

TO MOVE THE GUNS

Within Canadian doctrine, it is made apparent that the artillery is most susceptible to enemy action while guns are out of action and on the move. As such, the training system of the Royal Regiment places a large amount of time and effort into maximizing the efficiency and survivability of units during mobile ops, with the aim of minimizing the time that guns are out of action. Second only to our 'bread and butter' of shooting, the requirement for a valid response to the detailed problem of moving an artillery sub-sub-unit is engrained early into young GPOs and TCs. However, I observed several times throughout my personal phase training that lip service was often paid to the preparation and issuing of thorough and concise orders for such operations. Coupled with the lack of relevant rehearsals, this left an impression of uncertainty in the face of the mock enemy action that was to come. The first real opportunity to develop and refine relevant TTPs and SOPs came during high readiness training exercises at the unit, where the relative consistency of manning and the experiences of seasoned Sr NCOs guided the application of basic fundamentals into relevant plans.

Early in the collective training cycle of Task Force 1-10's road to high readiness, news arrived from theatre that an imminent change to the current TFK indirect fire coverage in Afghanistan was to occur. Rumours had the movement of a gun troop out of Zhari district being executed by either C Bty, 1 RCHA during the final half of Roto 8 or soon upon D Bty's arrival in theatre. In lieu of this probable task, the possibility of an austere deployment by the displaced gun troop became very real. A Troop was labelled by BC D early in the training cycle as the Tp responsible for relieving the designated gun line, executing the move, and establishing a new gun position. The force generation and training of A Tp was thus catered to with the intent of mastering the ability to move and operate in a hostile, COIN environment. The requirement for sound force protection skills, an adaptable routine, and solid team cohesion provided the foundation for directed training with the end state of being able to survive in a prolonged deployment away from friendly elements. We were fortunate as a Troop in that we had several NCO veterans of TF 1-07, who during their tour had conducted several road moves (some of substantial length and distance) and austere deployments throughout the districts of Zhari and Panjwayi, as well as the province of Helmand. The added presence of complex secondary and tertiary devices, RCIEDs, and low-metal content triggers made the IED threat in the current theatre arguably more deadly since 2007. However, the drills and tactics to counteract and mitigate their effects had remained fundamentally unchanged. It was thus my aim to master these basics during Exercise MAPLE GUARDIAN, which was greatly aided by the Task Force's opportunity to train and confirm in Ft. Irwin, California.

The dusty, rolling terrain and large temperature changes characteristic of the Mojave Desert provided a shockingly similar operating environment to Afghanistan. Ft. Irwin prepared the gun troops for the real world issues of cool mornings, scorching afternoons, dust, and creepy crawlies, which all combined into a challenging and unforgiving operating environment. In one of the harshest environments on earth, it became apparent that these natural factors were to be paid due respect, as they were entirely capable of rendering both equipment and personnel combat ineffective in the shortest of timeframes. Coupled with the mock IED scenarios and presence of an independent and adaptable OpFor, the opportunity to test the validity and effectiveness of our established TTPs and SOPs was provided. The layered and progressive approach to both mobile and gun line operations aided greatly in the collective and

individual confidence of the entire Troop. During road moves, drivers became proficient in the attention to spacing and pace on dusty, undeveloped roads, while the recce party developed the ability to conduct proper assessments of canalizing terrain and identify high threat areas to be vital point searched (VPS). Vehicle call signs and their respective crews became focussed on responding with positive action against threats in accordance with the governing ROE. The deployment of the gun line quickly became a simplified drill to a complex problem, whereby every detachment was aware of their individual responsibility towards the overall goal of deploying and recording the howitzers as quickly as possible. Coupled with the opportunity to master technical shooting in support of living and breathing manoeuvre elements, the training regimen brought the entire spectrum of gun line ops together in one effective period. It was evident as A Troop left California that we were confident in our abilities and had formed a unified, cohesive team with a set of common goals – deploy to Afghanistan, kill the enemy, and be prepared to move the guns.



Austere gun position in Ft. Irwin, California.

