

Realizing a Cavalry Troop's Place in the OPLAN



by CPT John Reynolds

Figure 1. An Alpha Troop Section Leader prepares to deploy after a Deployment Readiness Exercise in Korea (Photo by CPT John Reynolds)

“Fight Tonight and Win” is the watchword for Korean Rotational Deployments. The immediate months prior to the deployment include a Combat Training Center (CTC) rotation, sustainment gunneries, qualification ranges, and a myriad of other events ensuring that units are administratively and tactically ready to fight tonight and win. From the Troop-level to the Division-level, commanders constantly deliver assessments of combat power and training in terms of our ability to fight the Operational Plan (OPLAN). A commander rarely assesses their unit as unable to fight the OPLAN, and there are always metrics that can be used to demonstrate readiness. However, due to OPLAN-specific requirements and training restrictions, readiness for the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) mission as a cavalry troop needs to be deliberately trained prior to or immediately upon arrival to Korea. Units may be ready on paper to “Fight Tonight” as soon as they conduct relief in place/transfer of

authority (RIP/TOA), but true readiness takes weeks, if not months to achieve due to both the specific operational readiness required, as well as the unique hurdles related to fighting in the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO).

Troop-Internal Readiness

The first element of OPLAN readiness that the 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division focused on upon arriving to Korea was the ability to rapidly deploy within hours of notification. Deployment Readiness Exercises (DREs) are a hallmark of every Korea rotation, and the procedures for DREs are installed as soon as possible. While understanding a Notification hour (N-hour) sequence and various prowords are important for DREs, the biggest friction points remain both equipment and people; a prime

example of this is weapons draw. Having to draw an entire fleet of both vehicle-mounted and individual weapons from a new arms room and install them on the Troop's Strykers is an iterative process that can only be improved through multiple DREs. Mastering the load plan of Strykers with all weapons, optics, B & C duffle bags, planning materials, CLI (food, water, and other rations) and CLIII (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) and any other classes of supply is something that comes with training and practice – iteratively. In short, rapid deployment of equipment and personnel is an essential task for OPLAN readiness in Korea and any other theater. From Alpha Troop's experience during Korea Rotational Force-13 (KRF-13), it takes at least six weeks after TOA and three iterations of DREs to attain optimal performance. This timetable can be increased but dedicated training time must be allocated to ensure all parties can execute to standard.



Figure 2. An Alpha Troop Stryker crew conducting reconnaissance at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Fort Johnson, Louisiana. (Photo by SFC Zachary Francis)

The other element of OPLAN readiness that the CAV needed to train upon arriving to Korea was security operations. Indeed, cavalry troops are the masters of both reconnaissance and security operations for the brigade; however, training specific to the KTO takes time. Four months prior to deploying for Korea, 3-61 CAV conducted a training rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Johnson, LA. Its mission at JRTC; however, was focused almost exclusively on reconnaissance operations—constantly out front of the brigade, identifying trafficable routes and enemy composition to enable the brigade’s march through the training area. Additionally, the training area at JRTC is devoid of the massive urban structures that are ubiquitous throughout South Korea. Upon arriving in Korea, 3-61 CAV realized that the OPLAN involved far more

security operations than was trained at JRTC – requiring additional training and preparation. Alpha Troop subsequently designed a training progression that culminated in section-level situational training exercise (STX) and live fire exercise (LFX) focused exclusively on security operations, as well as designing an urban operations STX. While JRTC made the Troop proficient in reconnaissance tasks and maneuvering, it had to actively seek opportunities to train security operations on the Korean Peninsula to achieve OPLAN readiness. Due to constraints of land and other training resources, reaching a fully training status or “T” in security operations took approximately five months. Redesigning training progressions prior to Korea will enable units to be able to achieve its mission prior to stepping foot on the peninsula.

Troop-External Readiness

Even with the dedicated work Alpha Troop conducted to achieve OPLAN readiness, there were still efforts required to integrate with the adjacent units within 2nd Infantry Division (2ID) – the principal division in the KTO. While this article dutifully adheres to operations security (OPSEC) requirements, it should be noted that 3-61 CAV worked alongside adjacent brigades such as 210th Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), 52nd Brigade Engineer Battalion, and Republic of Korea – Army (ROKA) counterparts. Creating a shared understanding between Stryker Cavalry Troops and Rocket Artillery units is no small feat. Misconceptions abounded on both sides regarding the other’s capabilities, mission set, and even tactics, techniques, and procedures

(TTPs). Deliberate planning sessions and combined training are requirements to ensure OPLAN readiness.

