The Engineer Reconnaissance Platoon:
Overcoming the Lack of Engineer Reconnaissance Assets

This is the second in a series of articles about the roles of NCOs in an engineer battalion of a heavy division. The first appeared in December 1995. This article builds on ideas proposed by Major Douglas McNeese and Captain Steven Creighton (*Engineer*, August 1996, p. 14) and provides further clarification.

By Michael W. Sayer

It was two hours prior to LD (line of departure) for the armored brigade's deliberate attack. The commander arrived for the prebattle update, and each staff member briefed him on the status of his area. The scouts had located and reported some obstacles in the area but had not specified their orientation, composition, length, depth, or type before losing contact with the brigade. The staff engineer could not give more information, because communications with the engineers sent to gather engineer-specific obstacle intelligence failed early in the evening. The enemy identified additional engineers, who left at 2400 hours in their M113 Armored Personnel Carrier, and engaged them with direct and indirect fires. Due to the lack of information concerning enemy obstacles and disposition of his forces, the brigade commander had to inform the division that his unit was unable to conduct a deliberate attack but would conduct a movement to contact. He was not confident of the brigade's ability to fully accomplish the mission. The lack of battlefield intelligence, primarily the lack of mobility and countermobility information, degraded the brigade's capability to fight and win.

The Problem

Variations of this scenario occur during training at the National Training Center (NTC) with disturbing regularity. Scouts often fail to provide leaders with specific mobility/survivability Battlefield Operating System information. Brigades require solid obstacle intelligence to successfully attack.

In maneuver battalions—

- Scout platoons lack experience with mobility/survivability tasks and the data required for complete reporting.
- Scouts have too many tasks specified in the operations order.
- Mobility/survivability tasks generally receive too little emphasis during unit training.

In engineer battalions—

- A scout capability is lacking on the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE).
- Soldiers tasked with gathering obstacle intelligence usually lack scouting experience.
- Training and equipping engineers tasked with reconnaissance is not standardized.
- Communications capability within the force is poor.

The Solution

These are serious problems, but a solution is within reach that is both simple and difficult: Place an engineer scout platoon within the divisional engineer battalion. The solution is simple in that assigning personnel to such a platoon and equipping it can be accomplished quickly. The difficulty lies in finding the bodies in a shrunken force structure to support it and then training these soldiers to accomplish their mission.

Most combat engineer companies pick a team to perform as engineer scouts. The team's training is usually haphazard and is not conducted in conjunction with the brigade S2 section's training of other scouts in the brigade. While the team members probably are highly motivated young soldiers and well-trained engineers, the lack of formal training in reconnaissance operations lessens their overall capability.

Only one position in the current heavy engineer battalion MTOE has anything to do with reconnaissance—the reconnaissance noncommissioned officer (NCO). This position requires a military occupational specialty (MOS) 12B30, combat engineer staff sergeant. He receives no special training and often lacks reconnaissance experience and the equipment necessary to perform this duty. Frequently, he is part of the battalion intelligence section and works for the intelligence NCO, MOS 12Z50, who is a combat engineer master sergeant. As currently structured, any reconnaissance effort on the part of the heavy engineer battalion comes from the line companies. They must give up squads for this mission, which means that those squads are unavailable for other offensive and defensive missions.

One active heavy engineer battalion is working to incorporate a dedicated reconnaissance section—the 299th Engineer Battalion, from the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. As part of the Advanced Warfighting Experiment, the 299th is seeking ways to add new technologies to the tactics needed for Force XXI. The unit has organized a reconnaissance section of two teams under

