



"All I ever wanted to be was an Airborne Ranger, and I got to live that dream for my first seven years in 3rd squad, 1st platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion." — Command Sgt. Maj. Bryan D. Barker (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Philip Wood)

Fundamentals First

The Path to Success

By Command Sgt. Maj. Bryan D. Barker

XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg

All I ever wanted to be was an Airborne Ranger, and I got to live that dream for my first seven years in 3rd squad, 1st platoon, Alpha Company, 2nd Ranger Battalion. I left them in the summer of 2003 after our redeployment from the Iraq invasion.

I held every position there, and if I could have stayed as a sergeant first class squad leader, I would have. Fortunately, my command sergeant major knew better, and the timing aligned with the stand up of the battalion's new reconnaissance platoon.

In the early days of the war on terrorism, the 75th Ranger Regiment had its own high-end reconnaissance

detachment (RRD) to support the regiment. The detachment was tasked to support the battalions as required for an early eyes-on capability (before dropping the hammer of a Ranger force onto an objective). The RRD quickly fell victim to its success: Other units and higher headquarters sought it out for their reconnaissance tasks, leaving the Ranger battalions at a loss.

The platoon's capabilities were undefined, presenting both a challenge and an opportunity. This ambiguity made me uncomfortable until I better understood the difficulty and environment. Then, I relaxed and grew excited about my new role.

While the timeline and outcomes were indefinite (and the detractors for this new platoon were plenty), I knew I was responsible for doing my best with what I had. Leaders far more experienced than me would determine whether the formation should continue or not.

My company commander, fellow section leaders, and I proposed a table of organization and tasks to create a 90-day training plan. The sniper platoon sergeant would supervise.

Using the 8-Step Training Model

The eight-step training model is among the greatest and most underused resources in an NCO's toolbox. It was our starting point.

1. Plan the Training: *Develop a training plan based on objectives.*

I contacted a close friend and mentor serving in RRD and asked him what tasks we should focus on. Fundamentals would be critical — not enhancing capabilities useful only if the formation proved worth the cost.

We pored through Army training and evaluation program manuals and documents to plan the training, designing it with measurable standards and outcomes. We bore in mind the end state: what the critical tasks

would be and how we would use doctrinal measures of proficiency to assess them.

2. Train & Certify Leaders: *Ensure leaders are prepared to conduct training.*

This step was perhaps our most challenging, since we were building a capability that exceeded our proficiency. We decided to source experts from across the battalion.

We relied on them for our foundational tasks. Communications would be important, for example. So, we identified all the tasks and communications equipment needed for proficiency, and our battalion S6, communications and information systems, NCO-in-charge (NCOIC) trained us for a week.

Initially, no medics were assigned to our teams, so all team members took a Ranger first responder course. We took over the battalion's excess new special purpose rifles and trained with the sniper platoon to match our skills with the new weapon systems' capability. We trained extensively with our battalion mortar platoon in indirect fire and were certified by our battalion fire support coordination team.

3. Recon the Training Site: *Assess the training environment for suitability.*

Up to this point, our collective experience covered nearly every square foot of Joint Base Lewis-McChord,



Soldiers with the 75th Ranger Regiment provide overwatch and cover during a night raid at Fort Irwin, California, Feb. 24, 2015. Rehearsals are key to a successful training event. Oversights and gaps in the plan emerge at this stage, and leaders gain confidence in expertly executing and evaluating the training. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. William Lockwood)



For NCOs, the lesson is clear: Proactive leadership, commitment to fundamentals, and the ability and willingness to adapt to fluid situations are key to building a responsive and capable force and a testament to the strength of the NCO corps. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Richard W. Jones Jr.)

Washington. This paid huge dividends as we selected the optimal training sites for tasks to demonstrate and measure the new formation and equipment's capabilities.

During this step, we identified the resource requirements for the training event as well as the timing and sequencing for the culminating event of our situational training exercise (STX) lanes. We also determined how to maximize our minimal support to make the best training event possible.

4. Issue the OPORD: *Provide the operation order to all participants.*

Detailed planning pays off during this step. Often, NCOs leave this action to officer counterparts, who write and issue the order. NCOs who instead take ownership of the training execute it better, driving the process and building the plan.

The more NCOs are involved, the better the outcome. NCOs can zero in on details, identifying friction points and opportunities.

5. Rehearse: *Conduct rehearsals to ensure readiness.*

Rehearsals are key to a successful training event. Oversights and gaps in the plan emerge at this stage, and leaders gain confidence in expertly executing and evaluating the training.

