

“Mo.” “We know the importance of our mission. It is very rewarding to be a part of this campaign and to be able to provide support to our Marine brothers on the ground.” The squadron flight officer, “Woody,” echoed these sentiments. “There are

a lot of Marines from 3d Marine Aircraft Wing in Afghanistan, and it is an awesome feeling that we are all serving together as part of a larger crusade against evil.” Proud to be flying missions in defense America’s freedom, the Black Knights will con-

tinue to face any challenge and undertake any mission that is asked of them.



>Capt Ohman is the public affairs officer for VMFA-314.

Defense of Kandahar

by Maj T. Shane Tomko

The author provides an overview for the following series of articles that relates a firsthand account of one company’s veterans during the defense of Kandahar.

Kilo Company, Battalion Landing Team 3/6, 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU(SOC)) completed what could be considered an infantryman’s dream. Our company conducted defensive operations, raids, ambushes, and patrols during our 40-plus days stay in the Kandahar area.

As we are all taught in our professional military schools, the defense is one of the most difficult, time-consuming, and discipline-draining tasks to fulfill for any infantry unit. Throughout our en-

tire MEU(SOC) workup we focused on raids, conventional offensive operations for a mechanized company, blocking positions, and short-term defenses for consolidation and reorganization of the force for follow-on operations. As warfighters we are more inclined to focus on the attack rather than the defensive aspects of our trade.

The three platoon-sized sectors were reinforced by Firebase Glory (machinegun squad, javelin team, and shoulder launched, multipurpose assault weapons team posi-

tion), a position built out of nothing but sweat, hardwork, and old Soviet shovels and Chinese pickaxes, and The Alamo (reinforced machinegun squad position), a 10-foot high, adobe-walled compound. (See Diagram 1.)

The overall length of the company frontage was approximately 1,500 meters, and due to the ingenuity and effort of my company fire support team and small unit leaders, every inch of that 1,500 meters and dead space was amazingly covered by fire. Additionally, all fighting positions were dug by hand. Infantrymen laid all tactical concertina wire and tanglefoot. All sectors of fire were developed and refined by individual Marines. Battle drills were honed, drilled, and performed to expert precision. Individual Marines made sound tactical decisions all within the parameters of the commander’s intent. And finally, each and every Marine successfully fought and won the battle against complacency. Their crisp execution and devotion to duty is to be admired.

The end state of our defense was to provide such a formidable surface that even though we proudly posted our “Taliban Eat Free” sign, there would be no takers for fear of the most violent death. I believe that we were successful in our mission, true to Marine Corps form. Although the

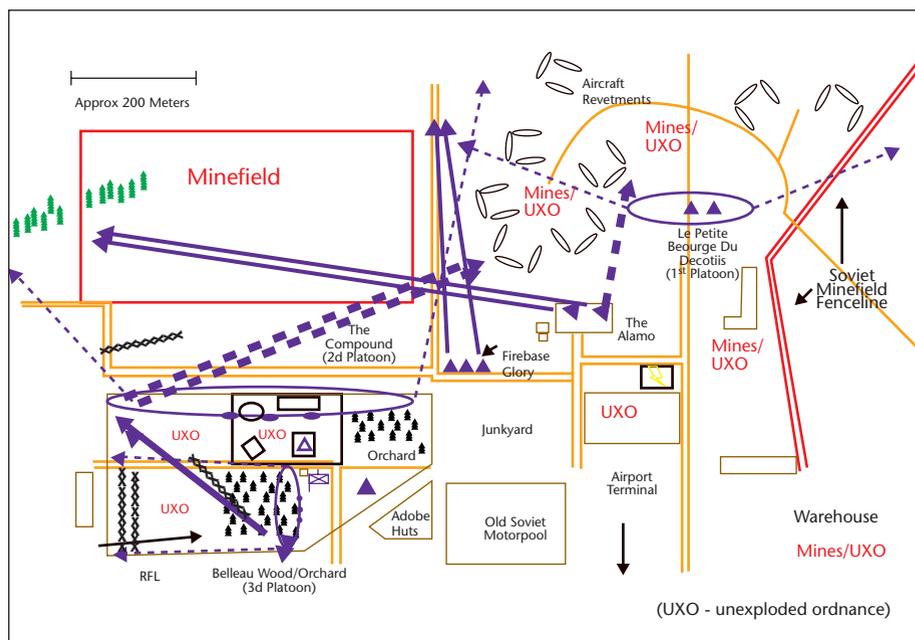


Diagram 1.

climate was diverse, temperatures ranging from the 70s during the day to the 20s at night, and the friction of defending against a multitude of threats was always present, the Marines continually fell into the basic tenets of instruction learned at the School of Infantry or Infantry Officer Course. The muscle memory of precision training and crisp execution of duty was the catalyst for success in every regard.

This defense can best be described in the words of the true American heroes who inspired their Marines each and every day of the defense. My officers, staff noncommissioned officers, noncommissioned officers, and Marines can best relate the tale of their superior performance. I will leave it to them. I am deeply humbled and proud to be their company commander and will never forget their motivation, pride, and deep

devotion to their Marine Corps call to duty.



>Maj Tomko was the CO, Kilo Company, 3d Bn, 6th Mar. He is currently assigned as the Operations Officer, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.

Le Petit Beourge du Decotiis

by 2dLt Art Decotiis

Initially shorthanded, 1st Platoon established and manned their sector of the defensive perimeter.

Due to a series of bumped flights and delays, 1st Platoon arrived in two waves over a span of 3 days. 1st Platoon brought up the tail end of Kilo Company's flow into Kandahar International Airport. The first Marines to arrive from the platoon were tasked with manning the newly established detainee camp, therefore leaving the platoon shorthanded as we occupied our defensive sector in a small adobe-structured village. My company commander ordained me the village mayor.

Upon the arrival of the rest of the platoon we conducted a leader's reconnaissance with the company commander. 1st Platoon was the final element of the company to occupy the defense. We were tied in on the right flank of the company sector in a small village on the southwest edge of the runway. A 200-meter gap separated the far right flank of the village and the runway. We were to be tied in with a light armored vehicle that was located another 200 meters away on the opposite side of the runway. The span between the two positions was marred with plane wreckage and dead space. Our frontage looked much the same. (See Diagram 1.)

While conducting the leader's reconnaissance of the village, several weapons and munitions caches were

discovered. We requested that a Marine explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team, along with combat engineers, physically inspect the entire village for live ordnance and mines. Due to the severity of the mine situation it was extremely difficult to establish our new defense in a traditional manner. Upon a brief evaluation of the sector we identified those positions we would occupy, and EOD went to work making sure they were useable. Once the initial positions were deemed safe we began the occupation by strongpointing the village primarily on either flank, along with an observation post (OP) on the roof that would be manned by our Javelin (FGM-148 maneuverable, fire and forget weapon) gunners.

As stated earlier, the platoon was severely undermanned due to our obligations at the detainee camp. We initially occupied the village with only 13 Marines, including the headquarters element. Since our first day in the defense was rapidly coming to a close we decided to postpone the initial fortification of the new positions until morning. The adobe structures would provide adequate cover and concealment for the night. Two four-man posts were established at the flanks of the village. They would maintain 50 percent security

throughout the night. Since the positions, or "posts" as we referred to them, were for the most part indoors and separated, communications between the posts and the platoon command post (CP) was a primary concern. The platoon CP was nearly collocated with Post 1 and a field phone was wired to the OP and Post 3 on the far left flank. Before nightfall a hasty signal plan was established and exact grid coordinates were disseminated to the company fire support team (FiST). The platoon sergeant, SSgt Joel Morgan, was sure to make liaison with the light armored reconnaissance to our right and pass on our exact location to the adjacent unit.

After a fairly quiet night we began fortifying the established positions at first light. We initially concentrated on fortifying the flank positions. The OP was lightly fortified and camouflaged. The few Marines we had on deck worked hard in preparing the positions with what little resources they had available to them. Overhead cover was manufactured out of old doors where needed. Window screens were used to fill exterior openings in order to prevent grenades from entering, and old Soviet parachutes were used to camouflage exposed sandbags. I was consistently

impressed by the Marines' ingenuity in fortifying the positions.