The Alpha Troop Commander worked to integrate his troop into the one of the field artillery battalions in 210 FAB. Alpha Troop platoon leaders conducted reconnaissance to OPLAN locations with their battery commanders and designated 210 FAB Soldiers attend Alpha Troop's land navigation training. Most importantly, both units scheduled capabilities briefs for their unit to understand what a stryker cavalry troop and FAB brings to the fight. Both units identified and worked to mitigate potential friction through this cooperation, resulting in a greater shared understanding between the units. However, due to collective training requirements for both units, the time for coordination between Alpha Troop and the field artillery (FA) battalion was limited. Without dedicated opportunities planned ahead of time, the ability of the cavalry squadron and 210 FAB to achieve joint OPLAN readiness was diminished. To correct this, 2ID forces through the assigned KRF brigade and permanent party brigades on the peninsula should plan combined training prior to arriving in Korea.

Alpha Troop's efforts at achieving Troop-external OPLAN readiness culminated in a counterfire taskforce DRE coordinated by US Forces Korea. Alpha Troop, the field artillery battalion, 2ID aviation assets, and a ROKA infantry battalion deployed to a training area north of their assigned duty station to test their ability to deploy and integrate with each other for the OPLAN. In terms of readiness for the INDOPACOM mission, this was the best, most valuable training Alpha Troop conducted throughout KRF-13. All units identified challenges, especially regarding communication systems and maintaining contact with the disparate units involved in the operation. Overall, Alpha Troop came out of the exercise feeling confident in their ability to execute the OPLAN and "Fight Tonight" jointly with 2ID and ROKA units. Due to competing priorities and collective training cycles, that exercise was the only opportunity

for Alpha Troop and the 210 FAB to explicitly and jointly test the OPLAN. Future units undertaking the Korea rotation should consider prioritizing joint training opportunities centered around the OPLAN and increasing engagements between the rotational force and 210 FAB.

Recommendations

There are options available for the Eighth Army to ensure constant OPLAN readiness. The first option is to transition the OPLAN mission to a permanently stationed force. This move

would not be unprecedented, as the rotational mission in Korea is only ten years old. A permanently stationed force would have two primary benefits. The first is continuity: the force would retain all institutional memory and relationships that it needs to fight the OPLAN. The permanently stationed units would have iterations of deployment TTPs to draw on. Arms room draws, communication management, and on-call DREs would be second nature to a permanently stationed force, instead of being a major muscle movement for a newly arrived rotational force. The second benefit is that 2ID

