

Translating Peacekeeping into Combat Readiness

Unit Learns to Train for Combat While Keeping the Peace in Bosnia

by Captain Rich Morales

In February of 1996, 2-63 Armor deployed to Operation Able Sentry, where the unit executed what had been a traditional infantry role. Then the battalion successfully transitioned from United Nations peacekeeping to warfighting as a counterreconnaissance company at the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC). This article is intended to explain how we forged a battle-ready team capable of operations at both ends of our mission spectrum.

Our rotation was not atypical. Units regularly deploy to the CMTC, refine techniques, and develop confidence in their ability to fight. Like most units, we benefited from a well paced training regimen that included seven intense days of STX training. Professional observer controllers and a spirited OPFOR made for a great rotation. But what made our rotation different was that the most of our preparation was done hundreds of miles away from our equipment as tankers — without tanks. Training for battle is not a new concept in any tank battalion or cavalry squadron; nevertheless, ours was a unique challenge that called for imaginative and resourceful training to sustain mission essential task proficiency following six-months of peacekeeping. As it turned out, our United Nations deployment to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) sharpened, rather than dulled, our preparation for combat by building a truly cohesive team in which leaders were routinely given the latitude to execute without fear of failure. Continuous operations along a 100-kilometer United Nations patrol line between Serbia and FYROM provided an unusual opportunity to build on scout and tanker skills. Specifically, competence, leadership, reporting, navigation, and again — attitude.

It had been a busy year, one that included more than three months of training units to conduct stability operations in Bosnia, two gunnery densities, and the six-month deployment to the Former Yugoslavia. Training as part of a fast-



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Robert L. Stevenson

paced USAREUR unit forced leaders at all levels to focus on accomplishing a host of missions to standard. In hindsight, I attribute our success primarily to our outstanding troopers and secondly to the ability of leaders to instill an attitude of mission accomplishment. Harnessing the ability to shape attitudes and perceptions to build a cohesive team is an important tenet of our training philosophy that directly contributed to our success.

Tank companies, specialty platoons, and staffs became tight-knit, mission-focused components of a battalion with one mission: Train for combat while deployed as peacekeepers. Our initial training was largely conceptual, focusing tank, scout, mortar, and support NCOs and officers on the mechanics of our mission. Officers and senior NCOs met every Saturday for a two-hour professional development class on the combat functions of a tank battalion. Comprehensive written exams tested our grasp of a growing list of topics over a six-month period. Practical applications included construction of wire and mine obstacles, manual breaching techniques, orders production, and detailed rehearsals of fundamental compo-

nents of the attack and defense on hangar-sized terrain models.

Unlike leadership in a garrison environment, leading under field conditions offers additional challenges. Deployments magnify the benefit of leading in the field ten-fold. Tired, yet determined soldiers must execute real-world missions that have a far-reaching impact on the interests of the battalion, Army, and our nation. Austere operations based out of hilltop observation posts allowed junior officers and NCOs to independently execute countless mounted and dismounted community, border, and sector patrols over six months.

Despite the hands-on application of reconnaissance fundamentals in sector, our battalion was still a tank battalion minus tanks. Consequently, we built on a readily-available resource — our soldiers. Not unlike our efforts at home station, the battalion went to work immediately upon our deployment to improve morale and build cohesion. We motivated troopers through events such as Friday Night at the Fights, frequent trips, tournaments, sports, and developed legendary Battalion

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Horse and Rider Fights. The battalion, divided in half and mounted, charged into weekly combat to capture the opposing force’s “flag.” Cohesion would see us through rain, fatigue, and constant monitoring of operations as part of Operation Able Sentry.

The aim of extensive patrolling (and subsequent counterrecon operations) was accurate reporting. Standard SALUTE reports were drilled at every level. Nets were monitored continuously. Competency rose quickly as proper radio telephone procedures, communications security, and insight into the operation of radios, TACSAT, and antennas permeated the units in the battalion. In the end, every private, sergeant, and officer was prepared to communicate effectively and thus prepared to win a critical component of the counterrecon (or any other) fight.