Once the primary positions were completed, we began preparing for the rest of the platoon's arrival. We established several new positions and began planning how each would be manned once the others arrived. At daybreak, when the company relaxed its posture to 25 percent, all hands not standing watch would assist in fortifying the new positions. The platoon guide, Sgt Shane Reed, created a schematic that included a complete fire plan sketch, a detailed drawing of the village, all established and proposed positions, and a detailed, by name breakdown of who would man each post. As the Army began its slow takeover of the detainee camp, 1st Platoon Marines were able to occupy the village incrementally over the course of a week. As a fire team would be pushed to the perimeter they would simply move into the already established four-man posts.

Once approximately half the platoon had made it to the perimeter, the priority of work was turned to creating supplementary and alternate positions. Small, fortified positions were established along the roofline of the village. Reinforcement and reaction drills were conducted and refined. A rear security post was established due to our concern over unseen tunnels or entry points to the rear of our village, while also keeping an eye out for any stray detainees. This post consisted of rovers along with a gate guard and proved valuable in maintaining positive control over our sector by deterring unwanted sightseers and souvenir hunters that frequented the village at an alarming rate.

Once the positions were up to par, squad leaders mandated at least 2 hours worth of position improvement each day. Team leaders ensured that each Marine's firing position came complete with its own fire plan sketch and a list of target reference points (TRPs). These TRPs were made standard throughout each post and proved very effective when reporting activity forward of our position. Any potential activity would be reported directly to the CP and to the Javelin gunners on the roof so that they could provide bet-

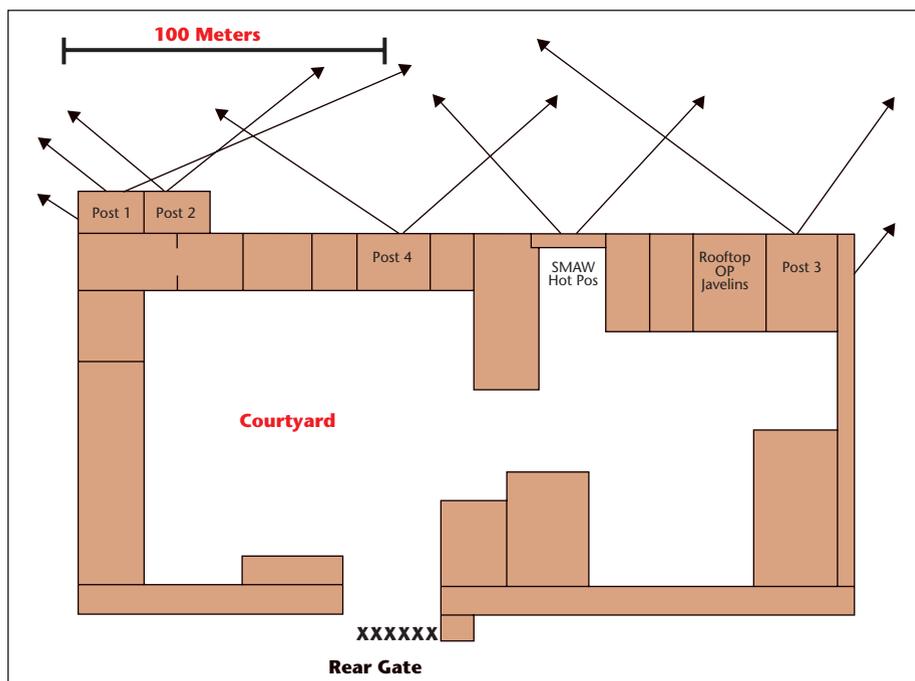


Diagram 1.

ter visual identification with their command launch unit (CLU) sight. Cpls Nathan Gilham and Brad Ostergard, along with the CLU, were invaluable assets to the platoon in their ability to more clearly identify vehicles and activity in our sector. They were very helpful in diffusing many potential friendly fire incidents, especially considering the heavy volume of uncoordinated friendly activity forward of the lines.

Combat engineers began setting in concertina, trip flares, and obstacles to our frontage, covering any likely avenues of approach. This was a slow process considering the mine and unexploded ordnance threat. The revetments, 400 meters to our direct front, impaired our field of view greatly while posing good concealment for potential infiltrators. The engineers made use of what little wire that was available in an attempt to force any potential attacker into our field of view. The company FiST leader and artillery forward observer visually identified for us where exactly oncall targets were located and plotted new targets that corresponded with the chokepoints created by the engineers. Scorpion sensors were also placed in front of our position.

When the entire platoon was finally present, we were able to implement a sleep rotation. Post 2 was

stood down and adopted as the rest/react position. Each four-man team was rotated through Post 2 until all Marines were afforded at least one full night's rest. Other posts were stood down whenever the platoon was required to give up Marines for various missions or working parties. The primary flank posts were manned throughout our stay in the village as well as the Javelin position.

Lessons Learned

Many of the lessons learned were a product of trial and error. Whatever problems we encountered throughout the night were quickly remedied the following morning. For example, we were forced to designate universal TRPs throughout the platoon after a night of confusing SALUTE (size, activity, location, unit, time, equipment) reports and movement sightings. These TRPs enabled our Javelin gunners to quickly decipher where to focus their CLU, thereby producing faster and more accurate situation reports to be passed on to higher authority. Small unit leaders were able to more effectively laterally communicate with one another, thus maintaining strict fire discipline.

Another problem we encountered involved somewhat incomplete coordination between supporting units. The battalion sensor control and management platoon technicians

notified me that two sensors were placed forward of our position, but I was not given detailed information as to the exact locations and capabilities. One night we received a call notifying us that one of the sensors had been tripped in front of our position. We had a general idea of where they were located, but there was no way of knowing which sensor was tripped, hence we were not sure where to focus our attention. Upon receiving the exact grid locations of each, we discovered that the three potential enemy personnel that tripped the sensor were uncomfortably close to our position. Amidst the flood of information and coordination requirements, I neglected to

pursue more detailed information regarding the sensors. From this I learned that, if time permits, all aspects of coordination between units must be as thorough as possible in order to make maximum use of the assets we have available.

I feel the most important lesson learned was that commonsense decisions, based on the situation at hand, produced the best results. School taught techniques and procedures are indeed helpful in laying the foundation, but strict adherence to rigid interpretation of a field manual is not always the most tactically sound approach. Although easier said than done, we must be willing to try new and possibly unorthodox tactics, tech-

niques, and procedures. Furthermore, the platoon's small unit leaders—squad leaders and team leaders—can be trusted to make tactical and organizational decisions within their scope of control and base these decisions on what works best for their particular unit while still carrying out the commander's intent. When the time was available I could always count on 1st Platoon Marines to come up with more efficient and innovative ways to accomplish the mission.



>Lt Decotiis is the 1st Platoon Commander, Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.

2d Platoon Defense at Kandahar

by 1stLt Ron Reed

Hard work and constant revision are required in the defense.

The defense of Kandahar International Airport posed numerous and significant challenges for a rifle platoon. These challenges began during occupation and continued until the relief by the 101st Airborne. Though daunting, these challenges were met with enthusiasm and vigor and demonstrated the phenomenal leadership of the small unit leaders and their commitment to mission accomplishment.

Occupation

Even though 2d Platoon was delayed in Jacobabad, Pakistan while the rest of the company transited through Camp Rhino, the platoon was actually the first company element to reach Kandahar International Airport. Once the main element arrived, our focus shifted to occupying

our new defensive position—a position that we would call home for the next 6 weeks. (See Diagram 1.)

The perimeter of the airfield presented numerous challenges. These challenges were due mainly to topog-

raphy and the level of urban development in the immediate area. The fact that our sector was littered with mines, weapons caches, and remnants of recent U.S. clusterbomb strikes did little to facilitate our occupation.

With explosive ordnance demolition (EOD) marking various unexploded ordnance sights within meters of our fighting positions, the platoon still had to maintain its focus and implement proper defensive fundamentals in order to ensure that our battle position was sound.

