

# Rifle Company Reconnaissance

Creating a dedicated element to fill a critical gap

by Maj Daniel Martin & 1stLt Ryan Casey

*“We must reach and execute effective military decisions faster than our adversaries in any conflict setting, on any scale. Our command and control processes and systems must reflect our maneuver warfare philosophy.”<sup>1</sup>*

—38th Commandant’s Planning Guidance (CPG)

The Marine Corps infantry is undergoing a major transitional shift within its organization, manning, and employment. Being able to recognize certain deficiencies and have a creative solution is what the Marine Corps expects of its squad to company grade leaders, as doctrine should not only be refined from the bottom but oftentimes generated. This article serves to present a conceptual idea to advance the rifle company’s capacity to better influence maneuver and intelligence. The creation of a proposed section dedicated to advancing the commanders estimation of the environment will eliminate a current critical gap within the rifle company.

## Problem Statement

Battlespace owners need their own taskable elements focused on gathering reliable ground-level intelligence that can shape their decision-making process. This fact is timeless and relevant across the conflict continuum, whether it is a COIN environment, EABO, or full-scale conventional warfare. The ability to understand the terrain and enemy analysis in developing operations or in their execution is a must.

It is undeniable that the frequency in which rifle companies are expected to operate independently within their own battlespace continuously increases, and by design in the Marine Corps future trajectory, it is a requirement. With respect to the rifle company’s current table of organization (T/O) and the registered demand for internal ground reconnaissance efforts, a gap is clearly evident.

## Proposed Solution

At the halfway point of a sixteen-month workup for Marine Rotational Force-Darwin, Kilo Company, 3/7 Mar was set to execute both Mountain Warfare Training Exercise in Bridgeport, CA, and the MAGTF Warfare Exercise aboard the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. Both events serve as dynamic force-on-force exercises that focus on decision making. The intent of force-on-force training is to provide a better evaluation of an infantry battalion and its subordinate units as

opposed to the “deliberate attack on a known enemy location.” Battalion and company staff’s function in situations where the enemy is unknown, thinking, and ever-changing. This type of environment places a premium on a commander’s ability to gather intelligence and make decisions in a timely manner. With this in mind and in preparation for the upcoming Service level exercises, the company sought an edge for fighting in dispersed environments with limited communication. In order to gain an advantage, the company developed the experimental “scout section” within its weapons platoon. This section would focus its efforts in advancing the commanders understanding of the battlespace and operate forward of the company’s line to increase decision-making space. From the onset, their training curriculum focused on enhancing their abilities to execute scouting and patrolling capacities at an advanced level. The section would advance the estimate of the situation of the commander, operating off intent and a total understanding of the company’s purpose.

## Creation of Scouts

The experimental section was placed within weapons platoon for two reasons. The first was to give the company an organic asset that can gather intelligence tied to fires and maneuver. Secondly, it answered the unresolved question of

>Maj Martin was the Company Commander, Company K, 3/7 Mar when writing this.

>>1stLt Casey was the Weapons Platoon Commander, Company K, 3/7 Mar.



**A dedicated section within the rifle company can provide essential close-in reconnaissance.**  
(Photo by author.)

what to do with the companies experienced 0351 assaultmen who would primarily make up the section. The idea and thought process behind the section's manning, training, and development was to provide a basic reconnaissance capacity within the company to be specifically equipped to advance the commander's battlefield estimation and shape operations. Akin to reconnaissance and snipers at the regimental and battalion level, scouts would operate inside the 3500m range ring the company could support with its 60mm mortars. The section would be dedicated to the company commander, relieving the rifle platoons from providing squads periodically for reconnaissance efforts, therefore reducing their combat power. They would stand as the solitary touch point during planning purposes and be employed as separate entity across the company's zone as opposed to being tied to platoon coordination lines.

Within the current rifle company T/O, the weapon's platoon is the ideal location for the scout section to reside. Having a seasoned lieutenant who has already led a rifle platoon as well as a senior platoon sergeant creates a command team knowledgeable in training an independent and reconnaissance-oriented unit. Since the weapon's platoon commander automatically

ties into company planning efforts for fires employment, the addition of the scout section enables further coordination and synchronization between maneuver, fires, and intelligence. The Kilo Company scout section consisted of an eight-man element split into two three-man teams with a section leader and corporals. The assault section accounted for the majority of the section's population. A 0311 NCO who recently graduated the Advanced Infantry Marine Course sourced the section leader billet. Additional 0311's filtered into the section later on.

