



Light COLT Platoon:

Improving the Effectiveness of Brigade Deep Operations

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The combat observation lasing teams (COLTs) of the 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas, are high-payoff targets (HPTs) for the opposing force (OPFOR) at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California. However, this has not always been the case.

About a year and a half ago, we took a hard look at the way our COLTs are organized and trained as well as how we employed them in combat situations. We found our COLTs couldn't survive the OPFOR's counterreconnaissance efforts—couldn't survive long enough to be effective during the deep and main battle area fights. In addition, they lacked adequate command and control to ensure they operated as a cohesive team and executed the brigade scheme of fire support. Essentially, our COLTs were ineffective; we couldn't rely on them to provide brigade combat team (BCT) commanders time-sensitive information and deep fire support observation.

Faced with these performance weaknesses, the 1st Cavalry Division Artillery (Div Arty), the Red Team, studied COLT initiatives of other division artilleries (including the 1st Infantry Division—The Big Red One) and implemented several initiatives to enhance the combat readiness of our COLTs. This article describes the organizational modifications and training initiatives we've employed. Additionally, we describe how our COLTs operated during NTC rotations and as a part of Joint Task Force-6 (JTF-6) counterdrug, border patrol operations.

COLT Platoon Organization

One of the primary factors contributing to COLT ineffectiveness was inadequate command and control. The current modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for a direct support



The platoon leader conducts pre-combat inspections of team equipment. Here he verifies the operability of the ground/vehicular laser locator designator (G/LLVD).

(DS) 155-mm Field Artillery battalion authorizes six COLTs. Each team has three personnel: the COLT chief (13F20), a fire support specialist (13F10) and a radio-telephone operator (13F10).

With this organization, we lacked fidelity and leadership in four key areas: command and control for the six separate teams, mission planning for COLT operations, supervision of pre-combat checks (PCC) and pre-combat inspections (PCI), and understanding of COLT critical fire support tasks (CFST). The brigade fire support officer (FSO) and fire support NCO (FSNCO) were too entrenched in the brigade planning pro-

cess to provide the leadership the COLTs needed. The result was six COLTs operated without cohesion and accomplished only a portion of their potential for the BCT commanders.

Our solution was to develop a COLT platoon, joining the six teams into a cohesive unit under the leadership and supervision of a COLT platoon headquarters. (See Figure 1.) To staff the platoon headquarters, we decremented the DS battalion one company FSO and selected a Ranger-qualified lieutenant as the COLT platoon leader. In addition, we diverted one sergeant first class position from aerial observer positions in the Div Arty fire support element (FSE) to each of the DS battalions.

In certain situations, it's beneficial for the COLTs to operate as squads. Each squad consists of two teams working together with the senior NCO as the squad leader. These situations include missions requiring a large equipment load or two teams to travel along a similar route until they to move to their respective observation posts (OPs). In the latter situation, the COLTs most likely will provide redundant observation for each other during the battle.

Our COLTs usually operate with several pieces of equipment, creating soldier loads well over 90 pounds. This equipment includes a ground/vehicular laser locator designator (G/VLLD), night-sight, tripod, single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS), enhanced position location reporting system (EPLRS), M16A2, night-vision goggles (NVG), precision lightweight global positioning system receiver (PLGR), rations, extra water and personal gear.

In addition to the team's challenge of carrying all that weight, it's very difficult for a three-man COLT to configure the load within their rucksacks; there's simply not enough room for the equipment.

To alleviate this problem, four-man teams are often necessary. The division's engineer brigade now requires each of its supporting engineer battalions to include an engineer soldier habitually as the fourth man on our COLTs for all training and deployments. The additional soldier enables the COLT to improve obstacle identification and employ a sleep plan that guarantees 50 percent security and observation at all times.

The COLT platoon leader and platoon sergeant provide the leadership the brigade FSO and FSNCO could not provide. They plan and coordinate the execution of the platoon's CFSTs. They also prepare and brief a COLT operations order to the COLT chiefs, focusing on their respective tasks, purpose and part in the overall brigade scheme of fires. Through the brigade FSO, the COLT platoon leader and platoon sergeant are the command and control link into the brigade battle staff for critical, time-sensitive intelligence reporting and brigade deep-fires planning and execution.