To further add friction to our occupation, an unidentified vehicle with several armed individuals suddenly drove across our engagement area without prior warning. With the Marines already at a heightened state of alert, it is a credit to the squad

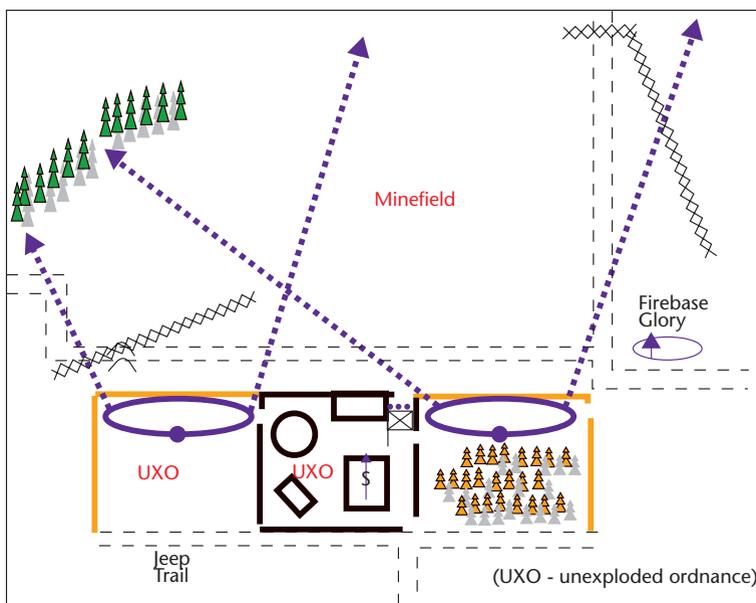


Diagram 1.

leaders and fire team leaders that they were able to maintain the appropriate level of fire discipline until the situation could be assessed. Thanks to the keen eyes of the 1st Squad Leader, Sgt Santa Cruz, the vehicle and its inhabitants were identified as U.S. special forces. Since we had just occupied the defense, no real coordination had occurred. This would prove to be an ongoing challenge considering the level of activity in and around the airfield (Marines, Army, special forces, covert organizations, anti-Taliban forces, etc.).

The platoon was tasked with defending the center of the company defense with 3d Platoon to our left flank and 1st Platoon to our right. The guidance given to the squad leaders was to immediately establish their sectors of fire and then focus on establishing their fighting holes. Sufficiently improving fighting holes required ingenuity on the part of every Marine. A 5-foot adobe wall covered the entire platoon frontage. The fighting holes would be located to the rear of the wall with spider holes cut into the wall. This limited how deep each hole could be dug and also increased the need to reinforce the front of the adobe wall in case of a rocket propelled grenade or heavy machine-gun attack. Improving our defensive positions was a continuous process and did not end until our relief.

During occupation the adjacent unit to our right flank, 1st Platoon, was tasked to provide security for the detainee camp near the airport's terminal. This increased the strain on our ability to provide effective security and tie in our fires. In response, the platoon established an observation post (OP) to our right flank on the crest of one of the old Soviet aircraft revetments. The OP would help provide early warning of any infiltrators and allow the platoon to rapidly orient our fires. Once 1st Platoon was relieved at the detainee camp the OP was removed. This was a relief considering the aircraft revetments were covered with mines and unexploded ordnance, as confirmed by combat engineers and EOD.

Improving the Defense

As time goes on and the enemy threat evolves, so must the defense. Sectors of fire were continually reassessed, as were the individual fighting positions. Within our engagement

area, combat engineers established countermobility obstacles and removed various junked vehicles and aircraft that hindered our sectors of fire. By the time the battle position was turned over to the Army, any weapon on the line could be employed at its maximum effective range.

Mobility within the battle position was also improved. Combat engineers used explosives to blow holes on both sides of "the compound" (see diagram) so that forces could rapidly be redeployed if necessary. Paths were established along the entire frontage so that squad leaders and the platoon staff could walk the lines confidently, even with reduced visibility. As the defense evolved, there was no portion of the defense that couldn't be rapidly and effectively reinforced if the situation required.

Fighting holes also underwent a refinement. What started out as two-man holes eventually were consolidated to fire team-sized holes that maintained the sectors of fire. With four Marines per hole, a sleep plan was easily implemented and ensured that at least two Marines were awake and alert throughout the night.

Communications procedures also were refined during our occupation of this position. With only one radio for the platoon, intrasquad radios (ISRs) were used to a large extent. Due to the unsecure nature of the ISR, the platoon developed prowords so that even the far flanks of the platoon could rapidly relay tactical information to the platoon command post. This was also necessary in order to maintain continuous communications with the crew-served positions at Firebase Glory to our right flank.

Continuing Actions

It goes without saying that continuing actions can make or break a defensive position. Continuing actions took many forms to include weapons maintenance, immediate action drills, improving camouflage of positions, and constructing supplementary and alternate positions. Stressing continuing actions also helped fight the idle nature of occupying the same position for almost 40 days. The strict implementation of continuing actions, coupled with a minimum sleep plan, was physically

draining on every Marine. However, the Marines far surpassed the expectations of the platoon and company staffs. The success of the platoon's defense was a direct result of their hard work during the day and commitment and dedication on watch at night. Further, it was the noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of the platoon who ensured this level of professionalism never faltered.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson learned is to trust the abilities and competence of the platoon's small unit leaders. If a platoon commander or platoon sergeant cannot trust the decisionmaking ability of his subordinates, then the failure must be placed on him for failing to adequately prepare his Marines for combat. 2d Platoon's subordinate leaders exceeded all expectations and will undoubtedly continue their success throughout their careers in the Corps. This is why both the platoon sergeant and I actually could participate in the sleep plan.

Lateral coordination with adjacent units—be it Marines, Army, anti-Taliban forces, or other multinational units—is crucial to the effectiveness of the defense, while limiting the risk of fratricide. Whether the coordination is disseminated from higher authority or it is conducted through face-to-face meetings, the important thing is that it occurs and that every Marine occupying a position "on the line" receives that information.

The defense is never easy, especially for an extended length of time. Occupying a defense is work—plain and simple. This work is continuous, unrelenting, and performed by every Marine, private to lieutenant. All of us worked, but the success of our defense must be credited to the junior Marines and the dedication of the platoon's NCOs.



>1stLt Reed is the 2d Platoon Commander, Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.

The Pomegranate Forest/Belleau Wood

by 1stLt Jaisun Hanson

3d Platoon's small unit leaders played a vital role in establishing and maintaining defensive positions.

One of the initial obstacles that needed to be overcome while setting into the defensive perimeter around Kandahar International Airport was establishing areas to work through and dig in that were safe from unexploded ordnance. Our platoon sector was set in a pomegranate orchard with a 150-meter by 100-meter plowed field with rather large irrigation ditches that ran parallel to our defensive line. Additionally, a 5-foot tall adobe wall ran along our frontage. The ditches and the adobe wall were two issues that were to be contended with. After an initial sweep by explosive ordnance disposal personnel, two Marines were set into a listening post/observation post (LP/OP) near a gap in the mud wall for security. This provided an additional 200 meters of clear observation to the platoon's front. Squad leaders, Sgts Andrew Yellope and Joseph Rodriguez, were given orientation and their areas of responsibility within the platoon sector. Once tasked, the squad automatic weapons were pushed forward of the defensive line while the platoon began digging fighting holes that would gradually grow into fortified, four-man, fighting positions to include sleeping positions with overhead cover. Each Marine quickly put to use his original issue of sandbags that were carried with them off of the ship. Meanwhile, squad leaders and team leaders set about assigning lateral limits and ensuring that either natural obstacles or indirect fire assets that were tasked organized to the infantry rifle platoon covered the dead space. (See Diagram 1.)