### **Why Having A Company Dedicated Recon Asset Matters**

The proposed concept seeks to provide a solution to skillsets that regardless of the operating environment are critical to the success of the rifle company. *MCDP 3-11.3, Scouting and Patrolling*, dedicates the first of two parts to the concept of scouting and its core competencies. Within the current construct of the rifle company, all nine of its squads are expected to execute scouting in support of company operations in addition to their platoon efforts and the litany of other tasks the squad is provided. Therefore, we have to accept the fact platoons will either hemorrhage a squad to the company commander for direct tasking

periodically, or consistently task scouting elements at their level in support of company operations and the commander's decision-making cycle. Additionally, the company becomes reliant on battalion for intelligence support via snipers or UAS assets. While scouting skill sets are 0311 tasks, the expectation for the performance of these tasks is elevated because of the fact it is their primary mission set. Reconnoitering practice and reconnaissance planning factors remain the focal point of their training and patrolling efforts. Therefore, scouts are removed from the company's standard patrol plan. When it comes down to determining essential mission planning considerations and information, the commander employs scouts without interfering in platoon offensive, defensive, or patrol plan actions.

A specifically tasked element dedicated to battlefield estimation, route planning for major movements, and forward reconnaissance will be a force multiplier to any commander. The intent is not to strip squads of the scouting responsibility or eliminate reconnaissance patrols from their mission set but to specialize a small unit for reconnaissance dedicated to the company commander. The section does not have the combat power of a squad, nor is it expected to, based on its singular mission focus. Fighting and winning the reconnaissance/counter reconnaissance fight goes beyond relying on higher headquarters for support. Intelligence gathered by the man on the ground remains the gold standard especially in a rapidly advancing dynamic distributed environment at the tactical level.

To wage combat effectively a commander needs information regarding the friendly and enemy situation, as well as the terrain to maintain momentum and speed in his decision-making process through both planning and execution. *MCTP 10.A Infantry Company Operations* states "that the forms or warfare are evolving and the infantry company commander is now facing new challenges and responsibilities that previously had been under the purview of higher command."<sup>2</sup> Considering *MCTP 10.A's* guidance, dedicating a scout

element to these estimations enables them to deliberately focus their planning, training, and operational efforts in pursuit of essential information. This information then molds faster decision making and intelligence routing to the commander. Some additional (not conclusive) mission sets outside of forward reconnaissance efforts that an organic scout element within a rifle company can bring a commander are:

- A skilled scout unit can expertly plan, mark, and proof lanes for major movements both day and night.
- Capable of manning observation posts beyond traditional company distances when equipped with appropriate communication assets high frequency (HF), Mobile User Objective System (MUOS), or satellite communications (SATCOM).
- Remain the dedicated advanced guard for company movements and split the section to operate as guides at critical junctions or choke points.
- Obstacle recognition in reconnoitering a defensive position as well as determining the objective of the obstacle plan.

Intelligence inherently ties to operations. The traditional rifle company relies heavily on its internal squad patrolling effort for its collection efforts. Unless specifically designated as a reconnaissance patrol, the squads reconnoitering efforts are generally secondary. A scouting element enables the company to prioritize specific Priority Intelligence Requirement's (PIR) with a dedicated human intelligence asset.

### Employment

As previously mentioned, the scouts section came to fruition approximately halfway through battalion's work-up for Marine Rotational Force-Darwin. While the scouts participated in multiple field exercises, Mountain Warfare Exercise and MAGTF Warfighting Exercise maximized their capability skill set. Both iterations shaped and refined the companies understanding of the section's employment.

MAGTF Warfighting Exercise is a demanding Service-level training exercise, which forces executing units to focus on light infantry tactics and em-

ployment. The force-on-force portion, which included demanding company movements over challenging terrain, offered a promising proving ground for the scout section. During the exercise, the section was employed multiple times in what is currently two of their core mission sets, screening routes, and executing forward reconnaissance of enemy or possible friendly positions. On two separate occasions, the section worked

darkness. As the exercise progressed, scouts consistently deployed forward of company lines in defensive postures to include manning an ambush position and OP forward of the battalion's main engagement area. Observing for over twelve hours in their forward ambush position, they stood as the early warning element and would be critical in the timing and sequencing of the enemy's destruction within the battalion engage-

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in conjunction with the commander to develop suitable routes for both day and night company movement's over severe terrain. The section additionally scouted, proofed, and marked the routes separating itself into three elements to appropriately echelon the phasing and timing of the company through critical junctions. The construction of rope lines by the section on demanding terrain features and deliberate marking plans increased the tempo of the company during a major night movement. The split section concept became a trend throughout the exercise; half of the section occupied forward observation posts, while the other half was scouting for possible future mortar firing positions, fire support team observation posts (OP), and company operational rally points. The section's capability to utilize terrain and execute appropriate route planning additionally found them operating in traveling-over watch positions for multiple company movements and as an adjacent covering lane for platoon level infiltrations.