Upon arrival in theatre, it was apparent to me that there were many echelons above the Battery that all had an immediate, vested interest in the disposition and location of the guns. As a young Lieutenant on his first operational deployment, the importance and respect paid to 'fires coverage' by planning and operational staffs was eye opening, and the imminent arrival of the summer fighting season forced me to think outside of the bubble of my own gun line. I will always remember the first night that A Troop spent on the gun position in FOB Wilson. Handovers had been ongoing throughout the day and all pers had gone to ground after late-night hours of smoking and joking with the few residual members of F Tp. At approximately 03h00 that night, a large explosion rocked the tent lines, rattling cots and sending kit toppling over. As everyone ran out of the tents with wide eyes and blank faces to get behind the blast walls, the report came over the radio that a local national van had hit a large IED 400m from the FOB. As I returned from the Command Post to brief the Troop, I couldn't help but finish with "welcome to Afghanistan, A Troop". The following morning during breakfast, my TSM, WO Hunt, added "well Sir, they sure couldn't have planned that at a better time. I don't think we will have any problems with the guys wearing their kit now." Joking from the Comd team aside, from that point on there was no questioning that a living, breathing enemy was operating just outside the double-stacked HESCO walls of the FOB, whose sole intent was to remove us from their country and this earth by any means necessary. As the RiP with F Tp continued, I thus carried myself with the intent to act as a sponge with a focus not only on gun line operations and its current ability to move, but the sitemp of the enemy and the risks on the roads in our immediate AO and beyond.

Following the Transfer of Authority between A and F Tps on 17 May 2010, we expected the movement of the gun line to follow shortly. The Troop leadership implemented a training plan focused on the vital areas of refresher training on the drills and TTPs/SOPs mastered in California. Daily training events involving weapons ranges, driver training, SOP refreshers, and vehicle extraction, 5s & 20s, VPS, TCCC, and heli-ops drills, maintained the focus of the Troop throughout the early portion of the tour. I tasked the Tp's NCOs with the responsibility of planning and executing individual training stands, to which they responded to great effect. They kept the refresher training relevant and streamlined, bringing to bear outside resources such as the American Engineer element that lived adjacent to us in the construction of mock IED lanes in line with current enemy TTPs. The presence of TLAVs and AHSVS gun tractors were the first that most of our drivers had seen since their courses in Petawawa. Gone were the road moves of Ft. Irwin conducted in LS and MLVWs, and the requirement to refresh the faded driving skills was critical. We were fortunate in that the Americans were in the process of expanding the FOB threefold to make room for two more battalion-sized units as part of the surge into Zhari by TF Strike (101st Airborne Division). This plot of bulldozed grape fields was immediately adjacent to the gun line compound and provided plenty of room to reach nearly maximum ground speed in the TLAVs and regain an appreciation for low visibility, dusty conditions as well as the scalding temperatures which they were expected to operate in. Due to the ongoing requirement to man the guns simultaneously, we catered driver training to focus on the primary drivers and crew commanders in accordance with the intended convoy manifesting.



MBdr King briefs his detachment on VPS techniques prior to refresher training on an IED lane on the gun line.

What we thought was routine battle procedure prior to the move involving tasks that seemed simple on training and in garrison, ended up exploding into massive endeavours requiring a large amount of resources, both in time and effort. For example, the sheer amount of ammunition that was present on the gun line upon our arrival totalled over 1100 rounds of 155mm of mixed natures and 900 plus 81mm mortar bombs. These were all required to be inspected, counted, packed, and shipped over the span of several weeks and several CLPs. Some of the ammo was in unacceptable condition, mainly due to aging over the course of the Afghan combat mission. Mixed lots, improperly packed (and often broken) fuzes, and incomplete propellant increments are just a few of the challenges that faced the TSM. The lack of packing materials was also a concern, as much of the unpacked ammo's salvage had been removed from the gun position completely. Due



The large amounts of ammunition on the gun line presented a significant challenge.

attention and detailed planning also had to be paid in the allotment of ammo to be carried to the next position by each gun tractor. Given the limited space we had for mission critical stores and equipment and the requirement to meet the BC's intent for ammo on the ground at the new position, measurements down to the inch were required and detailed layout diagrams were issued to the Det 2ICs. It was not until after a long day of several back and forth email and VOIP conversations regarding ammo movements that I recalled a quote from BC D during an AAR back in Petawawa: "Rick, shooting the guns is the easy stuff, the technical side of gunnery. The hard part is feeding the beast, resupplying it with the ammo and stores required to keep it firing. That is the hard part, the easiest to overlook, and the hardest to maintain."

The question of where we were to be relocated was also a lesson in coordination and unity of effort. An advance party consisting of the TL, TSM, and Recce Sgt was required to depart the gun line for four days to verify the feasibility of the newly proposed gun position. While not an austere position, the liaison with non-gunner BG elements who did not entirely understand the requirements of a gun troop was essential in ensuring the ability to achieve the capability to support with indirect fires in 6400 mils. For example, a proposed joint PGSS (surveillance balloon) and PST (tower) were scheduled to share the same compound within the same TI expansion. These units rose to considerable height and had the potential to create significant near crest issues. We had trained for deployments in very limited spacing (<75m length and width) if required, however in conference calls with the Engineer Troop Commander responsible for the construction, it was made it clear that there would be ample defensive stores and room available for a sufficient gun position. The face to face liaison was successful in compromising on a solution to deploy the guns in the new Patrol Base.

