



Two soldiers from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment, are fitted for multiple integrated laser engagement system, or MILES, equipment July 2020 in preparation for training at Fort Riley, Kansas. Note all personnel are wearing masks to minimize the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus. (Photo courtesy of Ravenswood Solutions eXportable Combat Training Capability Program)

Training in the Time of COVID-19

Maj. Thomas Michael Warth, Kansas Army National Guard

During the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, many discussions begin with the phrase “In these trying times...” Around the world, every organization from the smallest local coffee shop to the largest government agency has struggled to carry out its day-to-day operations while adjusting to COVID-19 regulations. Some entities have the possibility to stop operations for a limited time (bars, restaurants, vendors of all forms), a type of COVID-related

hibernation, while others must continue to operate so that society can continue to function (hospitals, grocery stores, police departments). Some entities go into hibernation and do not recover, fading away forever, unable to cope with the drastic operational changes resulting from COVID-19. The U.S. Army has the option of shutting down to ensure soldiers do not contract COVID-19 by going into a kind of hibernation until a vaccine is developed or a hoped-for herd immunity



Sgt. 1st Class Brian Piland (*left*) and Staff Sgt. Paul Olson from Company A, 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment, discuss troop leading procedures with a First Army observer coach/trainer July 2020 in preparation for maneuver lane training at Fort Riley, Kansas. Although it was hot under the July Kansas sun, personnel wore masks to minimize the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus. (Photo courtesy of the First Army via Facebook)

emerges; the Army will not go out of business. The risk of such dormancy, however, is obviously too high. Readiness levels would plunge to dangerously low levels, and the enemies of the United States would see the vulnerability and take advantage of it, whether in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the South Pacific, or all three. The U.S. Army must learn to balance the risk of COVID-19 infections with the risk of an untrained force, and it must do it now.

Background

2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment (2-137 IN), is a combined arms battalion in the Kansas Army National Guard. In tactical year 2020, the battalion was scheduled to participate in an Exportable Combat Training Capability (XCTC) exercise from 10 July to 25 July at Fort Riley, Kansas. The XCTC is a program designed to bring

combat training center rotations to the National Guard instead of having states railhead hundreds of pieces of equipment and thousands of soldiers to the National Training Center (NTC) in California or the Joint Readiness Training Center in Louisiana. Oftentimes, XCTCs are also used as training events one year prior to a combat training center rotation, which is the case for 2-137 IN, currently scheduled to attend an NTC rotation in tactical year 2021. While operating within the continental United States, 2-137 IN falls under control of the 635th Regional Support Group (635 RSG), which is a major subordinate command

Next page: Spec. Addison Hall of Company A, 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment, wears a mask to minimize the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus July 2020 while moving to the field in an Abrams main battle tank at Fort Riley, Kansas. (Photo by Master Sgt. Eric Kaltenborn, Kansas Army National Guard)

in the Kansas National Guard; this is done to maintain Kansas control of a Kansas unit. Outside the continental United States, however, 2-137 IN falls under control of the 155th Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) of the Mississippi Army National Guard in order to serve under an ABCT. The 155th ABCT was scheduled to conduct its XCTC later in July of the same year at Camp Shelby, Mississippi.

XCTCs require considerable amounts of personnel and equipment to train units and soldiers. These personnel include hundreds of contractors from Ravenswood (the company that runs the XCTC program), hundreds of First Army observer coach/trainers (OC/Ts), dedicated opposing force soldiers from another similarly equipped unit (for this particular XCTC the opposing force was provided by the 278 ABCT of the Tennessee National Guard), and finally, all the normal range control support required of a large exercise. The combination of large amounts of enablers and personnel who need to be trained is the ultimate problem for the U.S. Army in regard to COVID-19. The more people coming together from multiple locations, the higher the chance any of them may have COVID-19, thus the potential to spread it to other participants. When a large organization's most important asset is people, how does it mitigate the risk associated with large amounts of people in one place while continuing to build readiness?

Mitigation Factors

The 1st Infantry Division of Fort Riley has instituted many control factors to attempt to stop the spread of COVID-19. These include the following:

The “bubble” concept. Each echelon of control is isolated in what is known as a bubble, from team to squad, all the way to battalion, and the bubbles do not interact with one another. This way, for example, if one soldier from 1st squad has COVID-19, only that squad is quarantined, keeping only ten soldiers out of training instead of an entire platoon or company. Leaders who cross bubbles (company commanders who must visit all their platoons and subsequent squads) are “vectors” and must be especially careful and closely monitored for COVID-19.

Masks. Soldiers wear masks. Soldiers wear masks in vehicles when with other soldiers. Soldiers wear masks in tactical operations centers. They wear masks when performing staff duty, and they wear masks when they are in the field, even when it is over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity is 80 percent.