Map reading became second nature for new soldiers and was reinforced in more senior leaders. In addition to usual mounted land navigation, our tank company was exposed to the challenges of dismounted navigation over difficult terrain. Patrols varied in distance from 3 to 30 kilometers and in time from one hour to three days. Crewmen learned to employ Global Positioning System equipment and, more importantly, improved their ability to associate terrain on the ground with map features on maps.

Home Station Preparation

Redeployment allowed for a deliberate hands-on training of our troops and preparation of our equipment for combat at the CMTC six months after our return. Again, preparation hinged on building competency through classroom instruction and OPD and NCOP events. A positive attitude continued to be a central theme in all training. In addition to the preparations begun in Macedonia, we focused on several critical areas: gunnery, logistics, and knowing our enemy.

In light of limited tactical training opportunities, we prepared mentally for gunnery, the CMTC, and combat. Our weekly OPD program continued throughout our redeployment and during gunnery. In addition, “Warrior Nights” were added to the preparation plan. Company commanders, staff, and specialty platoon leaders, and slice element commanders

met after hours over a potluck dinner to discuss operations, refine SOPs, and watch videotaped AARs of other units at both training centers. The cohesion established in Macedonia continued to grow.

The battalion gunnery program challenged crews by integrating advanced gunnery tables (M1A2 tables fired off of M1A1 tanks) in preparation for combat. Methodical preparation included standard TCGST and UCOFT training and incorporated TC-gunner drills that allowed for quicker acquisition and destruction of the enemy. Qualification gunnery tables that challenged crews to engage up to five targets at a time sharpened skills dulled while peacekeeping. Again, establishing cohesive crews early and training them would pay off later at the CMTC.

Servicing our tank fleet, training new soldiers on tank specific maintenance, and ensuring our equipment was prepared for combat became a top priority upon redeployment. Systems were re-established to deal with support issues. Our ability to land on our feet after months of being off of tanks was crucial. Maintenance management and operator PMCS training was reinforced at all levels. In the end, our task force was able to bring nearly all combat systems to bear on enemy forces with no fewer than 42 of 44 tanks learning from the fight.

The CMTC leader’s recon was a superb learning experience and opportunity to observe another maneuver battalion train. Not unlike combat, our intent was to understand how our enemy fights and thinks. We reviewed OPFOR tactics, techniques, and procedures as both a company and battalion. Unlike a real threat force, the OPFOR worked hand-in-hand with my company during STX to coach and share their own experiences in the box. Beyond natural spirited exchanges between soldiers, the OPFOR was intent on making us a better battalion.

Individual Replacement Training (IRT) commitments prevented the battalion’s line companies from spending any considerable amount of time on tanks in the months that led up to our rotation. Instead, crews and platoons trained specific tasks. Instructors, role players, and lane NCOICs and OICs continued to execute missions as late as two weeks before our deployment to Hohenfels. Despite the

reduced training time on tanks, the team formed to tackle peacekeeping, gunnery, and IRT proved capable of executing its wartime mission.

In the end, specialty platoons, staff sections, and task force soldiers focused on fighting throughout the depth of the defensive sector. A mindset permeated the entire battalion to fight and win. We did. Cooks, staff sections, HEMTT drivers, mortars, tanks, and scouts all applied leadership and tactical lessons learned in the hills of Former Yugoslavia to the battle at Hohenfels. By the early hours of March 23, Task Force 2-63 Armor had defeated nearly all recon assets, conducted a passage of lines in contact (100% of its combat power from the security zone), and subsequently overwhelmingly defeated an attacking Opposing Force (OPFOR) regiment. The scout platoon and two infantry platoons and three tank platoons formed the base of my company’s team. Additionally, we were linked to specific tank platoons in adjacent companies that were trained and poised to react alongside our team.

In the end, nearly 100 continuous hours of counterreconnaissance operations and aggressive execution of the MBA fight resulted in a superb defense that allowed no ground assets past the No Penetration Line.

In a period of increasingly limited budgets and resources, innovative training becomes a way of life. It is important therefore, to train smarter and make the best of available training. Effective leadership, superb soldiers, and a winning attitude empower a unit to accomplish any mission.

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