Improving Tactical Reconnaissance - Back to Basics

SFC Bryan Lackey and COL Brett Jenkinson,
NTC Light Task Force Combat Trainers

Preface:
Observations at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California, indicate our task force scout platoons have lost some basic skills that must be retrained and regained in order to ensure the Army's continued success in combat. This article provides specific observations and insights garnered from more than 20 brigade combat team rotations at the NTC with subsequent recommendations.

Shortcomings Start at the Top: The Task Force Staff
Many task force staffs fail their scout platoons for the following reasons:
> ➢ Improper scout platoon employment
> ➢ Inability to clearly enunciate tactical tasks
> ➢ Inability to manage reconnaissance and surveillance (R&S) assets

How we employ scouts
Due to the nature of the counterinsurgency fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, most units arrive at the NTC with no intention to use the task force scout platoon for doctrinal purposes: Route/Zone/Area Reconnaissance or Reconnaissance in Force. Typically, the commander or operations officer (S3) task the Reconnaissance Squads of the Scout Platoon to conduct mounted and dismounted security (Personal Security Detachment) for the battalion commander and command sergeant major during their battlefield circulation. The sniper squad's three sniper sections are usually task organized to support companies.

To make matters worse, during missions that the scouts are used in their doctrinal role, task force staffs rarely provide the scout platoon good, doctrinal tasks. In fact, most scout platoon leaders and platoon sergeants have never been employed in accordance with their doctrinal roles. Very few scout platoon leaders (PL) or platoon sergeants (PSG) have attended any institutional training courses to learn and understand their craft. Thus, PLs and PSGs do not know how they should be employed.

Tasks we give scout platoons
Task Force intelligence officers (S2s) and S3s rarely give the scout platoon sound doctrinal tasks – specifically to confirm or deny an element of the S2s Enemy Situation Template (SITTEMP). Even when tasking the scout platoon to observe a Named Area of Interest (NAI), such as an improvised explosive device hot-spot, rarely do S2s or S3s focus on observation times for the scouts; nor do they define the specific reporting requirements. A good task might read like:

"Observe NAI 3108 from 110400JUL11 to 110700JUL11 IOT PID IED emplacement; O/O conduct CFF Tgt AD 3105 to destroy IED emplacers; BPT conduct TSE on POI."

Regardless whether the staff tasks the scout platoon to conduct reconnaissance to fill an information requirement (IR) pertaining to an enemy SITTEMP or an IR to fill an intelligence gap on a personality target, the tasks must be written clearly. For example:

"**Collect a facial photo of Hask Hafiz IVO Ertabat Shar NLT 122100JUL11 IOT assist in PID of TF HVT #4.**"

Once written, S2s and S3s fail to properly capture the collection task. S2s typically use the collection synch matrix (CSM) (Figure 1), although it is intended as a briefing tool. The CSM typically lists brigade and above assets, to include National Technical Means. Worse yet, the task force scout platoon is rarely included in the CSM.

Task force S2s would do well to avoid using the CSM as a planning tool. For planning (orders), we should return to a tabular R&S Matrix (Figure 2) or Information Collection Matrix. These are simpler and more descript for junior leaders who have not been exposed to most of the reconnaissance platforms shown on the CSM.

DTG: _____													
MISSION: _____			RECONNAISSANCE AND SURVEILLANCE MATRIX										
PRIORITY	NAI	START STOP	SIR/ INSTRUCTION	RECON	CO A	CO B	CO C	MORTAR	HHC	SNIPERS	FIST	COORDINATION	REMARKS

Example Reconnaissance and Surveillance (R&S) Matrix

Solutions to fix problems at the task force level
While most task force staffs improve their use of the scout platoon during a rotation at the NTC, the scout platoon is frustrated by the staff's inefficiency and experimentation with the scouts. Barring formal training, S3s and S2s would do well to task the scout PL and PSG to provide a capabilities brief to the staff. Such a brief might remedy the staff's failure to assign doctrinal tasks in accordance with Field Manual (FM) 3-20.98, *Reconnaissance and Scout Platoon*.

The finer points of reconnaissance management may require some formal training. The solution for staff shortfalls can be remedied by attending one of many Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) Top Off courses offered by the US Army's Intelligence and Security Command's (INSCOM) FOUNDRY program. An ISR management course provides the student planning guidance to overcome shortages in

reconnaissance holdings. Instruction includes tips on cueing, mixing, and reconnaissance redundancy. It also helps intelligence officers to clearly enunciate reconnaissance tasks.

Shortcomings at the Scout Platoon Level
Combining the staff's inability to focus collection times, poorly written tactical tasks to the scout platoon, and weak individual skills in the platoon, a simple task to confirm or deny an action inside an NAI results in ineffective persistent surveillance. Scouts are generally weak at infiltrating hostile areas to establish an observation post (OP). Thus, persistent surveillance from that OP results in terrain denial: the enemy watched our scouts occupy our OP. Hence, we fail in objective reconnaissance. This is failure in the basics of reconnaissance – find the enemy, obstacle, or route and report it. At the scout platoon level, we routinely observe atrophied basic skills:
  - Poor Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs)
  - Lack of proficiency with organic equipment (specifically radios, computers, and navigation aids)
  - Poor fieldcraft
  - Lack of doctrinal knowledge

TLPs – the start of something good
Specific shortfalls lie in scout section and team leader skills in conducting the pre-combat inspection (PCI) and, later, the pre-combat check (PCC). Leaders seem hesitant to force scouts to lay out required equipment for a mission, a practice that is snuffed as "old fashioned" or beneath the expertise of the "special men" of the scout platoon! Later, leaders fail to execute PCCs prior to movement. The results are troopers who carry non-essential equipment and forget that which is essential. Batteries are dead, navigational aids aren't prepared with waypoints, leaders leave paper maps and fires overlays, etc. Scout leaders must have separate PCI and PCC checklists.