Enforced hygiene. Every commonly used building on Fort Riley has a hand wash station in front of it, and oftentimes, soldiers are posted at entrances to ensure other soldiers wash their hands before entering a building.

In addition to the measures above, there are increased control measures for soldiers visiting Fort Riley to train.



Visiting soldiers are forbidden from visiting the post exchange, shopettes, the commissary, gas stations, or anywhere else on Fort Riley except for designated training areas. Visiting soldiers must also have their temperatures taken twice a day and must log these temperatures on a personal sheet, which is kept on the soldier at all times.

Even with all these control measures in place, increasing numbers of Kansas infection rates in early July 2020 caused leadership in the 635 RSG to make the decision to cancel its scheduled XCTC approximately twelve hours before the main body of soldiers was set to arrive. The commander decided that the arrival at Fort Riley of approximately five hundred Kansas National Guard soldiers, one hundred Ravenswood contractors, one hundred First Army soldiers, and one hundred fifty Tennessee National Guard soldiers comprising the XCTC opposing force would create an unacceptable level of risk.

Risk Trade-Offs (There is No Free Lunch)

Cancelling the scheduled training at Fort Riley drastically reduced the risk of spreading COVID-19, but what does one do with five hundred soldiers reporting for their annual training? National Guardsmen are guaranteed annual training every year by law. Initially, the answer was annual training at home station, but soldiers training at their local armories throughout Kansas are still at risk. A mechanized infantry company has approximately one hundred and forty soldiers; they cannot socially distance on a drill floor. Add to this that training at home station with no Bradley Fighting Vehicles or Abrams tanks drastically reduces overall training value. Most risk mitigation enthusiasts will come to the conclusion that the specific control factor of moving soldiers to home station for training does not reduce risk enough to justify such a reduction in training value.

Further discussion between the 2-137 IN commander and the 635 RSG commander resulted in the decision that the XCTC would continue on Fort Riley but with smaller numbers of soldiers at any given time on post. The exercise would be limited to one company at a time on Fort Riley instead of the entire battalion conducting training. Smaller numbers would be easier to manage, and leadership would be better postured to supervise and ensure previously enacted mitigation factors were implemented. The following is the modified commander's

intent after changes were made to the XCTC training schedule:

The 2-137 IN will validate maneuver platoons (PLTs) utilizing the Movement to Contact and Attack lanes scheduled for XCTC. Our battalion will execute all updated COVID-19 mitigation factors to allow training. Units at home station will conduct TLPs in preparation for movement to the field and concentrate on completing NCOERs and OERs. After C CO's [C Company's] successful five days of training on Fort Riley following all COVID-19 mitigation factors we will request a larger amount of forces be permitted to train to allow more effective training for Scouts and Snipers. Endstate: All Armor and Infantry PLTs are validated in preparation for NTC. COVID-19 does not stop us from training.¹

The limit of one company at a time on Fort Riley and the inability to increase the length of training time available resulted in only five days of training on post for each company. All training except the previously scheduled "conduct an attack" and "conduct a movement to contact" lanes were canceled. Canceled training included "conduct zone reconnaissance" and "conduct area reconnaissance" lanes for the scout platoon; "acquire a target" for the sniper section; "conduct an area defense" for all companies and the mortar platoon; "perform vehicle recovery" and "conduct tactical convoy" for the forward support company; AT 4 antitank weapon, Claymore mine,

Maj. Thomas Michael Warth, Kansas Army National Guard, is the former operations officer of 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment (2-137 IN), and works full time as a dual-status military technician in the Kansas Army National Guard G3 shop. He was a platoon leader in 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, during the "Surge" in Baghdad, 2007-2008. In the National Guard, he commanded Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2-137 IN, and spent over four years in the 35th Infantry Division in various assignments. He is currently the operations officer of 69th Troop Command.



Sgt. Lewis Coy and Pvt. 1st Class Ryan Masterson from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment, breach a wire obstacle with smoke obscuration July 2020 during maneuver lane training at Fort Riley, Kansas. Soldiers removed their masks during maneuver training because the high level of physical exertion and the hot weather made the risk of heat injury greater than the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus. (Photo courtesy of Ravenswood Solutions eXportable Combat Training Capability Program)

and M4 rifle live-fire ranges; and the establishment of the battalion tactical operations center, combat trains command post, and battalion aid station.²

Even with all these cancellations, the new mitigation factors allowed the 2-137 IN to achieve the original end state of validating platoons for the upcoming NTC rotation. However, despite this success, there were still trade-offs in the form of risk. Five days on Fort Riley only allowed two days of lane training: day one for arrival, day two to move from the motor pool to the training area and conduct drivers training, day three to conduct day and night movement-to-contact lanes, day four to conduct day and night attack, and day five to move from the training areas back to the motor pool and depart Fort Riley.