Adapting to the Surroundings

A lack of "normal" bunker building assets left the Marines to use

their creativity and scavenge nature in building fortified positions. Thanks to supplies left from the former-Soviet Army, Marines set about foraging through the old Soviet motor pool and junkyard for supplies to help in fortifying their positions. Old shovels, Chinese pickax heads, steel beams, sheets of tin, and abandoned canvas shelter halves proved to be great materials for digging out, fortifying, and waterproofing fighting holes. Within less than a week's time Marines had fighting positions established with overhead protection, and some were even equipped with makeshift warming stoves. As Class IV supplies became more available, Marines began strengthening and improving their holes with more traditional building materials and additional sandbags.

Alternate Positions

Due to the fact that our sector was not considered the critical vulnerability in the company's defense, we were also tasked with an "on order task"—being able to provide reinforcements for the other two pla-

toons in the vicinity of The Alamo. It was established in the first days that, on command, 3d Platoon would shift the majority of the platoon to their alternate mission—fighting positions that were dug in the open area between 2d and 1st Platoons. Given the terrain, the southwestern end of the runway was expected to be the most probable area that would be hit if we were to encounter resistance. Rehearsals were done on alternating days at various times with various levels of readiness to get a true estimate on how much time it would take to occupy these alternate mission positions. By the time the Army relieved us, the Marines had this drill down to a mere 5 minutes.

Implementing Sleep Plans

Maintaining security along the lines, along with fortifying positions, digging crawl trenches, setting out concertina wire, and providing a squad rotation of Marines for security at the detainee camp, at times proved to be taxing on the platoon. Implementing a sleep plan that provided the Marines an

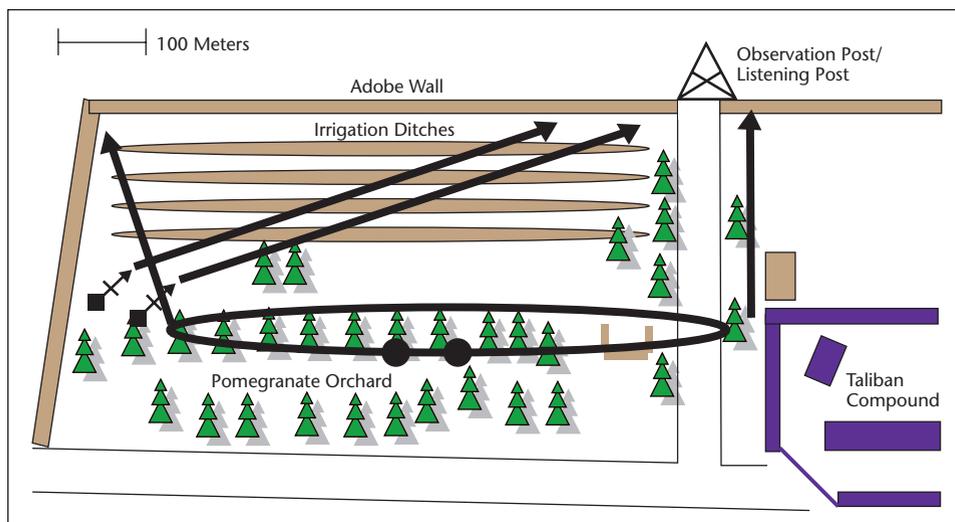


Diagram 1.

ample amount of sleep so that they would be alert for standing post, as well as ensuring that they made daily improvements to their fighting positions, was a difficult but critical task. To overcome this problem, each day we spent the first few hours after stand-to eating and making needed adjustments to the fighting positions while maintaining the required security posture. After that time period we would rotate within fire teams to catch up on rest. The Marines were given opportunities to sleep at night when not on post, but given the level of alertness that was required of us, they were on a 2-hour rotation that did not allow them any degree of "good" sleep. In order to ensure that a key leader of the platoon was in touch with what was happening within the defense, the headquarters element of the platoon, comprised of myself, the platoon sergeant (SSgt Rodric Green), and the guide (Sgt Mark McDonald) maintained a roving post to ensure that the line was alert throughout the night. Meanwhile my radio operator (LCpl Oscar Martinez-Mendez) and the corpsman (HN Troy Antoine) maintained a 24-hour radio watch.

Reinforced LP/OP

To get past the problem of the 5-foot mud wall that limited the visibility 200 meters to our front, the LP/OP gradually evolved into a fortified fire team-sized bunker that protruded out of the wall. This position was manned 24 hours a day and equipped with two AT-4s (M136 self-contained, shoulder fired antiarmor weapon) and two claymores to help provide standoff as well as security for the team in case they were forced to egress back to the platoon's defensive lines. Trip flares were also placed out in front of this position at varying heights in order to ensure that if they were tripped that it was not from one of the many stray dogs that wandered out in front of our lines. The position was wired into the platoon command post via field phones and was responsible for giving accurate reporting of any suspicious activity in the area. This position proved to be an invaluable asset in getting early eyes-on for any movement within our area of responsibility. A battle drill was developed and practiced by all teams that occupied that position. This battle drill

had the Marines bound back to friendly lines at which point a visual and vocal signal was passed by the team leader across the defensive line so that everyone in the sector knew that it was safe to fire without worries of fratricide.

Man-Sized Irrigation Ditches

To deal with the man-sized irrigation ditches that led up to 30 meters in front of our fighting holes we implemented several different measures. We started with trip flares placed in likely areas of advance to act as early warning devices. Natural obstacles that were found in the area were then placed in the ditches to help impede foot progress in the area. Once the Class IV material was made available to us, double-strand concertina wire was placed along the final protective line of the machine-gun squad on our far left flank. Wire and tanglefoot was also arrayed throughout the platoon's frontage.

Detainees

Once we started to receive a large number of detainees in the airport, the ever-looming possibility of an attempted breakout was present. To proactively combat this and in order to be prepared for all possibilities, we also formed battle drills to cover us from fleeing detainees inside our perimeter. Designated marksmen from within the platoon were identified and assigned with the task of providing security for the rest of us. A proword was formed and passed verbally down the line to indicate that a breakout was attempted or being carried out. In turn the Marines would move into an advantageous position in order to get a better view and a better shot at any detainees who posed a threat.

No Man's Land

Outside the wall was an area considered no man's land. It is well known that once you set into a defense you push foot patrols out in order to see what is out beyond your lines. It gives you a better idea of who is in front of you as well as an opportunity to see what the enemy is able to see from the outside of the lines looking in. With tank main gun ordnance, Russian grenades, recoilless rifle rounds, various types of mortar rounds, mines, unexploded submunitions, and rub-

bled buildings sporadically laced around the entire facility, patrols were severely limited to vehicle movement only. The anti-Taliban forces (ATF) as well as American special forces units, Marine combined antiarmor teams, and light armored reconnaissance were the only ones permitted to conduct patrols in front of our lines. We were not always informed beforehand, especially with the coalition forces and ATF, that there would be patrols conducted within our area of responsibility. This made the LP/OP that much more an asset and required detailed reporting procedures as well as very strict compliance with the area's rules of engagement.

Summary

In conclusion, my time spent in the defensive perimeter around Kandahar International Airport was the professional military education of a lifetime. The opportunity to field test all of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) passed on from teachers and mentors was profound. As a rifle platoon commander I was given the medium to see firsthand what actually does or does not work and make necessary adjustments to the TTP where I saw applicable. I learned in greater detail some of the intricacies that actually go into occupying a long-term defense, setting up a full-scale defense in concert with adjacent companies and coalition forces, the dire necessity of implementing a fully developed sleep plan, the importance of flexibility in a fluid environment and, last but not least, one of the Marine Corps' time-honored traditions—the ability of small unit leaders to execute within the commander's intent once properly tasked.

We were tasked in many directions with many different missions that needed to be accomplished on a normally stringent timeline. These missions would not have been fully accomplished without the leadership and drive of my platoon sergeant and non-commissioned officers. They, as always, were up to the challenge of doing whatever their country and chain of command asked of them.

US  MC

>1stLt Hanson is the 3d Platoon Commander, Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.

Weapons Platoon in the Defense of Kandahar

by 1stLt Clayton Henderson

The effective employment of a weapons platoon may require general support missions and attachment of platoon assets to the rifle platoons.