We walked the terrain and performed a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT), confirming the plan and adjusting objectives to ensure we hit our collective tasks to be evaluated.

6. Execute the Training: *Carry out the training as planned.*

Training conducted doesn't equal a trained unit. Executing the training against measured objective standards reveals where a formation stands.

Our training was on track, and building on individual

foundational skills early allowed us to focus on more complex collective tasks to measure our performance and capabilities. (A surge deployment to Afghanistan cut short our training path about 80% of the way through — paving the way for the real test to come.)

7. Conduct an AAR: *Evaluate performance via an after-action review.*

Be your own worst critic and stick to the tasks to be evaluated. I've seen AARs fall off track, getting mired in minutiae or veering astray to avoid hurt feelings. Combat is a cruel judge, so be honest in your assessments.

8. Retrain/Retry as necessary: *Address deficiencies identified during the AAR and schedule time to correct them, ideally as close to the initial training as possible.*

Validation in combat is the truest test in training evaluation. Fortunately for our new platoon, we didn't have to wait long: We deployed to the mountains of Kunar, Afghanistan, in the early winter of 2003, spearheading the battalion's advance. Coming out of the deployment, we looked critically at our training path and composition to better prepare for our next mission.

A few months later, we found ourselves back in Afghanistan, bouncing from province to province. We set up long-duration observation posts and hide sites overlooking villages with suspected enemy activity. We also provided overwatch for the company's staging and basing areas, using our long-range optics to provide a persistent stare for commanders and paint a picture of the pattern of life through our observations.

A year after standing up the platoon, my section achieved its truest testament to the collective proficiency we had gained as a trained, proficient, and — when necessary — lethal formation. Our previous two deployments were

shorter-duration surge deployments for under 30 days. This deployment was scheduled for three months.

Those months demonstrated our ability to iterate over the previous deployments and build trust with our command. Showing we were capable, we found ourselves tasked with expanding roles more and more. We ably evolved into them because of the solid foundation we built over a year.

One mission we had was to establish overwatch of a border crossing point between Pakistan and Afghanistan, along with other reconnaissance elements spread along the border. The plan quickly changed when the enemy ambushed a Ranger platoon before our insertion. The enemy force that ambushed them took a heavy toll and fled the battlefield across the border. We received intelligence reports they would return in the morning.

After a map reconnaissance of likely crossing points, my section and another team set out that night to set in an ambush. Shortly after dawn, we spotted the enemy armed with PKM machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) approaching our position in the valley below. When they reached the center of the kill zone, the battle was over almost as quickly as it started.

We accomplished our mission and later learned it was the first time coalition forces initiated contact with the enemy in more than a year.

Conclusion

And so it went. Deployment followed deployment,

each more refined by the lessons learned from the one before. The team sharpened the skills we honed during the deployment, mission after mission. We were something new, built on a foundation of fundamentals and a willingness to adapt and overcome.

Looking back, it wasn't about the fancy equipment or expanded roles. It was about the process, about

applying the eight-step training model, which proved invaluable — not just as a checklist but as a practical roadmap for building proficiency.

It was about the trust built with leaders and every team member's unwavering commitment to excellence. We proved that a unit's initial mission doesn't define its value but its ability to learn, grow, and deliver when called upon to go above and beyond.

The reconnaissance platoon ultimately transformed, as most units do, and a couple of years later — as the Headquarters and Headquarters Company first sergeant — I saw the platoon reach new heights under new leadership.

Formations change and requirements shift, since the nature of war is constantly evolving. Yet the principles that guided us — the importance of solid fundamentals, the power of thorough planning, and the need for honest self-assessment — remain timeless.

We played a part in establishing a capability that served the unit and left a legacy. For NCOs, the lesson is clear: Proactive leadership, commitment to fundamentals, and the ability and willingness to adapt to fluid situations are key to building a responsive and capable force and a testament to the strength of the NCO corps. ■



Command Sgt. Maj. Bryan D. Barker, circa 2003. (Photo courtesy of Command Sgt. Maj. Bryan D. Barker)

Command Sgt. Maj. Bryan D. Barker enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1996. He has served in various positions as an infantryman throughout his career, including all positions from rifleman to operations sergeant major to command sergeant major. He served most recently as the command sergeant major of Combat Capabilities Development Command. Barker is a graduate of Air Assault School, Airborne School, U.S. Army Ranger School, Jumpmaster School, Pathfinder School, U.S. Marine Corps Winter Mountain Leader Course, Pre-Command Course, and all levels of the NCO Education System, including Class 63 of the Sergeants Major Academy, Nominative Leaders Course, and the Keystone Course. He earned an associate degree from Excelsior University.



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