As tentative move dates were pushed further to the right and May quickly turned into June, the phrase of 'well, maybe we won't end up moving after all' became popular amongst the gun dets. Refresher training continued, however quickly became monotonous and taxing in its repetition. The challenge of maintaining a variety in the scenarios and a dedicated interest became understandably difficult for the soldiers. The troops were also comfortable, as we had taken over a well-developed gun line which had been built up over the span of three separate rotations dating back to be 2 RCHA's last deployment on TF 3-08 with F Bty. Tent lines were stocked with custom-made furniture, AC units, wireless internet, and enough magazines and books for each Detachment to stake claim to its own library. The Troop was also completely self sufficient in it's day to day operation. Three meals a day were hay boxed to the gun line and our dedicated 72KW generator kept the water in the shower sea can hot, 8+ fridges running, and 2x TVs, an Xbox, and 30+ laptops glowing. The human reaction to being unexpectedly 'spoiled' as such and the potential for relative hardship when we did move created the seeds for low morale and the development of complacency. The TSM and I treated it as a low-level command issue capable of mitigation by the NCOs of the Tp, yet it was an overall mindset that had to be overcome. My nightly TC's CUB would generally end with a reminder of the imminent arrival of move orders and scaled tasks would be issued in order to continue preparations.

During this time, the relief in place of the existing American Inf Bn (1-12th) by the 1-502nd Bn (TF Talon/First Strike) was ongoing. TF 1-12 was concluding a year long rotation where they had operated in the insurgent stronghold of the Arghandab before taking sole responsibility for Zhari district. They had suffered casualties at an alarming rate, with some platoons utilizing 300% of their replacement pool. The incoming 1-502nd

presented themselves as a focused and highly professional unit from the beginning and I quickly began to work directly with the new Fires Support Element (Talon FSE) within the Bn TOC.

Following lethal engagements in support of medevacs into hot HLS and firing in defense of critical TI throughout the green belt north of the Arghandab River, the mutual respect and warrior spirit that was garnered between A Troop and the 1-502nd was something that I will never forget. It was within weeks of TOA when we were no longer addressed as simply 'those Canadians' but as 'our brothers the gunners'. Officers at all levels of Bn command were quick to praise the accuracy and efficiency of our guns. In prosecuting enemy targets with often first round hits to devastating effect, they began to think of ours guns as snipers and it took some clarification in the application of artillery to explain that we could not always guarantee this. They were so sold on the use of our guns that it got to the point where the FSE would push away CCA assets in order to maintain the moment of surprise and then strike with the M777s. I remember the Bn FSO, Capt Zell Railey briefing the staff during a weekly Bn Targeting Briefing early in June. He was back briefing the fires plan for an upcoming baited ambush operation along Highway 1 and stated "Choppers are scaring these guys, they can hear them coming from a mile away. Let's see if they can dodge a Canadian 155mm round."

As a residual effect, the preparations for the road move were both aided and opposed by our American comrades. They continually brought up the fact that, should the Canadian guns move, the Bn and the entire district would be without dedicated indirect fire support assets with the exception of each TI's single 60mm mortar. As we received word in mid-June of imminent orders to move, the staff of the Bn seemed to simply shrug it off as 'it is never going to happen'. However,

once I had received official orders from the BG on 20 June, their warrior spirit and 'take care of your own' mentality resulted in us being dedicated assets that were often scarce at best within the First Strike AO. A Troop's movement plan was quickly bumped from number five on the Bn's list of priority tasks during the targeting cycle to number one. While officially tasked with a platoon level escort by TFK, a platoon plus of 6x MRAPs was dedicated. This was coupled with a Route Clearance Package (RCP) to sweep the route at H-30, the Bn QRF with an EOD team on 10 minutes notice to move, and a Heavy Weapons Team that would provide over watch of the convoy as we pushed down Route Summit out of Zhari and into the Canadian AO. I didn't realize the sheer amount of assets that were dedicated to this short 6km road move until I received the CONOP package from the Bn S3 on D-4 and truly came to appreciate the resource hungry machine that is the US Army.



Lt Parent presenting LCol Johnny Davis, CO 1-502nd Bn with an RCHA flag signed by A Troop.

