The 1-7th ADA Battalion’s preparation for Roving Sands 2019

By Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Walker

In April 2018, 1st Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery was preparing for redeployment from the Central Command area of responsibility (AOR) after a nine-month deployment to Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. The hot topic around the Air Defense Artillery branch and 32nd Army Air and Missile Defense Command were the struggles and challenges the participating units endured during the execution of Roving Sands 2018. The 32nd AAMDC reinstated this important training event that requires air defense artillery units to support the maneuver force and defend the land component commanders’ critical assets. This requires units to adopt an expeditionary mindset and be able to shoot, move tactically and survive on the battlefield. As the Panther Battalion prepared for redeployment from CENTCOM, the leadership knew that their next challenge would likely be its participation in Roving Sands 2019 (RS19). The first and most important task the leadership identified was changing the culture and the mentality of the Soldiers and leaders throughout the battalion. It was no secret that the next mission set required an expeditionary and tactical mindset.
Undoubtedly, the Soldiers proved they had a winning attitude when they swept the 108th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, Officer, Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) and Soldier of the year awards in early summer of 2018. Likewise, the Supply Support Activity (SSA) received numerous accolades and recognition for winning the Forces Command Supply Excellence Award. This winning attitude translated to achieving results not only in garrison but also in a tactical environment. Unit pride became the foundation of the Soldiers continued motivation.

Create a structure

The battalion leadership developed an aggressive but achievable plan to prepare for its deployment to Roving Sands 19. There were various challenges that impeded the planning process but none of them overshadowed the fact that majority of its modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) and Patriot equipment would not immediately be available for training due to its scheduled modernization at Letterkenny Army Depot. Nonetheless, the battalion leadership developed a robust plan that included a leaders’ field training exercise (FTX), battalion FTX supporting the 108th cumulative training exercise (CTE), battalion’s final collective training exercise and various battery field training exercises and certifications. This aggressive plan allowed the battalion to accomplish all their required training objectives. The battalion also executed multiple communication exercises and deployment readiness exercises to validate its ability to mission command and to deploy.

The battalion strictly enforced and implemented Warrior Wednesdays as it provided NCOs and leaders valuable time to train Soldiers on critical individual tasks. Subsequently, leadership implemented a directive that all military movements throughout the Spartan Brigade footprint will be tactically focused and executed as such. All movements to ranges were considered tactical movements with crew-serve weapons, radios loaded, joint battle command-platforms (JBC-Ps) and mission command systems operational. The Soldiers were able to incorporate tactical convoy operations to a range where they were then challenged with personnel on the battlefield (hostile and friendly) or identifying and sending up an unexploded ordnance report. Additionally, all Patriot Table VIII certifications were required to have continuous force protection and security and were not authorized to be administrative in nature. Furthermore, all tactical vehicle movements were tracked at the staff duty desk via JBC-P tactical operations center (TOC) kit and FM communications. These standards became the structure that enabled units to think and operate tactically.

Develop a theme (CRAWL)

Early on, the leaders’ FTX was not a very popular training event. Nonetheless, this training exercise was executed 90 days after redeployment and set the foundation and solidified team building, expectations and a shared understanding for the long journey to come. This training exercise involved all NCOs, platoon leaders and other senior leadership in the organization to relearn perishable skills, familiarize themselves with Soldier common tasks, and focus on troop leading procedures. In the end, all these leaders executed tasks their Soldiers needed to be familiar with in order to survive, fight and win on the battlefield. This included digging fighting positions, loading cryptographic into radios, pulling security/guard duty, executing tactical convoys, casualty evacuation (CA-SEVAC) operations, land navigation and field maintenance. After a nine-month deployment from CENTCOM, this provided leaders the opportunity to not only refresh but also gain knowledge and build confidence. Likewise, it provided a realistic appraisal of where the organization stood in regard to executing expeditionary operations. Leaders began incorporating the lessons learned from this event to revamp their warrior time training schedules and strategies. The exercise also identified some unique and important skill-sets that were needed in regard to mission command systems. A few of the major lessons identified and actioned were the unit sent an NCO to the Digital Master Gunner Course at Fort Leavenworth and numerous Soldiers to the JPC-Ps and Command Post of the Future (CPOF) operator and maintainer courses located at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Practice is preparation (WALK)

Upon the conclusion of the leaders’ FTX, the battalion immediately started preparations for their first collective training event in support of the 108th ADA Brigade during their CTE. The battalion staff conducted a thorough military decision-making process and developed and produced a solid plan. The battalion took full advantage of this training opportunity and employed all their communications equipment and mission command systems. The battalion SSA validated the use of a Forward Issue and Turn in Point which allows units to have continuous support in a field environment. The continuation of this practice during RS19 proved to be extremely beneficial and was noted as the best practice.