Reorganizing the COLTs into a platoon has advantages. The command and control provided by the platoon leadership has increased the COLTs' effectiveness. Each COLT more clearly understands its role in the brigade scheme of fires and, perhaps more importantly, its role in collecting critical battlefield information from which the brigade commander can make more informed decisions.

COLT Training

It's difficult for one COLT section to maintain proficiency in both heavy and light operations. Consequently, we focus on light COLT operations and training. Our "light" COLTs combined with our heavy fire support teams (FISTs) provide heavy and light observers and enhance the brigade commander's flexibility to adapt plans to varying terrain and situations.

COLT Tasks. We implemented several training initiatives for our light COLTs to enhance their effectiveness and abilities to survive. These include integrating divisional aviation and reconnaissance team assets; sending COLT platoon leaders to the scout platoon leader's course at Fort Knox, Kentucky; and implementing a team certification process administrated by the Div Arty FSE.

To focus our training, we established individual and team tasks for COLT certification, as listed in Figure 2. Platoon headquarters tasks that focus on command and control and planning and preparing the platoon for combat operations also are listed in Figure 2.

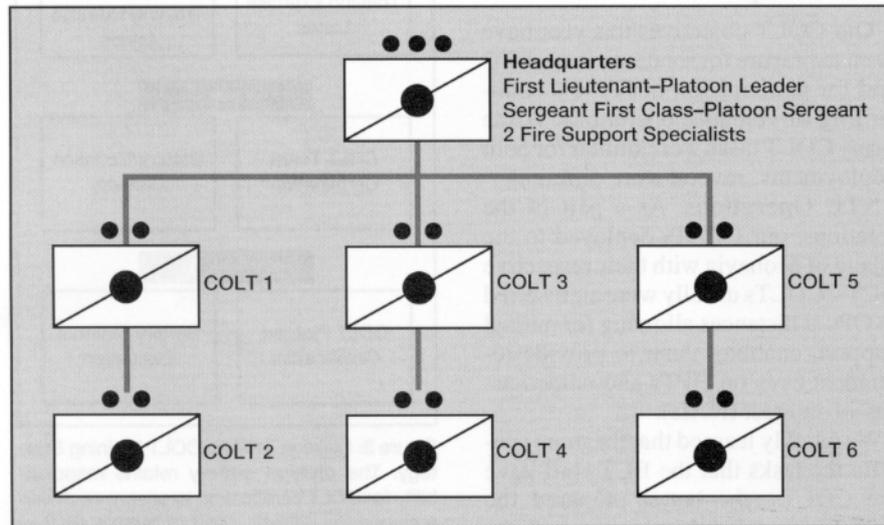


Figure 1: COLT Platoon Organization. Each of the six COLTs has a staff sergeant as the team leader, three fire support specialists and a high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicle (HMMWV).

Individual and Team Tasks

- Infiltrate by air, dismounted and mounted.
- Conduct immediate action drills on contact.
- Communicate—conduct remote single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS) operations and retransmissions and erect expedient antennas.
- Evacuate soldiers wounded in action (WIA) and those killed in action (KIA).
- Exfiltrate.
- Conduct pre-combat inspections (PCI) and preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) on equipment.
- Conduct a Copperhead priority mission.
- Follow reporting procedures and execute the fire support execution matrix (FSEM).
- Know threat doctrine.
- Conduct a passage-of-lines.
- Establish triggers.
- Occupy an observation post (OP).

Platoon Headquarters Tasks

- Develop a COLT fire support plan.
- Develop an observation plan.
- Conduct battle tracking.
- Conduct back briefs and rehearsals.
- Develop a communications plan.

Figure 2: COLT Tasks. Each COLT has to demonstrate proficiency in individual and team tasks for team certification. The headquarters tasks focus the platoon's command and control and planning and preparation for combat.

Our first task was to develop the basic soldier readiness skills required for COLTs to survive and operate deep independently for several days. We structured training in three areas: physical fitness, small unit tactics and air insertions. We also incorporated fundamental artillery observation skills into the basic combat readiness training.

Aviation Insertion Training. The best method to insert COLTs into an area is air insertion by helicopter. Using this insertion method, COLTs can maneuver undetected to their OPs under the cover of darkness.