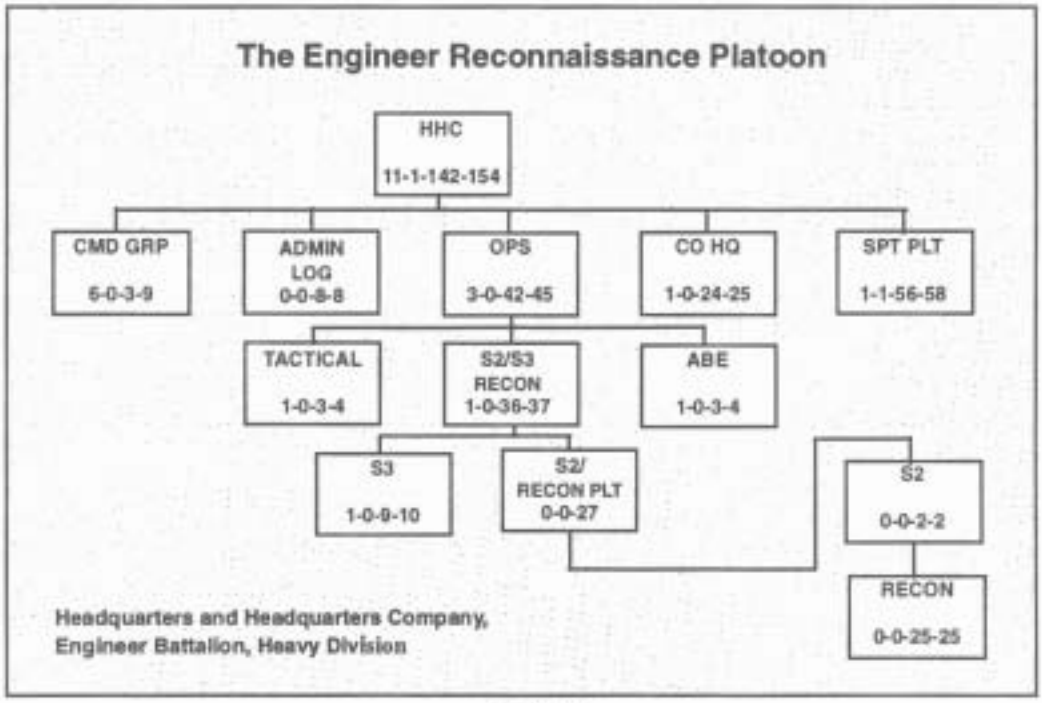


Figure 1

battalion control. While this is a good starting place, it cannot cover the entire brigade sector. With two teams attempting to gather information from three task force zones, the effort is too little and the information probably will be received too late.

Reconnaissance Platoon

A recommended solution is for the engineer force to assign and equip an engineer reconnaissance platoon within the Headquarters Company S2/S3 section. The platoon would work for the S2 under the reconnaissance NCO (Figure 1).

Organization and Equipment. By placing the unit in the S2/S3 section of the heavy engineer battalion, command and control of the platoon is at the proper level. The S3 ensures that the unit has adequate resources for training, and since the platoon is organic, the S3 knows the capabilities and limitations of each squad when he conducts the planning and orders process. Additionally, each squad can be broken down to the habitually associated task force in a direct-support role when the mission dictates. In this configuration, the brigade order must specify that the task force and engineer company pass the proposed tasking of the squad to the engineer battalion for required support. The squad would seldom, if ever, be attached to or placed under operational control (OPCON) of the task force.

The purpose of having the intelligence NCO in the chain of command is to ensure proper training and required coordination with the brigade and task force S2s. The intelligence NCO is the platoon leader and assists the reconnaissance NCO in developing training schedules, gathering materials, and ensuring that all training meets applicable standards. Each squad associates with a specific task force to increase interoperability and build teamwork. The intelligence NCO, in conjunction with the reconnaissance NCO, is the liaison to each task force for training and determines personnel allocations within the platoon.