Defending Kandahar International Airport posed some significant challenges to effectively employing the weapons platoon while still adhering to traditional defensive fundamentals and crew-served weapons techniques. These challenges were due mainly to the terrain and structures of the airfield as well as the sheer area the company was expected to defend. In discussing these challenges, it is best to generally discuss command and control issues for the platoon as a whole, the particular challenges of each individual section, and conclude with the lessons learned.

Command and Control

As with any subordinate unit, the employment of weapons platoon assets was based on the commander's intent. For the defense of Kandahar International Airport the commander's intent was twofold. First, weapons platoon assets would be placed in general support of the company in order to maximize their effectiveness and flexibility within the defense. Second, due to the geographic nature of the defense, weapons platoon assets would be collocated with the rifle platoons in order to provide them sufficient firepower even though they remained in general support.

In accordance with the commander's intent, each rifle platoon had one machinegun squad and two assault teams located within their general vicinity. The terrain did not always permit these crew-served weapons to be located in close proximity to the rifle platoons, but each squad or team was placed in a location where they could support the rifle platoons by fire. General support, however—at least within doctrinal terms—was not completely con-

ducive to effective command and control. It ultimately was necessary to implement a hybrid of general support and attachment in order to limit excessive strains.

Tactical control was maintained through the traditional general support doctrine—from company commander to weapons platoon commander to section leader. This enabled the weapons platoon commander to ensure that the company defense maintained its flexibility and that sufficient firepower could be summoned at the critical point and time. One significant dilemma that still remained was effective communications within the platoon. Since many of the weapons platoon units were in isolated positions, effective communications was often reliant upon field phones and intrasquad radios (ISRs). When possible, weapons platoon units would relay tactical information to rifle platoons, who would then relay it via radio to the weapons platoon commander at the company command post (CP). However, this method was not always the most effective or efficient.

This strain on communications placed further importance on the need for the weapons platoon commander to convey a clear and concise commander's intent to his subordinate leaders. Further, it was also necessary to clearly express critical coordinating instructions, such as engagement criteria and target precedence, so that subordinate leaders could confidently, competently, and quickly react to any situation, even in the absence of good, continuous communications with the weapons platoon commander.

Since weapons platoon assets were essentially collocated with each rifle platoon, the rifle platoons provided the logistical and administra-

tive support for their collocated weapons platoon units. This significantly reduced the strain on command and control. With subordinate units stretched almost 1½ kilometers from end to end, logistical and administrative support would have been very problematic if weapons platoon strictly applied the doctrinal notion of general support.

The combination of general support and attached doctrines did not provide the perfect solution but did provide an acceptable level of effective command and control. The weapons platoon commander was able to maintain tactical command to maintain flexibility, while logistical requirements were fulfilled by the rifle platoons. Subordinate leaders had to deal with increased friction since their tactical guidance and logistical support came from two different units at different locations, but this was a minimal increase in friction given the scenario. Overall, this hybrid method is a good example of the heralded Marine Corps 80 percent solution tradition.

Machinegun Section

The machinegun section was faced with a tremendous amount of friction in expecting to function as a cohesive unit. One squad was placed in the general vicinity of each rifle platoon, which meant that the section was stretched over the entire company perimeter even though it was in general support. Further, the terrain limited the section's ability to collocate its squads within the rifle platoons. One squad was forced to occupy a partially isolated position (Firebase Glory), while another squad was completely isolated—the nearest friendly unit being at least 250 meters to either of its flanks (The Alamo).

Small unit leadership was critical to the proper and effective employment of the machinegun section. All three machinegun squad leaders were corporals and were typically the highest ranking Marine on deck when a tactical decision had to be made. The lack of effective communications further increased the pressure on these subordinate leaders to make the right decision. Each squad leader continually acted confidently and competently. This was due mainly to their leadership skills and the clear and concise commander's intent and coordinating instructions they were given. On more than one occasion a machinegun squad showed remarkable fire discipline by properly applying the engagement criteria and target precedence.

Each squad diligently improved its primary position and mission—whether final protective line or principal direction of fire—but never lost sight of the importance of alternate and supplementary positions in order to maintain the defense's flexibility and depth. The section also displayed a keen sense of ingenuity when improving its positions. Two squads constructed exceptional machinegun positions in the traditional sense, worthy as examples at the schools of infantry and The Basic School. The squad occupying The Alamo was forced to construct elevated machinegun positions due to the terrain and the Alamo structure. It, as well, showed tremendous ingenuity and is worthy of a closer look by future 0331s and weapons platoon commanders. This same squad also was forced to provide its own security due to its isolated position. The squad leader took it upon himself to develop and rehearse immediate action drills for close enemy contact. It was this level of dedication and small unit leadership that was absolutely necessary for the machinegun section to successfully accomplish its mission.

Assault Section

The assault section faced many of the same problems as the machinegun section but also had many that were inherent to its primary mission. Since the section was in general support of the company, four assault

teams were collocated with a machinegun squad and Javelin (FGM-138 maneuverable, fire and forget weapon) team at Firebase Glory, while two assault teams occupied a position with 1st Platoon in Le Petit Beourge du Decotiis.

The assault teams collocated with the machinegun squad and Javelin team were given two missions. They were expected to effectively employ their shoulder launched multipurpose assault weapons (SMAWs) in defense of the company position, but they were also expected to serve as a security element for the other crew-served weapons at the location. The success of the assault section was based more on its ability to accomplish this collateral duty rather than their primary mission as SMAW gunners. Being collocated with machineguns and Javelins somewhat rendered the SMAW obsolete due to its much smaller maximum effective range. With relatively flat terrain, any vehicular threats could be engaged at the machinegun and Javelin maximum effective ranges, almost four times that of the SMAW, with high-explosive antiarmor rockets. However, there was still a significant risk of infiltration by small groups of Taliban or Al Qaeda. Therefore, it was paramount that the assault teams provide security within small arms range of their position. With Javelins providing firepower deep, machineguns covering the interim, and the assault teams providing close-in security, this isolated position was capable of exercising heavy antiarmor weapon/medium antiarmor weapon/light antiarmor weapon capability within its own sector of fire.

Though not a traditional section within weapons platoon, the company had two Javelin teams attached to it for the duration of the operation. These crew-served weapons provided outstanding standoff for the defense and ensured that any vehicular threat was engaged at maximum range. Perhaps the Javelins' most important contribution was not its firepower but its imaging capability. The Javelin thermal sight proved to be critical to the company's identify friend or foe capability. At least one Javelin team

was placed in a position that facilitated its imaging capability rather than its weapons system. The Javelin was a valued asset within the company defense and significantly reduced some of the friction in a defense that can, at best, be described as chaotic.

The defense of Kandahar International Airport exposed the importance of finding the proper balance in training 0351s as SMAW gunners and as demolition experts. If anything, demolition seemed to be a much more prevalent factor in defending the airport than the SMAW. From occupation through relief in place, a myriad of potentially explosive situations was encountered. First, the proposed defensive perimeter either paralleled or was located in old Soviet minefields. Second, during occupation of the company defense, the position was littered with the remnants of U.S. clusterbomb strikes from earlier in the campaign. Taliban and Soviet weapons caches, to include mines and unexploded ordnance, were frequently discovered within the perimeter throughout the operation. Demolitions were also used on a regular basis, either for improving counter-mobility obstacles or defensive flexibility. Both combat engineers and explosive ordnance demolition personnel were on scene to handle most of the demolition needs; however, it was clearly evident that an assault section properly trained in demolitions would be invaluable to the unit. Whether for improvement of the positions or for force protection, the demolitions knowledge of the assault section was sought after and utilized.

The assault section, like the machinegun section, relied on the leadership skills and dedication of its noncommissioned officers to successfully accomplish its mission. With no one higher than the rank of corporal, the section accomplished every mission it was tasked. It provided effective security to other crew-served positions, employed its organic weapons systems, and utilized its demolition expertise to continually improve the entire defensive perimeter. Like the machinegun section, the friction caused by a lack of continuous communications was greatly reduced by the professionalism of this section.

