capable of airborne assault. All 65 troopers, 23 vehicles, and mission-essential equipment can be loaded on an aircraft for parachute drop within 18 hours of notification. Coming in FY 2002, the troop will also field an 81mm mortar section with the same airborne assault capability.

One of the limitations of training at Fort Bragg is a lack of adequate multipurpose ranges. While the range complex at Fort Bragg supports dismounted training well, it is unsuited for anything beyond a Level II gunnery density. In addition, because of the lack of available ranges, the troop becomes extremely familiar with the existing target array, which greatly decreases the training value of home station gunnery. The other option available to the troop is to conduct gunnery off-post. Last year, the troop conducted an off-post gunnery at Fort Pickett, Virginia, but the range facilities at Fort Pickett are so primitive that the troop itself had to establish and run the ranges on which it shot, diminishing the training value of gunnery there.

One answer to this lack of range facilities was to fire gunnery at Fort Knox, which has true multipurpose ranges with a computerized target array. In addition, the movement to Fort Knox would provide outload and deployment training to the troop. Finally, it provided the opportunity to conduct an airborne assault onto unfamiliar terrain.

This off-post gunnery would not have been possible without the support of the Air Force to outload and deploy the troop. The Air Force allows Army units to use Air Mobility Command aircraft under the Joint Army/Air Transportability Training (JA/ATT) program. Indeed, JA/ATT is the primary method by which the 82d Airborne Division resources its airborne operations. It allows Army units to request Air Force cargo aircraft to conduct unit movements and airborne operations, with transportation costs at Air Force expense. The benefit to the Air Force is collateral training on landing and drop zones. JA/ATT missions are typically scheduled three months out from the requested date, and are dependent on aircraft availability. Sometimes, real-world missions have preempted JA/ATT requests in the past, but the infrequency of such missions means that JA/ATT is the airborne division's usual method of deploying units to an off-post training event, to include CTC rotations.

The usual timeline for an airborne operation on Fort Bragg is measured in hours. However, for an off-post deployment, particularly one involving transportation of vehicles, the timeline increases significantly. February 2, the day prior to the actual deployment, saw the troop line-hauling six of the 12 vehicles it would take to Fort Knox from Fort Bragg's Central Receiving Point. In addition, a Tactical Airlift Control Element (TALCE) from Pope Air Force Base conducted a joint inspection of the other six vehicles to ensure that they met the shipping and preparation requirements required for air movement.

The troop, under direction of its own jumpmasters, also conducted personnel manifest and sustained airborne training the day prior to flight.

Troopers fired the machine gun tables at Baum Range and later at Cedar Creek MPRC. Moving to a different range ensured a more realistic assessment of the gunners' and truck commanders' target acquisition and engagement skills.

Photos by
Robert L. Stevenson

The troop's advance party deployed to Fort Knox by a 15-passenger rental van. That group included the drop zone support team, required for the troop's airborne assault into Roszov South Drop Zone, located on Godman Army Airfield.

On the morning of 3 March, the troop's 54 jumpers conducted mock door training and jumpmaster personnel inspection. Then the jumpers and their vehicles loaded onto a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft for the short flight to Fort Knox. Part of the collateral training for the Air Force included low-level flight into Fort Knox starting approximately 30 minutes from drop, which may be necessary in actual combat if the troop jumps an assault zone defended by hostile air defense systems.

One of our major concerns was the small size of Roszov South DZ. Compared to the large drop zones at Fort Bragg, which offer some 30-60 seconds to exit a pass of jumpers, Roszov South is a small DZ that allows only a mere seven seconds of "green light." This meant that the troop would have been exiting jumpers over the Armor Inn, Patton Museum, and Highway 31W, so the troop planned for four passes of 11 jumpers each. The other hazard at Fort Knox is the runway surface itself. In peacetime, most drops are made into a sandy area to reduce the possibility of injuries upon landing. Yet in combat, all airborne assaults conducted since 1983 have been onto hard-surface airfields. The opportunity to train on a realistic DZ is rare, particularly outside of airborne or ranger infantry battalions.

The troop took approximately 30 minutes to mass its five jumpmasters and 49 jumpers in a textbook jump, which was followed by an airland of the vehicles on part of the runway at Godman AAF. From marshalling, the troop conducted onward movement to the Fort Knox garrison area. Life support in garrison was generously provided us by 5-15 Cav. This arrangement was made through direct liaison from the troop's reconnaissance party and 5-15 Cav itself. In addition, the troop had the support of other senior NCOs at 5-15 Cav and 1/16 Cav who had been former members of the troop or 3-73 AR, and their assistance was priceless.

The troop deployed to Baum Tank Range to conduct Light Cavalry Tables I and VII for its machine gun crews. The troop's gunners zeroed and fired their M2HB and M240 machine guns on Light Cavalry Table I, which is against 10m paster targets from the range's baseline. Upon completion of LCT I, LCT VII trained the crews on engagements from moving and stationary vehicles on stationary and moving targets. Due its small size, the troop was able to fire LCT VII within a day. Later, the troop moved to Cedar Creek Multipurpose Range Complex. Such a change of ranges, taken for granted at most heavy installations, is rarely available at Fort Bragg. Moving to a different range ensured a more realistic assessment of the gunners' and truck commanders' target acquisition and engagement skills.