The engineer reconnaissance platoon is a 25-person unit that includes the reconnaissance NCO as platoon sergeant and three squads of eight engineer scouts. Two four-person teams make up each squad, with the squad leader acting as the A Team leader and an engineer sergeant acting as the B Team leader. The senior enlisted soldier is the gunner, and of the two junior enlisted soldiers, one is the engineer scout and the other is the driver. The reconnaissance NCO position changes from that of a staff sergeant to a sergeant first class, with the position coded for ranger-qualified NCOs. The squad and team leaders and the gunners also should be ranger qualified (Figure 2, page 49). Each team operates in an M1044 HMMWV. This organization provides one engineer scout squad to each task force in the brigade, with each scout squad capable of working as two teams covering the task-force zone. If the situation requires, as for a dismounted approach, each team can break into two two-person foot-reconnaissance teams. This configuration allows greater saturation of the area and long-term (more than 8 hours) observation of objectives. Possible applications include:

- Inserting the team into the task force zone early to observe and report enemy defensive preparations.
- Positioning the team to report enemy movement to bring forward engineer-specific breaching or river-crossing equipment.

Engineer Reconnaissance Squad Equipment

Equipment	*Quantity*	*Remarks*
High-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV), M1044	2	Supplemental armor provides crew protection from small-arms fire and artillery fragments.
Mounted on HMMWV		
Machine gun,.50-caliber, M2 or Grenade launcher, 40-millimeter, MK19	1	One vehicle has the M2, the other the MK19; allows both long-range and short-range indirect fires.
Short-range/long-range vehicular radio with dismount, AN/VRC-91A	1	Allows squads or teams to report from most locations within the brigade sector. Teams can conduct two-way operations, one using the dismount system from the AN/VRC-91A, the other the AN/PRC-119A.
Antenna, OE-254	1	
Loudspeaker, LS-671	1	
Intercom set, AN/VIC-1	1	Allows communication within the vehicle.
Combat vehicle crewman helmet	4	
Telephone, TA-1	1	
Control monitor, C-11291	2	
Precision lightweight global positioning system (GPS) receiver, AN/PSS-11	1	
Pneumatic boat, 3-person	1	For bridge and stream reconnaissance.
Camouflage screen and support system	1	
Mine detector, AN/PSS-12	1	For breaching or route reconnaissance.
Reeling machine with communications wire, RL-39	1	Supports outposts/listening posts.
Two-Person Team		
Individual weapon and ammunition	2	Either the M16 or M16/M203.
Night vision goggles, AN/PVS-7B	2	Support all night operations.
Manpack radio, AN/VRC-119A, or dismounted short-range radio, AN/VRC-91A	2	
Antenna, OE-254	1	
Telephone, TA-1	2	
Precision lightweight GPS receiver, AN/PSS-11	1	Supports split-team operations.
Compass, lensatic	2	Supports all operations.
Binoculars	2	Determines target position.
Sniper scope with laser	1	Determines target position.
Demolition kit	1	For breaching or route reconnaissance.
Clinometer	1	Measures elevation.
NBC equipment	2	

NOTE: *Team equipment load (minus personal load-bearing equipment [LBE] and spare clothing) is about 120 pounds.*

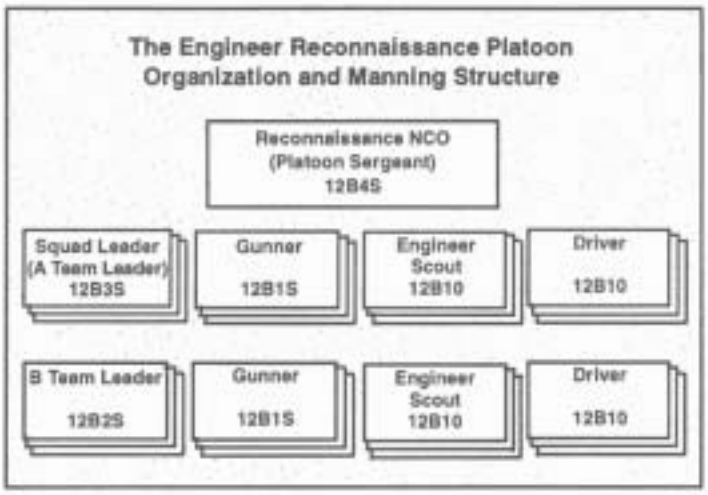


Figure 2

- Using the team as "deep eyes" for detailed engineer technical reconnaissance.

