

Experience is key at J_{oint}

By 1st Sgt. Jason Silsby

The role of the first sergeant has evolved in recent years, especially when it comes to preparing for Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, La., rotations. From the Civil War until recent times, the first sergeant has been the company's logistical "Yoda," taking care of the beans, bullets and Band-aids.

Technology and tactics have changed and so has the first sergeant's role. From land navigation and basic marksmanship to casualty collection, the first sergeant usually has more experience on tasks like these and JRTC rotations in general.

Two of the most important things the first sergeant needs before deploying to JRTC are a good clerk and good computer skills. The days of the pencil and memo pad are gone. The first sergeant must be able to understand and maintain a good unit database. One of the best first sergeants I ever met took computer

classes before he took over his company. He and his clerk knew how to use the software for maximum effectiveness. In fact, he used to carry his computer files to the field in a small map case.

Armed with the basic skills, the first sergeant must prepare to carry out the unit's casualty collection plan. In many cases, this means writing the unit's standard operating procedures (SOP) for casualty collection and evacuation. Most units have SOPs that read well, but when it comes time to execute, they don't pass the test. The only way to know if your plan is going to work is to test it at homestation

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Photos courtesy of JRTC and Fort Polk, La., PAO

Member of the 172nd Infantry Brigade (separate) move through the woods during a combat

before you deploy. One first sergeant actually rehearsed his plan with the Battalion Aid Station. He used the Battalion/Administrative/Logistical net to test his medical evacuation procedures. He also ensured that each platoon had an assigned Combat Lifesaver with them.

His unit was able to immediately treat casualties and quickly transport them to the collection points. First sergeants can make the process run smoother by ensuring every soldier carries copies of the unit's marking policy and the battle roster numbers. The first sergeant should also ensure casualty collection points are set up where the soldiers could realistically support them and accomplish the mission.

When a unit prepares for a JRTC rotation, they should depend heavily on their first sergeants' and other senior NCOs' experience. The senior NCOs are a walking, talking repository of basic soldier skills. Many soldiers are weak at land navigation. Soldiers know how to navigate as long as they have a Global Positioning Satellite (GPS); many of them have lost the art of map analysis. All too often NCOs punch the waypoints into their GPS system and start walking. They don't take into account the soldiers' load, terrain nor mission. A straight line is not always the fastest or safest route. First sergeants need to ensure the soldiers' movements are as detailed as the execution phase of the mission. The soldiers get a better fix on meeting their scheduled hit times and also saves real-world casualties.

Experienced senior NCOs should teach soldiers how to read terrain on the map first and then to use the Precision Lightweight Global Positioning Receiver (Plugger) along with a map and protractor to plan routes and practice using them at homestation. Doing a few short movements will give the soldiers the knowledge of how to plan a route and follow that route using both the GPS and a map. But it all comes down to the basics. Soldiers have to know how to read terrain and a map first.

Marksmanship is yet another important area where the first sergeant and other senior NCOs can help soldiers. In fact, it's probably the most important area. Marksmanship using the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement (MILES) equipment has always been something of an art form. Most senior NCOs, especially observer/controllers, know a few tricks to improve accuracy. For example, taping cardboard down on the MILES box mount works well. For even better accuracy, steel clamps with tape around them do an even better job.

Teaching soldiers individual marksmanship techniques and how to engage small, moving

targets is critical. These are key elements to the Opposing Force's success, living the Geronimo Creed: One shot; one kill. Again, these are skills that need to be honed at homestation.

Obviously, the first sergeant has a lot more to do than just order the MREs when it comes to preparing for JRTC. The first sergeant still fills those traditional roles, but those missions are not the main focus for a first sergeant who wants to ensure that his unit does well at JRTC – or on the battlefield. Modern technology has simplified the tasks of getting the beans and bullets. Making sure the troops employ those bullets to maximum effectiveness and that the injured soldiers are cared for are more important.

One last tip: when the brigade combat team gets orders to send leaders to the JRTC Leaders' Training Program, go. You can learn more in that week-long class than you can in months of self-preparation.

(Editor's note: 1st Sgt. Jason Silsby is the first sergeant assigned to HHC, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, Fort Drum, N.Y. He is currently deployed in Afghanistan.)