Mortar Section

Responsive and effective fire support was critical to successfully defending Kandahar International Airport, and this responsibility primarily fell to the company 60mm mortar section. The mortar position was located in close proximity to the company CP which helped facilitate command and control and limited the need for the section to provide its own security. However, the length and asymmetrical size of the defensive perimeter forced the section to utilize its advanced gunnery and fire direction center (FDC) skills.

The section's most prevalent mission was to provide responsive illumination anywhere along the company perimeter. Movement in front of the line was commonplace. Effective illumination ensured that the rules of engagement and engagement criteria were properly followed to limit fratricide between adjacent units (Marine Corps, Army, opposition group, special forces, etc.). In order to accomplish this task, the section maintained three priority illumination targets—one per tube and one target per platoon. In addition to a priority illumination target, each platoon was given a preplanned target reference point in case high-explosive munitions were required.

This defensive mission frequently tested the proficiency of the section's FDC capabilities. The section employed an FDC, manned by the section leader (sergeant), FDC chief (corporal), and the section's corpsman. While very proficient with the plotting board, the section's mortar ballistic computer (MBC) proved to be critical in providing extremely accurate and responsive fires to the company. The MBC significantly decreased the processing time by allowing the section to place the data on the guns while the FDC simultaneously conducted a "sanity check" with the alternate plotting board. This system proved to be quite efficient.

The MBC was worth its weight in gold, not just operationally, but in training as well. While on ship the section was able to conduct advanced call for fire training with the rifle platoons. Utilizing the MBC, the section leader, Sgt Grass, and FDC chief, Cpl Stevens, developed a train-

ing system where forward observers—typically 0311 squad leaders and fire team leaders—could call in polar missions and have their rounds and subsequent corrections plotted on a map. This training system was an outstanding opportunity for the company to perfect its call for fire procedures and for the section to perfect its FDC procedures at the same time. This training certainly paid dividends in Kandahar.

Deconfliction also proved to be a challenge for the section. Due to the inherent challenges of deconflicting indirect fire in close proximity to an operating airport, all fires had to be cleared through the battalion fire support coordination center (FSCC). This included the company mortar sections. One of the reasons the 60mm mortar sections are the most responsive indirect fire agency is because they are typically not regulated by the FSCC. To limit the friction caused by this situation, the company fire support team (FiST) served as a preliminary FSCC for the company. The rifle platoons would request a fire mission directly over company's tactical radio net to the mortar section. Meanwhile, the FiST would be monitoring the net and immediately request approval from the FSCC over the conduct of fire net. During this time the company mortar section would be processing the fire mission. Once the section was ready to fire, they simply waited for approval from the FiST over company tactical net once the FiST received approval from the FSCC. This method provided the best possible mixture of responsiveness and deconfliction.

Lessons Learned

Academics versus reality. Publication-based doctrine provides an outstanding foundation for developing and executing proper tactical decisions. Unfortunately, reality seldom restricts itself to the same confines as classroom study. This operation showed that blanket application of publications did not always lead to the best tactical decisions. Leadership at all levels had to adjust the publication "template" to achieve the best fit possible for the operation. The weapons platoon commander had to utilize aspects of both general support and attached in order to effectively sup-

port the company defense. The mortar section had to devote three guns for three simultaneous missions, otherwise a platoon would have to go without effective illumination. The machinegun section was forced to use ingenuity and build an elevated machinegun position in order to accomplish its mission. In every one of these situations the publication-based doctrine was not the best fit. Rather, the unit leader had to use his knowledge, experience, and ingenuity to develop the best tactics, techniques, and procedures for the specific mission.

Communications. The sheer magnitude of the company's defensive perimeter placed strain on the ability of the unit to maintain good, continuous communications with every position. The use of field phones and ISRs was mandatory to relieve some of this friction. Communications assets should never be discounted during preparation for combat if there is a chance that defensive operations may be conducted. Lack of communications also stressed the importance of issuing clear and concise guidance to subordinate units and having faith in their training abilities to carry out that guidance. This guidance should be in the form of a clear commander's intent, concise tasking statements, indepth coordinating instructions, and a thorough "no communications" plan. Weapons platoon had no one higher than corporal on the line, but there was never any doubt that each subordinate unit would execute to the fullest. Their tremendous success supports this unwavering confidence in their professionalism and competence as small unit leaders.

Continuing actions. There is never a defensive position that cannot be improved. That is the attitude that every Marine had to hold if the unit was to thwart complacency and accomplish its mission. Continuing actions can take many forms, and all of them are proper, so long as its purpose is to improve the defense. During the nearly 40-day occupation of this particular defensive position, continuing actions took several forms. Individual fighting positions were always being improved with overhead cover and camouflage. A

strict maintenance schedule for each crew-served weapon was adhered to in order to ensure combat effectiveness. Actions upon enemy contact were developed and frequently rehearsed so that the enemy would never hold the element of surprise. Supplementary and alternate fighting positions were constructed and refined to ensure that unit could mass superior firepower at the critical time and place. Countermobility obstacles were increased throughout the 40 days.

The benefits of these continuing actions were threefold. First, they sustained the unit's combat effectiveness for the duration of the operation. Second, continuing actions

improved the tactical soundness of the defense. The offense has the ability to decide when to attack, but the defense has the ability to decide where and how. Continuing actions help maintain that edge. Finally, continuing actions kept the Marines actively employed helping to fight complacency. There is a caveat to this: *do not make Marines work for the sake of working!* Notwithstanding the stereotypes, Marines are not stupid and are well aware when they are being patronized and given a line of garbage. There are more than enough legitimate improvements that can be done to the defense without having to resort to this type of continuing action.

Conclusion

Overall, defending Kandahar International Airport provided an exceptional opportunity for defensive fundamentals to be implemented and reassessed. It was a shining example of the dedication and professionalism of the small unit leader. No matter the challenge, the Marines met it with enthusiasm and vigor and accomplished the mission.



>1stLt Henderson is the Weapons Platoon Commander, Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.

Fire Support in the Defense of Kandahar

by 1stLts Clayton Henderson and Jason E. Broene

Situational awareness requires that Marines be kept abreast of the situation and the changes in the organization of the ground.

The fire support team (FiST) was forced to develop a fire support plan capable of defending a vast asymmetrical perimeter encompassing both open terrain and urban structures.

Overview

As it was taught at The Basic School (TBS), Infantry Officer Course, Field Artillery Officer Basic Course, or any other school, the key to a successful defense is the implementation of a defensive fire plan that incorporates both direct and indirect fire systems. This plan ensures there are no gaps in the defense and that a combined arms effect can be achieved anywhere along the perimeter at the critical time. When the mission is to defend an operational international airport defended by countless numbers of allied units, this challenge becomes that much more difficult.

The indirect fire assets available to each company changed as the defense evolved; however, the company defensive position was most reliant upon its 60mm mortars, 81mm mortars, and

rotary-wing close air support (RWCAS). These assets were controlled by the company FiST consisting of the fire support team leader, artillery forward observer, 81mm mortar forward observer, and artillery scout and radio telephone operator.

With aircraft utilizing the airport, and various units (combined antiarmor team/light armored reconnaissance, amphibious task force, operational detachment A (special forces), explosive ordnance demolition, etc.) conducting patrols within the defense's engagement areas, authorization to utilize indirect fire assets was maintained at the highest level. This included the use of the company's 60mm mortar sections. Therefore, it was paramount that the FiST maintained continuous communications with the fire support coordination center (FSCC) to ensure the company had responsive indirect fire support at its disposal. The ability of the FiST to deconflict and rapidly request fire support was critical to the successful defense of the airfield.

Company Fire Plan Sketch

This defense certainly was not typical of the defenses encountered on the sandtables of TBS. Platoons and crew-served weapons were not in a linear formation but were strategically placed throughout irrigation ditches, orchards, adobe villages, compounds, and junkyards. This placed immense importance on the abilities of the FiST team to accurately portray these positions and implement proper defensive fundamentals including (but not limited to) no gaps in the defense, a reduction of fratricide risk, and interlocking fields of fire between the company and adjacent units.