Equipment for the engineer reconnaissance squad is shown on page 48.

Training the Force. Placing the platoon under the S3 pays high dividends for training. During quarterly training briefs and regular training meetings with the brigade and task forces, the S3 verifies that engineer scouts are part of training events, particularly for lane training. Attending these events strengthens their habitual association and improves the level of training for all concerned. Joint training with the task force scouts reinforces standard techniques and procedures, improves reporting formats, and develops and formalizes policies within the tactical SOPs.

The engineer reconnaissance platoon can help train scout platoons within the brigade on the many engineer-related tasks included in their mission training plan task list. They can also help when scout platoons are scheduled to attend the Sapper Leader's Course. Because the prime emphasis of this course is on demolition skills and introductory patrolling techniques, this training will benefit the entire unit.

To be effective, a scout must train in small-unit tactics and techniques. Therefore, the MOS codes for senior platoon members (platoon sergeants, squad leaders, team leaders, and gunners) indicate that their positions should include ranger qualification. Normally this does not occur within heavy forces, but the requirements for dismounted obstacle reconnaissance and deliberate engineer reconnaissance obligate commanders to ensure that soldiers are as well prepared as possible. While this requirement uses scarce training dollars, the skills acquired will pay great dividends during operational deployments.

Manning Issues and Utilization. The S3 should carefully screen soldiers to ensure that only those best qualified are assigned to the scout platoon. Due to the difficulty of the mission, volunteers are the best choice. Random assignment to fill slots is a last resort.

Platoon sergeants are key to developing platoons. When selecting the platoon sergeant, the S3 places him on the battalion staff, where he has the primary mission of reconnaissance. When the reconnissance NCO selects soldiers to fill the platoon, he selects soldiers for reconnaissance missions, not for staff support. If the reconnaissance NCO is at the brigade tactical operating center, he can help the brigade S2s develop the reconnaissance and surveillance plan. Together with the engineer battalion S3, he develops a solid plan to cover the named areas of interest important to confirming or denying the templated enemy mobility/survivability information. By upgrading the duty position's grade from staff sergeant to sergeant first class, a more mature, experienced leader will be available to assist with all related operations.

When operating tactically, the engineer reconnaissance platoon is the logical choice for covering all mobility/survivability named areas of interest. While not limited to these areas, the reconnaissance platoon is the best qualified to report required information on them. These areas include obstacles on the battlefield as well as any deliberate engineer reconnaissance required within the brigade zone. Ideally, engineer scouts are a brigade asset, much like the combat observation lazing teams.

Scouts efforts are wasted unless the information they find is reported to all echelons. The operations order must specify which reporting nets the teams use and to whom they report. If the scouts are task organized under the task forces, reports must be passed to the engineer battalion to ensure that an accurate, brigade-wide picture of mobility/survivability data develops. The best choice for reporting intelligence is the operations and intelligence net, either at the brigade or task-force level. Teams normally do not report over the engineer battalion nets unless that is specified in the order. An exception is when teams operate solely in support of the engineer battalion; then they report either over the battalion command frequency or the company frequency.

Summary

By establishing and using a dedicated engineer scout platoon, the engineer battalion and heavy maneuver brigade gain a tremendous tool for gathering information. The flexibility, adaptability, and skills of the platoon provide a combat multiplier of the first order. The effects of these teams in the brigade reconnaissance fight are quantifiable and their benefits immediately apparent. While finding personnel to staff the platoon may be difficult, the benefits tremendously outweigh this difficulty. Only by getting these reconnaissance platoons up and running in every battalion can engineers overcome the shortage in reconnaissance expertise and set the conditions for successful battalion and brigade operations.

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