Arrival of the long-awaited BG Frag Order spurred the gun line into action. We had the opportunity to establish a detailed teardown and packing plan in anticipation of orders, which was executed by the gun line efficiently. The amount of random kit and

materials that had been accumulated over the span of several rotations was incredible. The gun line gym alone required an entire sea can packed in every nook and cranny in order to fit all of the various equipment. Another sea can next to the stand easy had been lined to the roof with goodies, 'fat-pills', and beverages which we traded to the FOB Seabees (US Navy construction engineers) for palettes of plywood and 2x6s for use at the new gun position. Over the span of the final week in FOB Wilson, stores were packed and final preparations were made while battle procedure was conducted on the operations side.

The ordered route had us entering the Cdn BG AO via Route Summit by night under American escort and conducting a link up with 29TAC the following morning (4 July) in FOB Masum Ghar. From there we would execute the second leg of the road move through the heart of the BG AO, travelling SE to our new home with arrival at the new gun position slated for mid-morning on the American's Independence Day

Route Summit, even prior to deploying, had always been mentioned with an ominous tone. Whether in the Officers' Mess talking with 2 RCHA veterans of 3-06, 1-07, and 3-08 or simply listening to the American radio nets in the weeks leading up to the road move, this infamous road seemed like a pathway through the heart of darkness. The contract to pave it following Op MEDUSA had reduced the frequency of IED sigacts, however the previous 30 days had still seen several IED detonations followed by direct



TC issues Convoy Orders to A Troop on 2 July 2010.

fire ambushes on American convoys. Myself and Lt Dereniowski, TL A, worked hand in hand with the Bn S2 in order to paint a clear picture of what we were headed into and we truly began to get the feeling of 'if we can get to Masum Ghar without incident, we are home free'. With ample time for the application of proper mission analysis and detailed battle procedure, we developed a thorough and very detailed threat assessment covering the entire route from FOB Wilson to the new position and presented it to the Troop as part of the convoy orders on D-2

BG's decision to move us at night down Route Summit was welcomed by all but the drivers. During the production of the threat assessment, sigacts were virtually zero throughout the entire AO during the hours of darkness. Our lack of knowledge of American movement TTPs and SOPs however, had us planning for the most adverse of conditions - driving at night in tactical column aided only by night vision optics. The AHSVS drivers immediately expressed concern given the reflection in the windshield created by the grade of the glass, which resulted in an obstructed view of the road through the driver's Monocular Night Vision Goggles (MNVG). After liaising with the Escort Platoon Leader and getting read into their SOPs for night movement, we were surprised to learn that they moved with headlights blazing. His justification was that the RCP package would be lighting up Route Summit like a moving, multi-coloured Christmas tree and given the random bypasses and washouts, it was safer to risk white light than attempt blackout driving.

With orders issued and rehearsals conducted, the worst part of the entire operation was the wait involved as H-Hour approached. On D-2 the replacement American M777 Platoon arrived on position and the fresh faces offered an outlet for a lot of A Troop's members to pass the time as they aided in getting them settled in place. This platoon, as part of an American M777 Battery, had been ripped out of Germany on 10 days notice to move to remedy TF Strike's lack of dedicated indirect fire support. They watched as our howitzers were taken out of action at 21h00 on the evening of 3 July to mark the beginning of Operation CANNONBALL RUN. The guns were to be immediately rigged for airmobile transport supported by CH146 Chinooks the next morning. The detachments completed the vital task of rigging the guns to a high standard despite the difficulties and tedium of working in the dark. Following this, there was an absence of chatter as the troops made final adjustments to their personal kit and vehicles, awaiting the approach of midnight. Spirits were visibly high, however I personally got the sense of a nervous, yet quiet confidence as the Troop prepared to embark on a task that had been upwards of a year in the making. As the TSM and I made our rounds, the uttering of "see you in Masum Ghar" resulted in a grin and nod. The shaking of hands and a firm slap on the back of the frag vest that followed was all some of them needed to perk up. As we rolled out of the front gate of the FOB amidst the American escort call signs, my thoughts were laden with confidence that we were as prepared as we could be. I planned on enjoying what was to come, as we were about to complete a mission that no gun Troop had been tasked to conduct in upwards of three years.

