



By Major Joseph F. O'Donnell

The 46th Engineer Battalion ("Steel Spike"), Fort Johnson, Louisiana, recently completed Rotation 23-09 as the divisional engineer battalion for the 21st Airborne Division (the high-command element of the Joint Readiness Training Center [JRTC], Fort Johnson) in support of the 3d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, Fort Johnson. This article highlights the experiences of the 46th Engineer Battalion and presents its process for building relationships and participating in a combat training center (CTC) rotation as an echelon-above-brigade (EAB) formation for any EAB engineer battalion that would like to tackle the challenge and benefit from the training value—of participating in a JRTC rotation.

The process of joining the JRTC rotation involved a year of planning and the convergence of a few factors. EAB engineer battalions that wish to follow suit should—

- Carefully chose their rotation and partner units.
- Ensure that they understand the U.S. Army Forces Command process of the troop exemption list memorandum, initial planning conference, and final planning conference.
- Communicate the importance of the training value to their higher headquarters.
- Confirm coordination with the commander and staff of the supported formation as the battalion integrates into the team.

Background

The commander of the 20th Engineer Brigade, Fort Liberty, North Carolina, posed the following question to the 46th Engineer Battalion: How can we apply the Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model or Operational Readiness Cycle Framework to EAB engineer companies and battalions for Headquarters, Department of the Army-directed response force capability missions? Ideally, these units would be afforded a year-long collective training phase that would culminate with a validation exercise (in the form of a CTC rotation) in the fourth quarter.

Parallel to that planning effort, the 46th Engineer Battalion will field a multi-role bridge company (MRBC)—the 553d MRBC—in fiscal year (FY) 2025. In planning a training cycle for the 553d MRBC to participate in large-scale exercises such as Defender–Europe and Remagen Ready, Fort Cavazos, Texas, the 46th took a look at a series of 10th Mountain Division JRTC rotations, with the idea of participating in increasing increments during each rotation from FY 23 to FY 25. 10th Mountain Division rotations were chosen for two reasons: 1) The 20th Engineer Brigade had directed that the 46th Engineer Battalion have a habitual supporting relationship with the 10th and 2) The 46th Engineer Battalion has a subordinate engineer support company collocated with the 10th at Fort Drum, New York. The battalion headquarters would stay in the divisional support area and manage the flow of assets forward (to actual or simulated brigades), as the scenario and the 21st Airborne Division dictated.

First Steps

In August 2022, the 46th Engineer Battalion contacted the 10th Mountain Division planning office in an attempt to initiate support for JRTC Rotation 23-04 in February 2023. Unfortunately, the initial planning conference for Rotation 23-04 was already underway and additions could not be made to the troop exemption list memorandum. The initial planning conference, which brings all of the Forces Command scheduled enablers together to coordinate priorities and training objectives, is scheduled to take place 180 to 150 days prior to the start of a rotation. The troop exemption list memorandum is a document, signed by the division commander, authorizing any additional Soldiers or equipment for the rotation; it is often used to add extra aviation assets or white-cell or opposing-force requirements. The troop exemption list memorandum is typically finalized prior to commencement of the initial planning conference so that all rotation participants are present. Getting in ahead of the initial planning conference and getting approval to be added to the troop exemption list memorandum are the two most important steps in gaining access to a CTC rotation.

With the planning for Rotation 23-04 too far along for the 46th Engineer Battalion to be included, the battalion began coordinating with the 10th Mountain Division planning team and the 3d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, with a revised goal of participating in Rotation 23-09 with the 3d Brigade. Starting in November 2022, the battalion also began coordinating with Task Force Zulu of the JRTC Operations Group. Task Force Zulu was interested in pulling some of the traditional brigade combat team (BCT) enablers back to the divisional support area to better replicate a divisional fight.

In January 2023, the 46th Engineer Battalion attended the initial planning conference for JRTC Rotation 23-09. The conference was arranged by warfighting function, and the 46th participated in the protection cell working group. At that time, JRTC had not yet determined the command support relationship for the 46th, the combat support enablers, or the configuration of the higher headquarters. While meeting with adjacent units was useful, much of the integration and planning for one of the U.S. Army Reserve companies was conducted with leaders who did not actually participate in the rotation, which created a disconnect between the expectations of the 46th Engineer Battalion and the company command team when they arrived for the rotation. In retrospect, all company commanders and first sergeants of the enabler units should have been present for the initial planning conference. The planning conference marked a transition for the involvement of Task Force Zulu; the task force unit went from high-level conceptual planning to detailed planning for the rotation.