To develop the skills required to load and unload the helicopters as well as react to emergency situations, we coordinated with our aviation brigade liaison officer (LNO) to conduct training using the “crawl-walk-run” philosophy. First, we conducted static-load training on grounded aircraft at a designated landing zone (LZ). We then trained on uploading and downloading from the aircraft at several LZs along an air route during daylight. In our final stage of training, we performed the same tasks at night.

Skills such as marking an LZ for aircraft, calling in aircraft, loading equipment and personnel safely onto aircraft, and dropping the correct team at the correct LZ required many training events. We even conducted air insertion training in the preliminary weeks at an NTC rotation to take advantage of the mountainous and near-zero illumination conditions at Fort Irwin.

Division Reconnaissance Team (DRT) Training. Another unique aspect of our COLT training involves DRTs. In coordination with the division cavalry squadron, we plan and execute multi-day, off-site exercises. These exercises train our COLTs on survival tasks, reporting intelligence information and other tasks unique to DRT operations, such as rescuing a downed pilot. The training is realistic—we have an OPFOR search for the COLTs and DRTs while they provided accurate, timely intelligence reports.

COLT Certification. The certification process consists of a series of situational training exercises (STXs) with hands-on and written examinations to assess the COLTs and their platoon headquarters. In addition, we use the training set fire observation (TSFO) and live-fire to train and assess COLT fire support observation skills.

As much as possible, we integrate COLT certification into the DS battal-



The COLT platoon leader verifies the operability of the precision lightweight global positioning system receiver (PLGR).

ion Paladin tables and battery external evaluations. Another realistic assessment might be combining COLT certification with force-on-force training with a maneuver brigade.

Unlike FIST certifications conducted by the respective DS battalions, the Div Arty oversees COLT certification. The Div Arty’s certification training strategy is depicted in Figure 3. By retaining responsibility for certification, the Div Arty commander can ensure that COLTs operating with one BCT can perform to the same standards as COLTs operating with another. This enhances the BCT commanders’ flexibility to conduct deep reconnaissance and fire support operations.

COLT Operations

Our COLT objectives this year have been to prepare for rotations at the NTC and for participation in JTF-6’s counterdrug surveillance operations. While many COLT tasks were similar for both deployments, several were different.

NTC Operations. As a part of the rotations, our COLTs deployed to the island of Mohavia with their respective BCTs. COLTs usually were air inserted to OPs at distances allowing for mutual support, enabling them to provide redundant eyes on HPTs and named-areas-of-interest (NAIs).

We quickly learned that the more specific the tasks that the BCT staff gave the COLTs, the better prepared the COLTs were for the mission and the better they understood their contribution to the brigade scheme of operations

and fires. This more focused guidance from the staff enabled the entire BCT to mass its effects to support the commander’s guidance more efficiently and effectively.

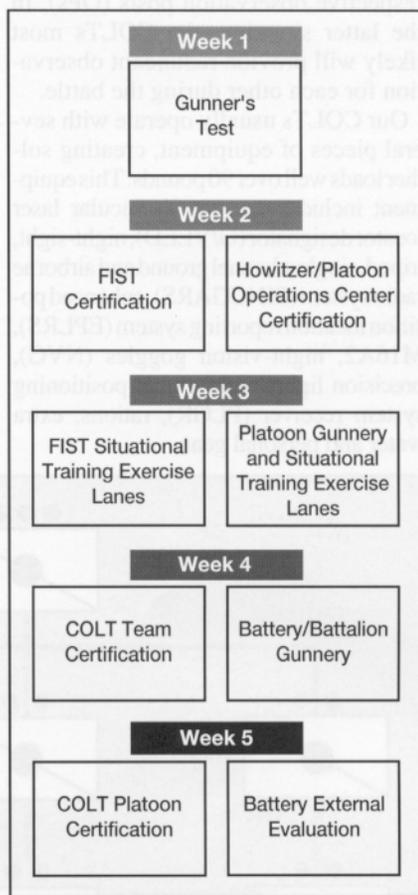


Figure 3: Division Artillery COLT Training Strategy. The division artillery retains responsibility for COLT certification to ensure each can enhance its brigade combat team’s (BCT’s) ability to conduct deep reconnaissance and fire support operations.