Minus the requirement to turn around the convoy as the lead American elements burned past the front gate of FOB Masum Ghar, the journey down Route Summit was deliberate and uneventful. The roar of the Queen Mary's engine as Gnr McCabe stepped on the accelerator to maintain the distance between us and the US Army MRAP to our front, the choking dust kicked up on the bypasses, and the presence of random Afghan billboards with triumphant depictions of the ANA, are all memories I recall from that first leg of the road move. By the time we marshaled our vehicles into FOB Masum Ghar, it was 01h00 and cots were quickly deployed in order to get a few hours of sleep while we could. With everyone exhausted, I may have been the only one to be awoken by the Chinook helicopter landing on the HLS 75m away at 02h00, as it sent pieces of gravel cascading down upon the sleeping Troop. As the sun began rising and the rumble of the Husky and Buffalo call signs from the departing EROC package rolled across our frontage, the Troop gradually rose. We were able to grab a quick breakfast at the FOB field kitchen and were soon standing in front of Maj Douglas, OC Bravo Coy, receiving convoy orders shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers of his TAC. As we filed past the ANA guard at the main gate, it was impressive to see the staggered barrels of the LAVs mixed amongst the TLAVs and AHSVSSs of the guns. Familiar faces displayed thumbs-up as they moved forward to establish their positions in the order of march.



A Troop gets a few hours of sleep upon arrival in FOB Masum Ghar

The second leg of the move differed from the first only in the fact that it was broad daylight and the diverse terrain of Afghanistan was in full view. Kiowa helicopters zipped overhead, scanning the approaches and compounds that skirted our route. As the troops scanned their arcs, they were able to see everything from the clustered shops



A Troop moves with its B Coy escort.

of the Bazaar-e-Panjaw'ai, sprawling grape fields, and rising high features of the various Ghars in the distance over the course of the 30 minutes we travelled. 29TAC set a fast pace and, coupled with their assessment to not VPS any of the culverts along the way due to the leading clearance by the EROC package, we arrived at the new TI shortly after 08h00. As we split from our escort and drove onto the new gun position for the first time, we were impressed and relieved to see the sheer size of the compound that the engineers

had prepared for us. The position was still receiving gravel shipments however, which was meant to cover the thick moon dust that blanketed the position. The southern HESCO wall was lined with waiting Afghan gravel trucks, whose drivers were sitting on their haunches in the shade, staring and eating from plastic bags as we dismounted and wiped the dust from our faces.

Gun platforms were immediately identified and all 81mm mortars were pulled from the back of the gun tractors and deployed. Word came that the first gun was inbound shortly and as it began to take shape to the east, hanging below the belly of the Chinook, it was hard not to begin to anticipate the satisfaction in accomplishment as the operation entered its final stages. The drop and deployment of both howitzers went smoothly, with each gun det rushing out like ants to remove the chains, horsehair, and massive quantities of duct tape that had held the rigging of the M777.



MBdr Nuttall guides the incoming CH146 Chinook onto the gun platform.

The hours that followed offered no break in pace, as we conducted confirmation shoots to verify the accuracy and performance of the howitzers and bedding of the mortars. The troops handled the transition to living under canvass on the dust in 50+

degree heat, with no access to AC, fridges, or Xbox with minimal complaint. Heat casualties became an immediate concern as the troops were sweating more than they could replenish their bodies with water as they worked to deploy the foundations of the position. Their minds were evidently set on the opportunity to develop this former grape field into their home for the next six months and their faces showed a pride and relief in a mission accomplished. It took several individuals a while to realize what they had achieved and the familiar sounds of IED detonations and endless BIPs made them appreciate their fortune during the road move. The gun line developed at a rapid pace amidst the long periods between engagements and within six weeks the gun position was more developed than the one we had left behind in FOB Wilson. The signature A Troop pride was everywhere to be seen, including the gun line gym and a brand new stand easy constructed by the gunners from the ground up with the materials acquired from the American Seabees.



A Troop firing in support of operations from its new location.

As a Troop Commander, I am thankful and proud that we were able to conduct a joint road and airmobile move of the gun line without incident or casualty and am confident that we would have been able to react with positive action in the face of the enemy. Thinking back to the long training cycle we underwent to culminate in a move of a gun line 20km, I do not see any of the time as wasteful or insignificant. Every single scenario tested a new skill and prepared us for the worst. The term 'train hard, fight easy' had always sounded more cliché than the truth it speaks. As we continue to support operations throughout the AO, I often remind my soldiers of the significance of their achievement. The moving of the guns had not been executed in over three years and the ability of the Troop to do it efficiently is a testament to every individual's dedication and attention to detail. The Troop was able to tear down a well established gun position, pack it up, and redeploy it without incident and without loss. We had the opportunity to support both our American and Canadian comrades in two districts and remove almost two dozen Taliban from preventing the progression of peace and stability.

In closing, the success of the road move can be summarized with a comment I received during a Troop AAR that I will look back upon with a chuckle and respect. When asked how they think things went, the response offered by one gunner of "Well Sir, nothing went boom" seemed very timely and appropriate.

UBIQUE!