Traction

In March 2023, the 46th Engineer Battalion attended the Leader's Training Program (LTP) for Rotation 23-09 at the Fort Johnson Mission Training Complex. In conjunction with leaders from the 3d Brigade, the 46th began planning missions for the EAB engineer enablers. The first issue encountered during the LTP was a divisional order that included tasks for a fictional 21st Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (MEB) but no dedicated MEB team or coach. The 46th spent the first day and a half of the LTP conducting a military decision-making process session to produce outputs for the 21st MEB to pass down to subordinate battalions. The 317th Brigade Engineer Battalion, Fort Johnson, coach agreed to act as the coach for the EAB engineer battalion.

After the exercise, commander's intent, key tasks, end state, and tasks to subordinate units had been developed, the 46th Engineer Battalion transitioned to planning its own mission. The LTP mission set was extremely challenging for the staff of the 46th, as the battalion was to be supporting the 21st Airborne Division, which had units spread from north to south along a 187-mile-wide front between two interstate corridors and was moving east to west—with a river requiring a wet-gap crossing.

Attendance at the LTP provided the 46th Engineer Battalion with valuable planning experience. It helped the battalion identify friction points, including the clearing of fires in the rear area, management of division Class IV supplies, and specification of command support relationships when companies are pushed into other BCT areas of operations. The LTP also highlighted the need for a liaison officer (LNO) for each brigade. Finally, as an EAB engineer battalion, the 46th does not organically have tactical Internet; although this requirement was supported by the 35th Signal Brigade, Fort Liberty, the LTP provided a forum in which the 46th could warn that it had never trained with the 35th and question whether the 35th would be mobile enough and capable enough to jump with the 46th. Between March and May of 2023, the 20th Engineer Brigade commander and deputy commander were extremely involved in communicating the excitement of the 46th Engineer Battion to be a full on-site JRTC participant under canvas with the XVIII Airborne Corps and the 10th Mountain Division. This was important because, while units cannot be admitted to JRTC without inclusion on the troop exemption list memorandum prior to the initial planning conference, they can be cut for budget or other reasons all the way up to the end of the final planning conference. For a few months, the involvement of the 46th seemed precariously close to the cut line, despite the support of the 3d Brigade and the JRTC Operations Group. In the end, it was the championing of the 46th by the higher headquarters that secured participation in the rotation.

Final Details and Preparation

With participation in JRTC secured, the next critical steps for the 46th Engineer Battalion came in May 2023. The new battalion commander participated in planning conferences with Task Force 5 and Task Force Zulu to clarify the role and command support relationships of the 46th in Rotation 23-09. Task Force 5, the brigade engineer battalion task force, wanted one engineer battalion headquarters concerned with providing mobility and countermobility support to the tactical brigade in the close fight and another engineer battalion headquarters providing protection and combat support in the divisional rear area. Task Force Zulu was seeking unit input on whether the JRTC Operations Group should stand up Task Force 6.

The question of whether JRTC should stand up Task Force 6 for a unit is one that is critical for units to answer up front. Standing up Task Force 6 involves a JRTC request for battalion command team observer coach/trainers (OC/Ts) from the 1st Army Brigade. It also involves a more robust



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guest OC/T requirement from the battalion or its higher headquarters. In general, it is recommended that Task Force 6 be stood up if the majority of the battalion combat power is part of the rotation. If the headquarters element is small, it is recommended that the costs and the requirements for guest OC/Ts be kept down by not standing up Task Force 6.



Mobile tactical operations center diagram

During the final planning conferences for JRTC Rotation 23-9—and approximately 45 days before the exercise began—Task Force Zulu determined that Task Force 6 would be stood up for the 46th Engineer Battalion. This development resulted in a short-notice tasking for the 20th Engineer Brigade to provide approximately 20 guest OC/Ts for Task Forces 5 and 6. Task Force 5 managed the splitting of permanent OC/Ts between the two task forces and used the guests from the 20th Engineer Brigade to augment the JRTC trainers. However, as an added benefit, the 46th received a full-time senior trainer from 1st Army to manage Task Force 6.

