

Lessons from a Stryker Company Executing a Dismounted KCTC Rotation

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During training rotations at the Korea Combat Training Center (KCTC), much like those at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) and National Training Center (NTC), participants experience heightened pressure and stress that simulates a large-scale combat operations (LSCO) battlefield. The valuable lessons gained, whether through failures or successes, have lasting effects throughout an Army career and show the importance of the large collective training objective. KCTC stands out because its training environment combines aspects of both JRTC and NTC, featuring a compact area that restricts mounted maneuvers akin to JRTC but also offers significant terrain changes reminiscent of Death Valley at NTC. Through the recons executed before the rotation, similar to the Leader Training Program, leaders are allowed to see KCTC's terrain firsthand and make connections with their Republic of Korea Army (ROK-A) counterparts that will be invaluable when executing the training rotation. The more leaders invest into the KCTC recons, the better prepared they will enter the box with a knowledge base on how ROK-A operates and how to realistically plan tactical operations on the ground at KCTC.

Stryker troops, or companies, often grapple with balancing mounted and dismounted training without one compromising the other. KCTC highlights the necessity for dismounted operations as a critical component for brigade and battalion success. The dismounted training units accomplish at the team, squad, and platoon levels during their training progression in Korea before their KCTC rotation is very important to establishing a baseline of proficiencies. Reflecting on the preparation for KCTC 24-06, the most valuable training involved rigorous and realistic exercises in similar terrain, weekly ruck marches under heavy loads, and leadership professional development

(LPD)/leader's time training (LTT) sessions focused on tactical leader development. In this article, I will highlight lessons learned from maneuvering a dismounted troop at KCTC.

During the rotation, the troop deployed to a squadron assembly area and completed two days of reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI). This duration was significantly shorter than what is typical at U.S. training centers, emphasizing the need for swift execution of essential implementation tasks. Registering and zeroing the Korean Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System gear, performing troop and platoon operational briefs, and conducting pre-combat checks (PCCs) and pre-combat inspections (PCIs) were the troop's primary focuses. Typical KCTC rotations consist of two to three days of defensive operations, followed by a brief pause lasting 12-18 hours, after which offensive operations commence. During exercise preparation and execution, it was clear that ROK-A prioritizes defensive operations and allocates substantial resources accordingly. Our dismounted troop was assigned a 2-kilometer screen line along a ridgeline in a secondary battle position within the ROK-A brigade's main defensive setup. Though movement from assembly areas to training release points spanned only a couple of miles, the challenging terrain and



1SG Jeffery Hlatko and CPT Matthew Colvard, the command team of Eagle Troop, 2nd Squadron, 3rd Cavalry Regiment, confer during training. (Photo courtesy of 2nd Infantry Division Public Affairs Office)

elevation made it slow and laborious. During our defensive operations, the troop encountered minimal action due to our positioning and the difficulty of traversing the ridgelines. We were probed twice by opposing force (OPFOR) scout teams but successfully neutralized their efforts.

While the troop faced limited action during the defensive phase, the shift to offensive operations saw U.S. forces receiving greater emphasis in both scheme and tasking. After a brief operational pause, we moved dismounted to our release point for offensive operations and established a troop objective rally point (ORP) for briefings and additional PCCs and PCIs. After eight hours of dismounted movement in offensive operations, it became clear that our troop was progressing faster and farther than other units. This advantage stemmed from effective route planning that used severely restricted terrain to our advantage to minimize enemy contact. Fundamentals learned during the Ranger Course and training at JRTC — such as avoiding danger areas and ensuring proper linear and open danger area crossings — also aided in troop efforts to maneuver undetected. Upon reaching the attack positions, the troop was well-positioned to establish a robust support by fire onto the first objective.

Leaders in the troop utilized common sense in understanding that the enemy OPFOR would not freely relinquish key terrain, specifically the location designated for the support by fire. They understood that seizing this terrain would require a determined effort. The troop employed flexibility by organizing a small tactical unit of two infantry squads with a machine-gun team and ready-to-deploy fire teams to reinforce success in reserve. This strategy paid off; within a short period, they successfully seized the support-by-fire position, which was crucial for the squadron's tactical success. The OPFOR positioned on this newly acquired terrain included recon elements and observers capable of providing early warning and targeting support for enemy indirect fire missions. Not only did the troop manage to limit friendly casualties during the capture of the key terrain, but we also confiscated an operational OPFOR radio utilized by forward observers. This radio, part of the OPFOR fires net, was invaluable; it allowed the ROK-A fire support team to intercept and translate information about enemy fire missions, giving friendly forces critical early warnings of incoming indirect fire and higher headquarters details about the enemy's field artillery placements.

However, hours after multiple suppression efforts using both indirect and direct fires, it became clear that the assaulting force, comprised of two sister troops, suffered significant losses and had to retreat to the previous squadron's forward line of own troops. Reports indicated that the enemy remained entrenched within a fortified bunker system that provided excellent fields of fire towards the east and south. These positions were out of reach of the support by fire and protected by anti-tank systems and mechanized infantry. At 0100, the troop received a change of mission: leave a small force behind for ongoing suppression while maneuvering towards the first objective via a different route. Thanks to the troop's rapid troop leading procedures, by 0230 we were

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postured to execute the long-dismounted patrol. The new route, attacking from the north rather than the south of the objective, was unexpected and challenged the troop with heavily forested areas, a draw, and crossing of a river system running just west of the objective.

Throughout the patrol, the troop fought to maintain communications with the squadron, allowing indirect fire support to suppress the objective as we advanced. By around 0400, the lead element reported spotting OPFOR observation post locations. Fortunately, due to the patrol's stealth, the formation remained undetected, allowing a small team led by an NCO to take out the sleeping OPFOR soldiers. As the troop proceeded towards the objective, we encountered contact from OPFOR along the perimeter of the objective. Lead elements quickly overpowered this weaker defense before reinforcement could arrive. Minutes later, two squads entered and cleared the bunker system, delivering a significant blow to OPFOR morale. In response, the enemy deployed tanks to retake the position. With the remaining members of the troop in the bunker system, troop leadership called indirect fire support from the ROK-A field artillery battalion, aiming to suppress the advancing tanks to move anti-tank (AT) teams into position to destroy the enemy tanks. After successfully mitigating the tank threat, the AT teams identified dismounted OPFOR infantry reinforcements approaching. Despite being reduced to a 12-man fighting unit, the troop held the bunker system for more than an hour, ultimately seizing the objective and facilitating the passage of friendly ROK-A armor to the next target.

Throughout our KCTC rotation, the troop saw our share of successes and failures and learned immensely through both. The lessons learned in KCTC will stick with Soldiers through their Korea rotation and be the fundamental training blocks toward their successes in other large collective training events. KCTC was an invaluable training opportunity for my troop, and with proper planning and execution would foster the same results for any Stryker or infantry brigade combat team rifle company. Pack light, make sure your Soldiers are drinking water, and plan plenty of alternate logistics release points locations for resupply of ammunition and food.

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