At the battery/company level, units were focused on survivability and tactically displacing to various locations on the battlefield. Early on, familiarization with crew-serve weapons and their integration and emplacement as part of their base defense designs challenged some units. This challenge was later rectified when units started actively searching for observations and fields of fire, key or decisive terrain, obstacles
cover and concealment and avenues of approach and properly identifying their sectors and creating sector sketches. The leadership employed a small opposing force (OPFOR) in order to create a tough realistic training event allowing units to rehearse reaction to contact, CASEVAC and reporting procedures. The highlight of this exercise was incorporating two UH-60 rotary wing assets into the training exercise. This allowed Soldiers to communicate a 9-Line Medical evacuation request directly to the aircraft and prepare and move casualties off the battlefield. Lastly, one of the key lessons learned from this training event was that FM communications were not reliable as a primary means of communication across great distances. The mission command platforms (JBC-Ps) became vital to maintaining lines of communication and mission command throughout the duration of the exercise. Field discipline, basic Soldiers skills and field maintenance were notable areas that improved throughout the operation.

**Hard work is good practice (RUN)**

The battalion FTX was the culminating training event that prepared the battalion for RS19. This was the final rehearsal to validate the battalion’s warrior fighting readiness capability prior to its deployment to Atropia, which was the fictional country our unit was fighting in for RS19. The battalion staff worked tirelessly to ensure this training event was tough, realistic and well-planned. To enhance the realistic training effect, the battalion staff was able to resource a basic combat load of ammunition for all individual and crew-served weapons. Likewise, they acquired smoke, artillery simulators and training claymore mine kits from the Training and Audiovisual Support Center. Additionally, the battalion was approved for aviation support from the 82nd Combined Arms Battalion for the latter half of the training event. The battalion internally resourced a well-trained and motivated OPFOR and designated civilians on the battlefield that were managed by the battalion command sergeant major. This allowed the battalion leadership the opportunity to assess proficiency and conduct quality after-action reviews after key events. The battalion TOC and firing batteries were stressed throughout the duration of the exercise and were required to tactically displace multiple times in day and night time conditions. Additionally, they received small arms contact along routes and had to react to contact and recover vehicles and personnel. There were a few key tactics, techniques and procedures that were adopted based on lessons learned during this training event. The standardization of the individual sleeping tents allowed units more flexibility and saved time when displacing sites and saved critical space in Light Medium Tactical Vehicles. The next key takeaway was the importance of training in limited visibility with night vision goggles. This takes time, patience and continuous practice. The battalion validated its ability to shoot through tough air battles and a persistent OPFOR; move by displacing to an alternate and supplementary battle positions in support of the land component commander’s critical asset list; and communicate by maximizing the use of its full suite of communications assets to include FM, JBC-P, CPOF, Tampa Microwave Satellite Terminal and Combined Cryptographic Modernization Phase-1 capability. All this ensured the Panther Battalion was the most lethal, disciplined, competent and confident force during Roving Sands 2019.

**Roving Sands 2019 - aka #killthedonovians**

In conclusion, this training experience was a great evaluation and assessment of the battalions overall warfighting readiness capability. The unit movement operations alone enabled the battalion to assess its ability to deploy with all of its assigned MTOE equipment. The battalion-level FTXs provided senior leadership the feedback necessary to better identify which skills and resources required improvement.

Lastly, field discipline, basic Soldier skills and a tactical mindset were critical to mission accomplishment. The execution of tough, realistic and well-resourced training enabled the battalion to prepare to assume its mission as part of the Global Response Force (GRF). Surprisingly, it wasn’t long before all the hard work would pay off. Within a few months after the battalion redeployed from Roving Sands, the battalion deployed a battery within days of notification in support of the GRF. The battalion followed soon after and implemented the lessons learned and experiences learned during the last year of aggressive training and preparation. Today, the Panther Battalion remains postured to defend critical assets in the CENTCOM AOR and lives by their motto “Fear No Encounter”!

Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Walker is currently serving as the battalion command sergeant major of 1st Battalion, 7th ADA. His other duty positions have included operations sergeant major 108th ADA Brigade, operations sergeant major of 2nd Battalion, 44th ADA, first sergeant of Alpha Battery, 2nd Battalion, 44th ADA, first sergeant of Delta Battery, 3rd Battalion, 2nd ADA, S3 Operations NCOIC of 31st ADA Brigade, first sergeant of Bravo Battery, 2nd Battalion, 6th ADA, Advanced Individual Training platoon sergeant of Bravo Battery, 2-6th ADA, G3 Operations NCO 32nd AAMDC, Avenger/Stinger Team Observer/Controller Joint Readiness Training Center, squad leader D Battery, 5th Battalion, 5th ADA, team leader ADA battery, 2nd Armored Calvary Regiment, and team leader A Battery, 3-4th ADAR (Airborne).