A Scout Section Leader from 2-508th PIR conducts a PCC prior to a mission.

We also get lazy following issuance of our warning order. Leaders don't use available time to prepare and rehearse individual scout tasks. They don't maximize use of company intelligence support teams (CoISTs) or the battalion S2 shop, where there are invaluable computer software tools to help scouts select the optimal OP prior to leaving the wire. Blue Force Tracker (BFT), speed software, Falcon View, Arc GIS, and many more have line of sight (LoS) analysis tools. At the tactical level, LoS is undeniably the single most important factor affecting the scout platoon performance.

Equipment woes – the best kit in the world
We also observe trends in units' failure to use available time during TLPs to prepare mission essential equipment, including Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment, Lightweight Laser Designating Rangefinder (LLDR), and night fighting equipment: night vision goggles, aimpoint lasers, thermal sights, etc. If we are successful in preparing this equipment, we aren't especially adept at employing it, especially in the dark. These are all the tools that can make scouting remarkably more pleasant.

A scout from 2-508th PIR employs digital tools prior to a mission.

Much of a scout's dirty work, the infiltration, can be avoided if he uses his route selection tools properly. Because we've lost much of our ability to read a map well, specifically our ability to identify inter-visibility lines, computer software has become especially important. If used properly it can allow a scout to walk upright almost entirely to his OP, yet remain completely undetected. BFT, Speed, Falcon View, and Arc GIS are all programs that can help us plan routes.

If we do occupy a hide site effectively, we often have trouble sending reports back to the Task Force S2. A good, baseline understanding of wave theory can help scouts maximize the use of multiband radios like the AN/PRC-117G (see inset photo). Once mastered the AN/PRC-117G provides a digital communications capability that has eluded scouts for years. It allows long-haul communications and the ability for scouts to transmit more than voice reports. Photos, tactical chat, and even short videos of reconnaissance objectives can now be reported and shared.

Fieldcraft – expertise that is earned, not taught
Due mostly to ten years of combat conducted from a forward operating base or combat outpost (COP), fieldcraft skills are all but lost. Scouts have not been spared this atrophy. We seem to have lost the ability to stay "in the woods" for more than 24-28 hours without detection. Priorities of work, personal hygiene, and field sanitation skills are a distant memory.

Photo of scouts in an OP

While in an OP or hide site, scouts fail to conduct weapons maintenance, personal hygiene, or field sanitation,resulting in unhealthy and unsustainable conditions. None of this is due to their being bad or poorly disciplined Soldiers – they've never been trained to a standard. Early detection, sickness, and failure to report required information is the result.

Nobody is too cool for Doctrine!
While it smacks in the face ten years of combat experience, almost all the solutions for scout platoon shortfalls lie in training doctrinal tasks in accordance with FM 3-20.96, *Reconnaissance and Scout Platoon*. These tasks are taught at the Army Reconnaissance Course (ARC) or the Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leaders Course (RSLC) at Fort Benning, Georgia. While both courses are sufficient for the task force scout platoon, the latter is more focused toward Long Range Surveillance Units rather than the scout platoon. In either course, leaders (staff sergeant and above) can gain the skills required to plan and execute scout platoon tasks.

Training shortfalls are a product of the Army Forces Generation (ARFORGEN) model . Attendance at formal schools is often eliminated in the deploying units' struggle to satisfy pre-deployment tasks. The cost of sending a leader to school is absenting him from another "mandatory" task that must be completed. We must get back to our scouting basics to be prepared for our Contingency Expeditionary Force requirements.

Conclusion
This article provides nearly two years of observations that indicate poor trends in scout platoon performance. Difficulties originate in the task force staff:
- ➢ Improper scout platoon employment
- ➢ Inability to clearly enunciate tactical tasks
- ➢ Inability to manage R&S assets

Fixes for the staff are relatively simple:
- Read FM 3-20.98, *Reconnaissance and Scout Platoon*
- Have the scout PL or PSG brief the staff on scout platoon capabilities
- Attend some FOUNDRY training like the ISR Top Off course

Scout platoons are not without fault. Many problems within the platoon originate with:
- Poor TLPs
- Lack of proficiency with organic equipment
- Poor fieldcraft
- Lack of doctrinal knowledge

Fixes for these are straightforward:
- Carry different PCI and PCC checklists
- Conduct hands-on training with organic equipment prior to field training/during any down time
- Go to the field and stay out more than 72 hours without external support
- And most importantly, go to school!

Once leaders get our scout platoons and task force staffs back to the basics, our scout platoons will demonstrate their collective greatness. Task Force S2s, S3s and commanders have everything to gain when scout platoons return to their legacy of being the hyperperformers in training and on the battlefield!