Air insertions allowed the COLTs to travel in darkness and rapidly insert at deep locations—10 to 14 kilometers in front of our forward line of own troops (FLOT). These insertions were relatively close to the COLTs' OPs and minimized noise and light. With the exception of one COLT inserted within one kilometer of an SA-8, all COLTs inserted by air survived every battle.

With COLTs inserted deep, communication is key. The OPFOR is good at locating observers when they transmit over FM radios. Consequently, we train our COLTs to use a new communication system: EPLRS. The system is effective because it is relatively easy to use, weighs about the same as a SINCGARS radio and the OPFOR can't use its direction-finding capabilities to locate the COLTs. EPLRS automatically relays transmissions through other EPLRS systems, allowing our COLTs to communicate at greater distances. EPLRS also provides continuous self-location and the location of all other EPLRS.

Our COLTs use EPLRS from the time they move out in helicopters or vehicles to approximately one hour before line-of-departure (LD)—the friendly or enemy force's LD. One hour allows the COLT platoon leader enough time to reestablish FM communications with each team. This is important because, as soon as forces cross the LD, the COLTs are overloaded with reporting intelligence and calling for fires.

When communicating over FM, the COLT platoon needs an internal net for platoon command and control and to improve the teams' ability to send the brigade tactical intelligence reports and fire missions. Otherwise, the platoon has to use a net already prescribed for

- Implement the rules of engagement (ROE).
- Infiltrate dismounted and mounted.
- Conduct immediate action drills on contact.
- Communicate—conduct remote SINCGARS operations and retransmissions, erect expedient antennas and conduct satellite communications (SATCOM).
- Exfiltrate.
- Evacuate soldiers WIA and KIA.
- Conduct PCI and PMCS on equipment.
- Follow reporting procedures.
- Know threat doctrine.
- Occupy an OP.

Figure 4: COLT Individual and Team Tasks in Support of Joint Task Force-6. For JTF-6, some tasks received special emphasis—implementing the ROE, medical evacuation procedures and reporting procedures. The reporting procedures were critical as the civilian border patrol agents were not familiar with military procedures.

other purposes, usually the brigade operations and intelligence net or FA battalion command fire net. Without an internal net, stations that key their microphones will "step on" the COLTs' long-distance transmissions. A dedicated COLT net allows the platoon headquarters to communicate efficiently and clearly with its teams, enhancing unity of command.

JTF-6 Operations. When comparing the COLT tasks required for JTF-6 missions (shown in Figure 4) to those required for combat (Figure 2), one can see some JTF-6 tasks reinforce combat tasks. Preparing for and executing surveillance operations in support of JTF-6 enhance the combat readiness of COLTs.

For surveillance operations, we again focused on the basics: dismounted operations, dismounted and mounted land navigation, OP occupation procedures and reporting procedures.

However, some tasks required for JTF-6 operations were unique and received special training emphasis: applying rules of engagement (ROE), conducting a medical evacuation and following task force reporting procedures. The reporting procedures were crucial because each COLT sent reports to military personnel and civilian border patrol agents unaccustomed to military procedures.

Conclusion. An OPFOR regimental commander recently stated that, in terms of relative combat power, a COLT-kill was worth an additional motorized rifle company (MRC). He had learned that a well trained COLT in the right position can disrupt every step of his operations. Respect for our COLTs has grown as the teams improve their survivability and capability at the NTC and on the border with the JTF-6.

With training and certification of our new platoon organization and its integration with aviation assets, Red Team COLTs are more effective and lethal, significantly enhancing the BCT commanders' battlefield awareness.



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First Lieutenant Scott S. Marhold until recently was the Combat Observation Lasing Team (COLT) Platoon Leader for the 3d Battalion, 82d Field Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division. Currently, he's a Paladin Platoon Leader for B Battery in the same battalion. His previous assignment, also in the battalion, was as a Company Fire Support Officer where he deployed to the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana, in a challenging heavy-light rotation. Lieutenant Marhold is a graduate of the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and Airborne and Ranger Schools, Fort Benning, Georgia.



Part of a COLT team prepares to move to a helicopter for air insertion.