The original schedule had one day to conduct day training and then the following day to conduct night training. One full day would have allowed platoons to repeat lanes before night training the following day, reducing the risk of training accidents due to inexperience. The extra day

would also have allowed participants time to rest to reduce risk of training accidents due to fatigue and heat casualties. Therefore, implementation of control measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 simultaneously increased the risk of training accidents and heat casualties.

Results

The original end state for 2-137 IN's July 2020 XCTC rotation was achieved. Armor and mechanized infantry platoons were validated by the First Army OC/Ts. After successful training with Company C (2-137 IN's mechanized infantry company), the 635 RSG allowed the scout platoon and sniper section to conduct their lanes and be evaluated by their respective OC/Ts. Despite this successful training, the inability to conduct battalion tactical operations center operations including command post displacement will be painfully evident when the battalion conducts future operations at the NTC. The forward support company's inability to conduct its own specialized

training beyond general support to the maneuver companies illustrates another shortcoming of the rotation. The battalion recognizes these deficiencies and will work to make up this invaluable training before 2021.

Throughout training, there were four heat casualties with one requiring hospitalization; that casualty was released after fewer than twenty-four hours of treatment. There was one ankle injury, but importantly, there were no vehicular accidents.

The ultimate result “in these trying times” was zero positive COVID-19 tests. As a precaution, five soldiers were quarantined with COVID-19 symptoms. One soldier suffered from a case of diarrhea, though test results came back negative for COVID-19. Another soldier exhibited a case of high fever, and his battle buddy (battle buddies were the smallest bubble) was also quarantined out of caution. The affected soldier was determined to be suffering from possible food poisoning, and after three days of quarantine with no fever, was returned to duty (no test needed). Another soldier exhibited a case of body aches for three days; his test results also came back negative for COVID-19. Lastly, one soldier’s case of high fever was most likely due to hot outside temperatures; his test results were also negative.

Whether 2-137 IN would have been ravaged by COVID-19 if the original training schedule had been followed is unknown, but the original intent of the exercise was accomplished with zero cases of known COVID-19 and zero life-altering injuries. Were there any asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers silently spreading the virus? As of the writing of this article, there were no reports of soldiers experiencing symptoms after ending training.³

Practicality

The U.S. Army must adapt to COVID-19; it is not going away and will most likely get worse as the traditional cold and flu season begins. Fort Riley, Ravenswood

contractors, the 278 ABCT, and First Army demonstrated flexibility in response to the virus when they adjusted plans that had been set for almost a year to support 2-137 IN training. The Army must also continue to train to be ready to fight America’s enemies. Much like all things in the Army, success will be created by low-level leaders enforcing standards and leading their soldiers. Wearing masks and social distancing has been successful in several European and East Asian countries, so these control measures should be enacted in the U.S. Army in a reasonable way. Will soldiers wear masks when they are in the field and it is over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity is 80 percent? They absolutely will if a noncommissioned officer enforces it as a standard. Is it practical? No, it is not. While every individual soldier conducts his or her own personal risk analysis, any infantryman will know that the risk of heat stroke while bounding toward an objective wearing seventy pounds of equipment on Fort Riley in July is much higher than the risk of contracting COVID-19. Every low-level leader should know, however, that his or her soldiers need to wear masks when in the office, in the motor pool, or taking their annual operational security training. Leaders should also know that 1st squad should not be spending time with 2nd squad, no matter how many NTC war stories they want to tell each other.

While low-level leaders do their part, leaders at the battalion, brigade, and division levels must assess local conditions and decide what training can be done safely while limiting the spread of COVID-19. COVID-19 will force real decisions that will weigh the safety of the individual against the safety of the Nation. These are decisions saved for leaders who must put the good of organizations over the good of individuals while remembering individual soldiers are the greatest resource of the Army; this is never a simple task. ■

Notes

1. Fragmentary Order 3 to Operations Order 20-011 (Volunteer Annual Training)

2. Training tasks were pulled from the Standard Mission-Essential Task List (METL) of a Combined Arms Battalion (Armor). METLs can be found on the Army Training Network at <https://atn.army.mil>.

3. After conclusion of training and submission of this article for review, four soldiers from one platoon tested positive for COVID-19. The reader can decide if these positive cases are proof that risk mitigation factors to prevent the spread of the virus were not stringent enough, or were stringent enough to limit the spread to only one platoon (bubble) out of a population of close to one thousand soldiers and support personnel.