

## *Preparing a Reserve Platoon for Operations: Lessons Learned*

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Distinguished guests, fellow reservists, and to my colleagues on the panel, thank you for taking the time to take in this panel on our varied experiences on recent on operations. I think my own experience is now becoming a bit dated as I returned home from TF 1-08 in early November 2008 and the army is now launching TF 1-10 out the door. However, that being said, I will not be deterred from covering a few points.

Before getting started, here is some initial background to put my experiences in context. My role on TF 1-08 was a second-in-command of a Force Protection Pl in the National Support Element (NSE). Our platoon had two main tasks that we shared with a sister Pl that trained in Shilo with 2 PPCLI – one, convoy escort on Combat Logistic Patrols (CLPs) and secondly, the manning and securing of Entry Control Point (ECP) 3, the main entry point into Kandahar Airfield (KAF). Our Platoon reported to Edmonton at the beginning of April 2007, rotated overseas during February – March 2008, and was rotated out September – October 2008.

I will focus my remarks on major themes as opposed to a chronological approach. My basic themes will focus on training – both collective and individual, administration, the importance of managing expectations – as leaders and for the soldiers we lead, and a final thought on some recommendations.

## Training

Obviously the main focus of the Pl was in preparing for the two diverse tasks it had been given – one very much static and the other very mobile encompassing the entire AO. As mentioned earlier, our assigned tasks were to be shared with a ‘sister’ Platoon. This Platoon was based around Armoured Reconnaissance soldiers, while our Pl was infantry-centric. The other Platoon was trained in Shilo, while we trained in Edmonton.

The biggest challenge that faced Pl was how the training progression was set up. On arrival in Edmonton and the NSE, we were immediately “cut” over to 1 PPCLI for IBTS, Battle Task Standards training and assessment, urban operations, and convoy operations. While with 1 PPCLI, we were initially with HQ Coy and then we shifted over to A/3 – A Coy, 3 PPCLI that was in the processing of undergoing there LAV conversion in 1 PPCLI lines, within a few weeks of our arrival.

This move over to 1 PPCLI had us in Wainwright on a training exercise within one week of the Pl’s arrival in Edmonton. This initial exercise was focused on IBTS – which all members of the Pl had to have completed prior to reporting for the Task Force. It also included Battle Task assessment at the Section and Platoon level. This culminated in live-fire attacks at both the Section and Platoon level. These focus on collective training allowed the Platoon to bond more fully into a cohesive unit due to the sense of accomplishment and the success achieved on this exercise.

On return to Edmonton, the Platoon continued training with A/3 with the focus on convoy operations, urban operations, and gunfighter training. It must be noted that the entire Platoon did not complete the Gunfighter program while with A/3 because of time and resource factors. The thought being, however, that we would be able to make up this training later with the NES, but this never happened. Other skill sets were reviewed and practiced during this time as well – including a review of the HMG, use of the DAGR and PLGR, and navigation. Once this training wrapped up, the Platoon went on summer leave.

On return from summer leave, the Platoon returned to its parent organization – the National Support Element. The focus here was once again on collective training in

preparation for Ex Desert Ram/Maple Guardian. Prior to these exercises, the NES did a two-week preparation exercise in Wainwright in August 2007 and September and October were occupied with Ex Desert Ram/Maple Guardian. On the completion of the validation exercise for the Task Force, the Platoon returned to Edmonton for a period of individual training focused on First Aid, the Tactical Casualty Care Course (TCCC), and RG-31 driver and Remote Weapons System (RWS) training.

The key issue with the training of the Platoon was the way the training was laid out. A brief period of individual training, followed by a very large amount of collective training; then a very rushed individual training cycle to provide the necessary skill sets for the Platoon tasks. There was no opportunity for the acquired individual skill sets to be tested in a collective exercise prior to the Platoon's arrival in Theatre to validate them. As well, the impression left on the Platoon was that the intensity of the training conducted with A/3 better prepared them for operations and that following the return to the NES the Platoon 'lost' its edge to a certain degree during the training followed.

The time spent training with A/3 is still remembered by members of the Platoon as a highly positive and conducive period in the development of the Platoon. As an infantry platoon, A/3 was 'home.' The leadership of the company included the Platoon in their planning cycle and while focused on their own preparation for the tour, also worked to further the development of the Platoon. Overall, the Platoon to this day remembers fondly the training and time spent with A/3.

The transition to being with the NSE was a large culture shock for the Platoon. Moving from an Infantry Company to a logistic based world was difficult for the Platoon. The way the organizations are set up and think are fundamentally different; this contributed to some early adjustment issues for the Platoon. In an Infantry Platoon, the Platoon Warrant does the bulk of the administration; in the logistic world, this is handled at the officer level. This caused some early disruption till the Platoon leadership adjusted to this, but even in theatre, the division of labour between the Platoon Commander and the Platoon Warrant Officer in an infantry platoon was not understood by our logistic counterparts.

The NSE itself is a complex organization which has many moving parts that contribute to the success of the Task Force. But with this complexity comes an inherent

problem – each of these moving parts require specialized training. To name a few, this includes mechanics, traffic technicians, and ammo technicians. With so many moving parts, each with its own specialized area of expertise, there is nothing that unifies them as a unit. The overall mission is only a small factor in bringing together an organization this diverse – this contributed in many respects to the Platoon being left to on its own and conducting training away from the main organization. This was particularly noticeably when the Platoon initially joined the NSE because of the strong direction that had previously been received from A/3. Another contributing factor to this feeling of isolation from the rest of the NSE was the fact the sub-unit the Platoon belonged to within the NSE was also responsible for Camp Services, in many respects a one-hundred-eighty degree turn from Force Protection. That is a brief outline of the training undertaken by the Platoon and the impression it left with its members. Now a brief look at the issue of Administration.