Before a deconfliction analysis could be conducted, the defense had to be accurately portrayed. The FiST found that two fire plan sketches provided the best way to ensure deconfliction. The first fire plan sketch was created for use by the FSCC in order to deconflict the battalion's various company defenses. This sketch included 8-digit grid coordinates of each platoon's right and left flanks as well as

the grid coordinates of every crew-served weapon's position within the defense. The sketch also included right and left lateral limits for each platoon and the primary mission of each crew-served weapon (principal direction of fire, final protective line, etc.). Finally, the company's 60mm mortar position was plotted with its direction of fire. This fire plan sketch worked quite well for ensuring deconfliction at the battalion level. However, due to the scale of maps readily available to subordinate units—most only had access to 1:100,000 scale maps—an alternate fire plan sketch was developed for use by the company.

This second fire plan sketch was a layman's representation of the defense that accurately portrayed each position so that every Marine within the company could strengthen his situational awareness by recognizing the location of adjacent units and what those adjacent units were doing. The FiST could easily ensure deconfliction with the first sketch (using grid coordinates and directions in mils), but the second sketch enabled subordinate units to correct inaccuracies between what was depicted on paper and what was actually in front of them. It is very difficult to depict a junkyard, adobe wall, and a destroyed MiG-21 using grid coordinates on a 1:100,000 scale map.

It is important to note that the fire plan sketch continually evolved as the company defense improved. Whether it was guidance from higher, reaction to enemy contact, or just general improvements to the defense, these sketches frequently had to be updated. The final sketch handed over to the 101st Airborne was of only slight resemblance to the initial sketch drawn under a poncho with a Mini Mag-Lite.

Target Planning

With the artillery battery already securing the Embassy in Kabul, it was obvious that all indirect fire would have to rely on the battalion 81mm mortar platoon and the always responsive and reliable company 60mm mortar section. Being allocated only two 81mm oncall targets, our company's fire support plan relied heavily on its own 60mm mortar section. While the platoons established their defensive positions, the company FiST was primarily concerned with finding a place where it

could observe fire over the company frontage and conduct target planning.

Within our company's lines was an abandoned compound that consisted of four one-story buildings, one of which had already been occupied by the battalion's scout/snipers. After surveying each building the decision was made to collocate our observation post (OP) with the snipers. This decision paid dividends throughout our time defending the airport for many reasons. First, being only 20 meters from the company command post, the FiST could rapidly displace and occupy the OP within a matter of minutes when a situation developed. Second, it gave the FiST excellent observation to the majority of our company's frontage and targeted areas even with the host of junkyards, orchards, adobe villages, and our defense's asymmetrical characteristics. However, 1st Platoon's position still required an additional OP due to its isolated nature. In addition, being located with the scout/snipers enhanced the FiST's ability to conduct target planning and observation. Before the FiST even established its OP, the snipers already had accurate directions, distances, and grids to key terrain features and dead space to our front. With their high-powered spotting scope they were also able to identify and relay accurate target descriptions to the FiST. The snipers knowledge of the ground to our front and ability to accurately locate and identify potential targets greatly assisted the FiST in its early planning stages and throughout our time in the defense.

As the platoons' positions continued to improve, the FiST moved about the lines working with each platoon commander discussing preplanned targets they felt they needed or that we had already developed. It was our goal to ensure that the fire support plan be kept simple so that platoon commanders had only two or three targets to which they had to refer. This enabled the platoons to have a clear understanding of the target numbers they were given and where each target was located to their front. Further, the limited number of targets reduced the strain placed upon the company mortar section's fire direction center (FDC). Each platoon had one priority illumination target that was assigned to only one tube.

This nontraditional approach ensured that the mortar section could respond to all platoon requests for illumination, even simultaneously. Each platoon also was responsible for a target reference point where data was already calculated for high-explosive (HE) munitions. The FiST worked in close concert with the 60mm mortar FDC ensuring that they understood the target list worksheet, the fire support plan, and which targets corresponded to respective platoons. The illumination and HE preplanned targets were within 800 meters of the company's defensive lines, whereas our two 81mm mortar preplanned targets were deeper within the engagement area. This allowed the platoon commanders to call for and adjust the 60mm mortars with the naked eye. This also allowed the FiST to observe and engage deeper targets with 81mm mortars or RWCAS.

With the howitzers remaining on ship and eight 81mm tubes in general support of an entire battalion landing team, almost all fire support planning and execution relied on the companies' mortar sections. Kilo's mortar section, working closely with the FiST, was able to develop and implement a comprehensive fire support plan that supported the scheme of maneuver and commander's intent.

Coordination

The basic premise for the existence of a fire support team is twofold. First, the FiST is the company commander's tool to effectively employ all available weapons systems in order to achieve a combined arms effect at the critical time and place. Second, the FiST is responsible for ensuring that the effects of that massive firepower have been sufficiently deconflicted so that the risk of fratricide is reduced. In the defense, reducing the fratricide risk depends on the abilities of the FiST to coordinate with the FSCC and adjacent units.

There were two basic methods to ensure deconfliction between adjacent units along the defensive perimeter. First, the FiST would submit a fire plan sketch and target list worksheet to the FSCC. The FSCC would then compile this information and conduct its own "sanity check" for the entire defense. The FSCC did not require a 60mm target list worksheet, so another

er method of deconfliction was necessary for this asset. The second method of deconfliction was simple lateral coordination between adjacent units. The best way to guarantee that your fires are not endangering adjacent units is to conduct a “face to face” with that unit’s FiST. This coordination was extremely beneficial. It allowed deconfliction to occur on the lowest level and reduced some of the burden faced by the FSCC who had to deal with Air Force air traffic controllers, special forces units, and anti-Taliban forces in the area, just to name a few. With this much deconfliction having to occur at the higher level, it would be irresponsible for the company FiST not to deconflict what we could in and amongst our own unit and those adjacent to us before relying on the FSCC.

Due to the unique situation at the airfield, rather nontraditional tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for processing fire missions were implemented. The company’s perimeter was too lengthy and “unique” to allow the FiST to effectively cover the entire defense from one OP. The 1.5 kilometer path from one edge of the defense to the other did not lend itself to the FiST rapidly changing positions during an engagement. Therefore, the company had to rely upon the call for fire skills of the individual platoons in order to rapidly integrate indirect fire assets. However, since all indirect fire assets had to be cleared by the FSCC, the FiST could not be entirely discounted in the process.

To reduce this friction, the company established the following TTP. If the company mortar section was to be utilized—and the FiST was unable to observe from its OP with the scout/snipers—the rifle platoons would call for fire directly to the mortar section. At the same time the FiST would be monitoring the company net and immediately relay the request to the FSCC. This method allowed the mortar section to immediately process the mission without having to monitor both company and the conduct of fire nets. The FiST would receive clearance on the conduct of fire net in one ear and immediately relay that clearance to mortars over the company net in the

other ear. When the 81mm mortar section was utilized and the FiST was unable to observe from its OP, the rifle platoons would relay a call for fire request to the FiST who would then relay the request to the 81s platoon over the conduct of fire net. Any corrections were then transmitted from the rifle platoon requesting/observing the fire mission and the FiST would relay it.

Utilizing RWCAS proved to be a trickier situation for the company. Due to the limited number of forward air controllers (FACs) within the battalion, Kilo Company’s FiST went without the aid of a FAC. This, however, did not negate the FiST’s responsibility to effectively employ RWCAS if the need arose. One of the more difficult aspects of not having a FAC was not having the communications assets to direct air. To relieve this friction, whenever the need for RWCAS arose, the FiST would compile the necessary information and relay a nine-line brief to the air officer with the FSCC. The request would then be processed and RWCAS would be pushed to our location, either with FAC(A) (airborne) capabilities or guided by the FiST over very high-frequency radio. Typically, FAC(A) was the most prevalent method of control during RWCAS operations.

Lessons Learned

Proper lateral coordination equals successful deconfliction. The chaos associated with defending Kandahar International Airport clearly stressed the need to conduct face-to-face coordination to ensure deconfliction of all fires. By taking the time to conduct deconfliction at the lowest level, the FiST ensured that it had done its job and relieved some of the FSCC’s burden. The risk of being overconfident that someone within the FSCC will always deconflict your immediate area of operations equates to the FiST acquiescing its primary responsibility and increasing the risk of fratricide.