During the execution of MWX, 3/7 Mar was tasked to execute a dismounted movement through a narrow corridor along an un-reconnoitered route while under the cover of darkness. At the battalion's lead was a sniper team and Kilo's scout section who successfully reconnoitered and marked the route forward in order to allow the entire battalion to echelon through under the cover of

ment area. The sections employment was near continuous and a major enabler for the commander's decision making within both exercises and often times tasked to support the accomplishment of battalion objectives.

Currently deployed to Okinawa, an additional opportunity in vastly different terrain was provided to employ the section within a jungle environment and develop additional standard operating procedures. During the Infantry Jungle Skills Course 18-20 aboard the Jungle Warfare Training Center, scouts became a major enabler in the culminating company, level force-on-force exercise. Operating against a dedicated adversary force provided a day's lead time within complex and demanding terrain ensured the company would be spread thin. There were four primary objectives and multiple Named Areas of Interests (NAI)'s associated to probable enemy locations who was split into multiple teams. Because of the scout's ability to operate in a small unit off limited communication windows and deliberately occupying observation posts, they were inserted two kilometers north of the company's main body in vicinity of a major enemy objective. Their ability to maintain reconnaissance on an objective enabled the main efforts clear and were quickly re-tasked to move to a secondary advantageous positions along with the company's Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) to observe and

coordinate fires. As the concept and the section grows over time, so will the company's ability to exploit its growing list of tactics, techniques, and procedures.

### Scouts *FD30* Integration and Employment Advancement

With the intent pushed down from the CMC within his *CPG*, it is clear that his vision of the future warfare is more decentralized than we currently are operating. This would look like multiple highly capable small units spread across the battlespace (whether island chain or landmass) being able to make decisions faster and act of intent. In accordance with this type of employment, the entire construct of creating scouts was to speed up the decision-making process at the company level in order to support dynamic distributed operations. Within this type of warfare, a rifle company would most likely be that central unit controlling their specific sub-units (platoons or squads) verses a battalion and/or regiment like what we have seen the last twenty years in contemporary warfare.

Gen Berger's *FD2030* contains a number of dramatic shifts within the FMF. As per the Deputy Commandant for Plans, Policies, and Operations 2030 Infantry Battalion T/O brief, the future rifle battalion and its subordinates will undergo a significant restructure. Dramatic changes include disbanding weapons company, having staff sergeants as rifle squad leaders, replacing 60mm mortars with 81mm mortars in rifle companies, and removing infantry MOS specialties within the enlisted ranks up to the 0365 (infantry squad leader) or 0369 (infantry platoon sergeant). While most of these do not present a genesis for the scouts, concept one in particular does. The elimination of the scout sniper platoon within the battalion removes the traditional reconnaissance asset companies could expect support from the battalion. To be clear, the company scout section is not a replacement of snipers, nor are they expected to fill the void. However, the reconnaissance capacity scouts provide a company will be even more instrumental within the proposed future construct to fill what will be an



**The rifle squad is justifiably the main effort of the rifle company. (Photo by author.)**

even wider gap with the reduction of the battalion's only ground reconnaissance effort outside of the rifle squads.

In his opening statement of his *FD30* document, Gen Berger said

a certain degree of institutional change is inevitable when confronting modernization on this scale, and that the type of change is hard. As such, I want to be clear upfront: our force design effort is a work in progress.<sup>3</sup>

The CMC clearly lays out the fact that he expects there to be changes to the force design plan and that he is "unconvinced" in certain aspects, directing the Marine Corps to continue research into Phase III. Therefore, leaders are expected to provide insight and innovative ideas to identified short falls. The scout section is just that, a solution to solve not only the current but widening shortfall within the company in relation to intelligence.

### Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that the rifle squad remains the main effort of the company now just as it always should. The experimental scout section was developed specifically to enable the company commander to build his estimation to discover and avoid surfaces, identify the gaps to exploit, and appropriately prioritize his nine squads of combat power. Some of the core tenants of the Marine Corps maneuver warfare doctrine revolve around the

ability to find the enemy and focus our efforts appropriately. Going forward, the recommended size for the scout section would be ten personnel. This would create two, four-man teams with elected team leaders and provide increased flexibility for the section leader and corpsman to move between teams when operating disaggregated. Lastly, in regard to the capabilities of the section, all members should be exceptionally competent and trained on patrolling, handling communication assets, land navigation, calling for fire, and reporting procedures. By no means has the concept found perfection, but if we are able to fully man, train, and equip the section appropriately, it may prove itself much more than an experiment but an essential asset

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### Notes

1. Gen David H. Berger, *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, (Washington, DC: July 2019).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-11, Infantry Company Operations*, (Washington, DC: October 2014).
3. Gen David H. Berger, *Force Design 2030*, (Washington, DC March 2020).