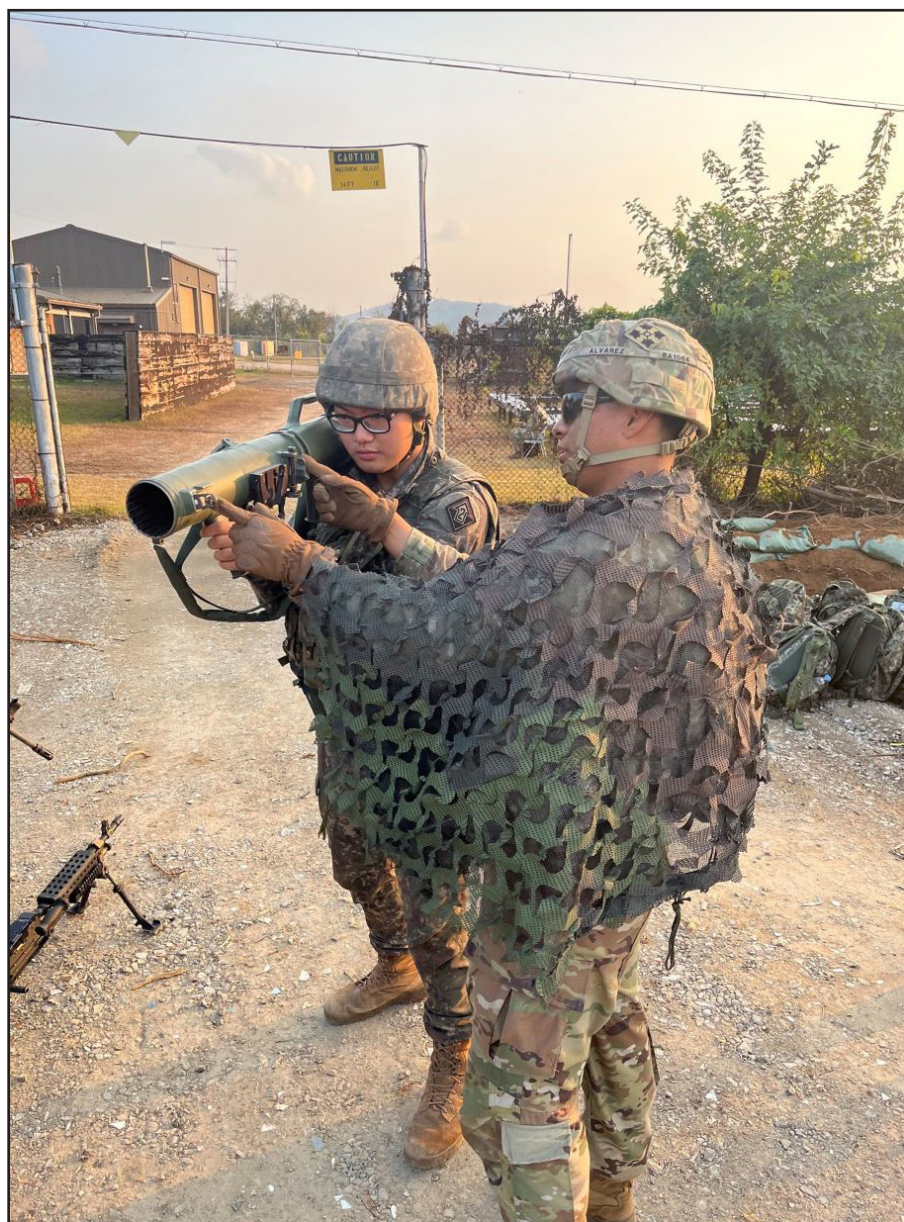


Figure 3. Alpha Troop Sergeants training ROK Army Soldiers during the counterfire task force mission. (Photo by 1LT John Pomeroy)

would have full ownership of the permanently stationed force. The unit would be able to design training management fully focused on the OPLAN without worrying about their Continental United States (CONUS) division's intended training progression for rotational units. This reallocation of the mission set would enable 2ID to stress-test the OPLAN with divisional assets on a regular basis, which would only increase synchronization among the distinct units involved in the OPLAN.

Understandably, transitioning to a permanent force is a decision that would take a significant amount of time, logistics, and bureaucratic measures to implement. Until that happens, a way to ensure OPLAN readiness is for 2ID to provide expectations for the rotational force far ahead of the KRF deployment. Currently, the rotational force does not get briefed on the OPLAN until the key leader Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS), which typically occurs at most four months ahead of their KRF deployment. For 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, the PDSS occurred after the brigade's JRTC rotation, and the only training events after the PDSS were a sustainment gunnery to qualify all crews prior to the deployment. Furthermore, due to the security classification of the OPLAN, the leaders that attended the PDSS were not able to come back and communicate OPLAN requirements to subordinate leaders, nor did they have the time to redirect training ahead of the deployment.

Ultimately, the OPLAN should be communicated to the rotational force at least nine months ahead of their KRF deployment to ensure the training progression at home-station matches the expectations of 2ID. Furthermore, 2ID

should provide the rotational force with Additional Mission Essential Tasks (AMETs) on which the rotational force is expected to be proficient nine months in advance. This would enable the rotational force to design unit training management with the AMETs in mind—Alpha Troop would have conducted security operations throughout the collective training cycle and their CTC rotation if this were the case. It would also enable the various staffs for the rotational force to conduct the Military Decision-Making Process on the OPLAN in their CONUS Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities (SCIFs) prior to assuming the KRF mission. This would lead to a far easier RIP/TOA process, where the units could focus on implementation of the OPLAN rather than starting the process of generating readiness for the OPLAN as soon as they arrive in Korea.

Conclusion

While Alpha Troop was a trained, proficient cavalry troop fresh from a CTC rotation upon arrival in the Republic of Korea, it still took serious effort to find its place in the OPLAN and become ready to "Fight Tonight." From developing new rapid deployment procedures, to training security tasks that were not focused on at JRTC, to conducting training events with the organic 2ID units, there were multiple iterations and exercises needed to feel prepared to fight the OPLAN successfully. Ultimately, Alpha Troop achieved OPLAN readiness and conditions were set for the Troop to maintain high-level readiness. However, the RIP/TOA to 3d Cavalry Regiment (3CR) required another round of coordination between CAV and FAB supporting KRF-13. 3CR and future units may still meet all performance metrics set by 2ID, but the risk that a deliberate effort to achieve

OPLAN proficiency, or that other training priorities get in the way of focusing on the OPLAN is too high to continue on the present course without changes to the nature of the force, or the timeliness at which the OPLAN requirements and expectations are communicated, rotational units will continue to face an uphill battle to achieve the OPLAN. Without a dedicated effort to communicate and train the unique skill sets for Korea, units will struggle to be truly ready to "Fight Tonight."

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