Use fire plan sketches to increase every Marine’s situational awareness. Implementing such a nontraditional defense required every Marine to have a heightened situational awareness. Creating a simple fire plan sketch that enabled every Marine to

understand his role, and the roles of the Marines adjacent to him, definitely helped achieve this requisite state. Further, each subordinate unit was better able to recognize potential gaps in its sector from a graphical depiction of the terrain versus grid coordinates on a 1:100,000 scale map.

Subordinate leaders ought to be included in fire support planning. Though not a new lesson learned, this defense reemphasized the importance of integrating subordinate leaders into the fire support planning process. Within this defense it was the platoon commanders who were calling for fire. It was the 60mm mortar section FDC—Sgt Nathan Grass, 0311—who was processing most missions—not a battery FDC. By including these individuals in the planning process, they better understood the premise of the plan and how to better implement it. As was stated in the “Coordination” section of this article, the company’s new TTP were not just academic but were implemented more than once during the successful defense of Kandahar International Airport.

Conclusion

Serving as the FiST in the successful defense of the airport reiterated that flexibility and adaptability are still two of the most important attributes a Marine can possess. Schools, Combined Armed Exercises (CAXs), and the Marine expeditionary unit (special operations capable) workshop certainly provided a solid foundation, but the FiST who attempts to rigidly apply “CAXisms” to Kandahar is doomed to struggle. After all, we never even ran a single suppression of enemy air defense—but were prepared nonetheless. Bottom line for the future—be prepared to think outside of the box, especially in regard to fires.



>For 1stLt Henderson’s bio, see p.45.

>>1stLt Broene served as the artillery forward observer and the headquarters platoon commander for Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.



The XO in the Defense of Kandahar

by 1stLt Jon Riggs

The defense of Kandahar International Airport is addressed from the XO's perspective.

In most tactical scenarios the company executive officer (XO) is seen as having little input other than coordinating support of the company and supervising the immediate staff and rifle platoon commanders. The experience in Kandahar took on a different aspect during my tenure as company XO. I had been part of the defense many times during different training operations and already had a feeling of what my duties should be. But a real-world operation tends to make you focus on the very essence of your job. Professionally during training you continually strive to carry out your duties as you would during combat. However, I don't think it is until you are put in that situation that you truly realize what your duties are. It was that way for me at Kandahar. It literally came to me as an epiphany, and I realized what my duties were and beyond.

Assumption of Command

One of the XO's tasks is to assume command and act as the company commander (CO) in his absence. There can be no hesitation in a tactical situation. I cannot stress the importance of a senior lieutenant stepping up and taking the reins when called upon. There were several situations that arose in which my company commander had been tasked to attend meetings or was separate from the company for other tactical missions. During these episodes I was called upon to make decisions that weighed heavily into our engaging a threat to our front. Hesitation in my duties in this area could have led to our engaging friendlies or not engaging a threat. Such a scenario occurred while my CO was absent when I received a report that a T55 tank had appeared in front of one of our platoon's positions. They

were ready to engage with a Javelin (FGM-138 maneuverable, fire and forget weapon) missile. Had I not been there to relay the information to higher headquarters, develop the situation, and get verification from higher headquarters that it was indeed an anti-Taliban force's vehicle, the results could have been disastrous. That weighs into the point that either the CO or the XO should always be available to run the company. The platoon commanders should not be engaged in communicating outside their immediate chain of command but focused on fighting the fight at hand. The CO or XO should be there to fight the fight at the company level and make the liaison with their higher command over the net. This senior leadership is critical to paint the picture for higher headquarters and to give the subordinate commands in the company the

adequate experience and information to empower them to do their job and accomplish their mission.

Stay Informed

It is critical that the company XO be as informed about operational taskings, intelligence, and general knowledge of the everyday information as the CO. If the XO is to perform effectively in the CO's absence, it is critical that the CO and XO have an understanding that they must share everything. In the defense this should be no different than the XO being read into an operations order in the attack so that he can execute it if the CO goes down. My CO, Capt T. Shane Tomko, always kept me read into all information so that I could execute his duties in his absence and keep subordinates informed. We had a policy of not holding any information from each other thereby ensuring that we were always on the same page when it came to the company. It allowed me to fulfill his intent.

The Command Post and Daily Operations

The XO should always ensure that the command post (CP) is running smoothly and is organized to allow the CO to focus on the job at hand. We ensured that there was a set standing operating procedure (SOP) for the CP and that it was adhered to at all times. Our SOP ensured that all tactical nets were manned continually. The CO or XO was always present in the CP. If we were not present, we ensured that the next senior member of the command element knew where we were. For example, if we were walking the lines they knew our exact route so that we could be reached. This was critical, as I have outlined before, for command and control. Someone from the command element was always awake so that we were all not just rolling out of our sleeping bags should we have a situation arise. During the hours that we were on our watch we ensured an active posture. Someone from the command element walking the lines at night was critical. It did several things for the unit. It allowed the command element to ensure that our subordinate commands were

doing their jobs, and it allowed the individual Marine to know that the command element was active and not all in the bag in the CP. This was critical to good order and discipline in the defense and for morale among the Marines.

Split Commands

The basic principle that the CO and the XO did not sleep in the same area, split into the alpha and bravo commands, was adhered to strictly. If we were in contact I was sent to the best area where I could act as the eyes and ears for the CO. This was another technique that worked extremely well for us. Our defensive frontage was strung out. When we were in contact, the CO would push me to the area that was most vulnerable or on the outreaches of his immediate control. For us, 1st Platoon's position was located in the adobe village, was very vulnerable, and was isolated from the rest of the company. On the night of 11 January, the battalion landing team (BLT) became engaged in a firefight with enemy forces that were trying to probe the battalion's lines and engage C-130 aircraft as they came in to remove detainees to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The company gunnery sergeant and I moved to 1st Platoon's position to facilitate the company commander's situational awareness with what was occurring on that flank of the defense. Additionally, this technique freed the platoon commander in this sector to concentrate on the fight at hand while not tying him up on the radio. This also allowed the company commander to paint good SALUTE (size, activity, location, unit, time, equipment) reports to the BLT for courses of action to deal with the developing battle as it occurred. In the event that the company commander or I were removed from the battle, split commands would allow us to still have some command element.

Supervision of the Staff

Supervising the staff is always an active duty of the XO. Administrative issues with the BLT do not disappear and logistical requirements become more intensive for the company in a real-world setting. Not being resupplied correctly in this environment

can be detrimental to the operation at hand in a tactical sense (ammo, batteries) and psychologically can beat the Marines (chow, water) if not conducted properly. Our company gunnery sergeant did an excellent job of ensuring we were properly supplied and equipped. However, the XO should always be read into the plan on where you stand on supplies and the means being taken to alleviate the problem. I always ensured that I knew where we stood on all administrative and logistical requirements. This allows the XO to speak intelligently with his CO and the BLT on logistical requirements for the company and ensure it is happening.

Conclusion

I have outlined in this article some of the basic principles that I found to be important in my duties as part of the defense of Kandahar International Airport. A lot of what I have covered are points that are taught as the basics for defensive occupations and the job of an XO in a rifle company. My point was to convey how true most of the textbook teachings are and how apparent they became to me. Some of the basic tenets of my billet and the defense were built upon to facilitate our daily operations. Some were tailored to our situation, but all were built on the basic premises. I learned a tremendous amount from watching my CO in numerous situations. It provided me a wealth of knowledge that I am sure I will carry to a company if I am ever put in the same situation. The biggest lesson I took out of this is the old phrase, "the more you sweat in peacetime, the less you will bleed in war." The training that I received, from Quantico to my present CO, was so critical for me to competently perform my job. The harder we train in peace to achieve realism and muscle memory in understanding our billets, the better we will perform during real conflict.



>1stLt Riggs is the XO for Kilo Co, 3d Bn, 6th Mar.