The reward for all of this effort was a JRTC rotation that greatly advanced the tactical and technical organizational competence of the 46th Engineer Battalion. The battalion tested the capabilities and limitations of its new mobile command post, which had been developed over the previous year. It learned the value of carefully prepared vehicle-hiding positions and deliberate patrol base occupation plans to disperse the formation and conceal its footprint. It learned the limitations of its communications equipment in the dense JRTC jungle and swamps. It received excellent training on moving and operating at night using night vision devices. And it witnessed the challenges that distance poses in supporting a BCT from a divisional rear area 15–25 miles away. The 46th Engineer Battalion was able to capture lessons that might have otherwise taken years and several staff generations to acquire and incorporate them into its command post standard operating procedure and tactical standard operating procedures.

Considerations

EAB units interested in participating in a JRTC rotation should consider the following:

Enabler integration. Prior to the JRTC rotation and • throughout the first week of operations in the rear unit bivouac area, there was a gap between the 46th Engineer Battalion expectations of enabler readiness and preparedness of the enablers to execute. As the battalion fought through a condensed reception, staging, onward movement, and integration timeline, the "unknownunknowns" caused friction points between the battalion headquarters and U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard enablers. The battalion must provide copies of the command post standard operating procedure and tactical standard operating procedures to the enablers early in the planning process to allow them the to better understand the way the battalion fights. The battalion must also coordinate to obtain the enablers' unit identification codes and Department of Defense Activity Access Codes ahead of their arrival at the CTC. This data allows for improved support of enabler maintenance and dispatch issues. If Department of Defense Activity Access Code alignment under the supported battalion is not possible, enablers must bring their signature cards, formatted for the JRTC supply service activity; assumption-of-command orders; combat slants; JRTC Orange 3s (vehicle reconstitution reports); personnel reconstitution packets; trip tickets;

and repair parts signature cards, which should all be created at home station. These products should require only minor updates after receiving pre-position operations equipment.

- Upper tactical Internet. The 21st MEB and the 21st Airborne Division worked exclusively from secure voiceover-internet-protocol telephones. As these telephones are not EAB engineer battalion organic assets, the 46th Engineer Battalion had little familiarity with their limitations in the field. JRTC foliage and terrain elevation and the amount of time required to disassemble, package, and reset the commercial, off-the-shelf communications dish severely limited battalion access to the tactical Internet and secure voice-over-internet-protocol telephones. As a result, the 46th missed half of the battle rhythm meetings.
- LNOs. Due to manning constraints, the 46th Engineer Battalion could support sending only two LNOs to higher and adjacent headquarters. The LNO sent to the 3d Brigade worked out perfectly. The other LNO, who was placed in the 21st Airborne Division-two levels up in higher headquarters—did not have the requisite rank or dedicated communications platforms necessary to be effective. The 46th should have provided each of the two LNOs with a dedicated Joint Battle Command Platform so that they could communicate effectively, per the battalion primary, alternate, contingency, and an emergency plan. Many of the issues encountered throughout the rotation were related to logistics; consequentially, in retrospect, it may have been better to place an LNO with the combat sustainment support battalion to alleviate friction with logistical support in the rear area. A total of three LNOs would have been ideal.

Conclusion

It requires a year of planning and a carefully chosen partner unit for an EAB engineer battalion to gain access to JRTC. The importance of the brigade and division commanders getting the battalion added to the troop exemption list memorandum cannot be overstated. Because the exercise scenario is designed by JRTC Task Force Zulu, battalions should have clearly defined training objectives, know whether or not they want JRTC to stand up Task Force 6, and understand the requirement for support details. For those units that successfully lay the groundwork to attend a JRTC rotation, the reward is an unparalleled training experience in supporting large-scale combat operations. JRTC develops the most challenging training scenarios in order to stress the rigors of combat in austere environments while operating from mobile command posts. With engineer battalions soon to be pulled from BCTs, the only way that engineers can maintain a battalion level presence at CTCs is by EAB engineer battalions leaning into CTC rotations.

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