One of the limitations of this gunnery, however, was the restrictions placed on 40mm grenade fire. Due to limited range availability, the troop was limited to firing 40mm grenades at Hackett Range. Since the target array at Hackett Range consists solely of stationary hard targets and there was no movement allowed on the range, SSG David Henry, the troop's master gunner, and SFC Leo Clark, the headquarters platoon sergeant, devised an alternate qualification table for both day and night fires. During the day, grenade launcher crews conducted a brief familiarization fire, then conducted untimed and timed target designation and engagements during the day. The crews then filled out a range card as an ungraded task. After nightfall, the crews then returned to their day battle position and conducted two graded engagements based on the data on the range card.

One of the biggest restrictions on 40mm grenade fire is the lack of 40mm grenade ammunition. In addition, the light cavalry tables for the Mk19 grenade launcher are written under such restrictive time standards that the likelihood of qualifying first run is slight. *FM 17-12-8, Light Cavalry Gunnery,* dictates that "All basic gunnery tables for the Mk19 must be device-based (i.e., without expending live ammunition), due to ammunition constraints." Additionally, the lack of an Engagement Skills Trainer (EST)[1] means that most Mk19 crews are at a severe disadvantage to their counterparts firing other machine guns. Consequently, there is no way to adequately build competency through basic tables if there is no ammunition or simulations for them. The absence of sufficient training aids or simulations to fire basic tables through LCT IV means that, at best, crews can dry-fire those tables. Consequently, the first table that most Mk19 crews fire with any kind of ammunition is usually LCT VII. The scores of most crews shooting LCT VIII off that one table of practice are abysmally poor, and gunner confidence suffers as well. The alternate qualification table that the troop used better reflects what the troop would actually do in combat and gives gunners a far bet-

The unit's HMMWVs arrive at the MPRC for fire and maneuver exercises. Each section was able to perform a route reconnaissance on varied terrain, which was not pssible at home station.

ter understanding of the mechanics of the Mk19 grenade launcher and its Mk93 Mod 1 vehicle mount.

The troop was able to fire LCT VIII day and night runs within a day, largely due to the drive and leadership of the troop's NCOs. In most heavy units, gunnery normally peaks at Tank Table or Bradley Table VIII. Since the field of competition in the airborne division is limited to the division's lone ground troop,[2] the emphasis of gunnery within Troop A is on Light Cavalry Table X, which stresses tactics over marksmanship.

At the end of LCT VIII, the platoon leaders received a troop tactical OPORD. From there, they did their own troop leading procedures and briefed platoon OPORDs to their section sergeants. LCT X was done in two phases, a live-fire phase and maneuver phase. By design, the troop's execution of LCT X allowed the section sergeants the latitude to do their own intelligence preparation of the battlefield, to include indirect fire targeting as well as positioning for a screen position. Each section conducted a dry-fire LCT IX at Cedar Creek before executing the live-fire LCT X. Each section conducted a screen at Cedar Creek Range, with retrograde to subsequent screen positions. On order, each section conducted a route reconnaissance with forward passage of lines, then established a hasty anti-armor blocking position at Hackett Range, where the section conducted TOW and Mk19 fires.

One of the fringe benefits of training at Fort Knox is its terrain. There is very little terrain at Fort Bragg that fits the minimum required reporting procedures for a route reconnaissance, and route reconnaissance skills are notoriously perishable. Short of the Scout Leader Course or BNCOC, this is the only training our junior leaders normally can get in an environment that requires them to work all the elements of a route reconnaissance.

The troop spent approximately two days in recovery back at the Fort Knox garrison area and prepared to conduct a jump back to Fort Bragg, with a similar sequential airland of six of its vehicles. Due to weather and low visibility at Godman AAF, the Air Force scratched the jump and the troop redeployed out of Standiford Field in Louisville. A Kentucky Air National Guard TALCE from the 123d Air Wing assisted us in coordinating with the C-17 that brought us back to Pope Air Force Base.[3]

Gunnery at Fort Knox was an outstanding training opportunity for the troop, and one not often afforded light cavalry units. Scouts in the troop received quality training on ranges far better than anything they could get at Fort Bragg on a regular basis. In addition, they were able to train IPB, field planning, and collective tasks at the section and scout team levels. Each section sergeant was able to do a full MDMP drill, to include OPORD, briefbacks, and rehearsals in the conduct of LCT X, as well as training direct fire planning, distribution, and control at the section level.

At the institutional level, the range assets, support, and targetry at Fort Knox far surpass anything remotely available at Fort Bragg. The availability of multiple ranges prevented the gunnery from becoming stale, which is a hazard due to the presence of only two MPRCs at Fort Bragg. The extremely hilly terrain at Fort Knox allowed the troop to train tasks difficult to train at home station (e.g., route reconnaissance). Most notably, this off-post deployment exercised alert, marshalling, and deployment for the entire troop, from headquarters down to individual trooper. Given the 82d Airborne Division's emphasis on deployability, the value of such training is hard to overstate.

Notes

[1]*FM 17-12-8,* Appendix D, describes the EST.

[2]The antitank companies in the airborne division, while similar in composition and equipment to the light division ground cavalry troop, do not fire Light Cavalry Gunnery. Their heavy weapons marksmanship is primarily dismounted in nature.

[3]The TALCE served as a liaison between the control tower and the troop.

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