### **Administration**

The biggest issue confronting the Platoon was administration. From the very beginning the in-clearance was chaotic with a large of augmentees showing up in Edmonton at the same time. Complicating this was within a week of reporting for the Task Force the Platoon was on exercise in Wainwright for the next five weeks. Trying to resolve administrative problems from Wainwright was a nightmare. Time and distance were the two biggest factors in trying to resolve issues – there was no time because of the necessity to do the training and distance because we were unable to deal with people necessary to solve the problems. The major one naturally was the matter of Class C contracts. The inability to solve administrative issues was a legacy the Platoon continued to deal with even into theatre.

Although a number of the NCOs and a few of the soldiers had been on previous overseas missions, the issue of benefits and what the soldiers were entitled as a Class C soldier was never clearly articulated. Incomplete and half-truth information filled the vacuum of the lack of a proper briefing on this issue. To combat this, at the Platoon level, the step was taken to organize our own SISIP briefing to ensure the soldiers had the correct information on this critical matter. As well, for soldiers from Alberta, the

matter of the Alberta Health Care Insurance Premiums continued to be an issue that followed us into Theatre. Soldiers while deployed received their bills for this; when they had completed the paperwork for the Army to take have this deducted from their pay and for the Army to pay its portion of the Premium back in Edmonton. As you can imagine, it is very difficult for the member to resolve this type of situation from Theatre, especially when your family is getting the bill for this and wondering why it is not been taken care of.

However, the biggest administrative issue was the matter of Class C contracts and pay. Once the Class C contracts were signed, getting the information inputted into the system took a very long time. In one case, took one individual eight months to be entered into the Regular Force pay system from when he signed his contract. As well, because of the allotment system used to pay personnel while waiting for their contracts to be entered, it caused a large number of problems when the soldiers were finally entered into the system. The major problem being large lump sum payments, when the Mounting Base Orderly Room (MBOR) was questioned about the payments; the Platoon leadership was assured the payments were correct for the soldier's pay. The MBOR did not take into account that the allotment payments had not been entered into the pay system when the lump pay payments had been paid out and therefore had not been deducted from the amount sitting in the soldier's pay accounts. Wisely, the soldiers were directed by their Platoon leadership not to spend the funds as there had undoubtedly been a mix up some where. You can imagine the distress that could have been caused it at a later date the Army had come looking for this money if the soldiers had not held on to it. It should be noted on a positive note, members of my unit that went on TF 3-09 had no difficulty with pay as far as Class C contracts.

On the positive front was the support from both 1 PPCLI Headquarters Company and the NSE in providing office space, computers, and troop space for the Platoon. In the case of 1 PPCLI this positive relationship was perhaps most assisted by the previous Reserve service of a number of its staff and the previous relationship established by shared courses, taskings, and other missions. Those relationships and how important they become to making things work one does not realize unfortunately till long after the fact. It makes one realize how small our army really is.

## **Managing Expectations**

Perhaps the biggest challenge in training was managing the expectations of the Platoon. This not included our soldiers, but ourselves as leaders. As leaders, we arrived with the expectation that there was a clear plan to follow on the path to Afghanistan. There was a plan – a general outline of a plan or “Road to War.” This plan did not however, extend down to the Platoon level. Much of the time of the Platoon leadership was invested in developing a training plan to match the “Road to War,” while simultaneously doing the individual training required and getting the necessary resources for training. This situation was certainly intensified on the Platoon’s move to the NES, significantly adding to the feeling of being left without direction and assistance.

The second issue was the expectation of the soldiers themselves. This was centered on two issues – the first was straightforward and was a matter of the soldiers shedding there Class A mentality and adjusting to the pace and discipline of full-time service. The second was harder to overcome because the soldier’s expected all equipment and kit deficiencies to be resolved because they were now training with the Regular Army. They did not understand or appreciate, that like the Reserves, the Regular Army also has constraints on equipment and kit.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the experiences of the Platoon the following points are recommended to improve the integration of reserve mission elements into the Task Force structure. The first is having the Platoon leadership report in at a minimum a month before the solders report in. Ideally, if the leadership can report sooner, it is an opportunity to give them advance courses such as Urban Operations Instructor, that would provide them skill sets to train there own Platoon and skill sets they can take back to their home units to train those soldiers. By bringing the leadership in advance of their soldiers, it allows the leadership to clear in and become familiar with the process and ensures that when there soldiers are doing their in clearance, the leadership can deal with the issues that occur, instead of trying to in clear themselves. As well, this provides the leadership

time to work together to better to become a cohesive team, while not under the observation of the soldiers. Finally, it provides the Platoon leadership the opportunity to properly develop a Platoon training plan in the context of the larger unit and Task Force Plan but also allows for resources limitation and time constraints to be factored in.

Secondly, allow time for proper administration to be completed – both of a military nature and that of personal benefits. In the long term, for the soldiers and the unit, this will save a considerable amount of man-hours that otherwise will have to be invested in this. This also allows for the Reserve soldiers to adjust to full-time service, work on their physical conditioning, and ensure they have the proper allotment of kit. Finally, it allows the Platoon to integrate and to start team building.

Finally, allow the Platoon to acquire the individual skill sets required for the Platoon's mission and tasks before collective exercises and validation. Do the necessary IBTS training, but also ensure the necessary individual qualifications that are required are trained and tested. Once this is done, build up the collective skill set of the Platoon – this should include both dry and live fire exercises. Finally, confirm the acquisition of individual and collective skill sets on the collective exercise designed to evaluate the Task Force.