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Adapting the British Light Infantry Section and Platoon Structure for the Contemporary and Future Operating Environment

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Introduction

Regardless of what form or resultant outcome the debate of strategic force structures takes both within the United States and subsequently within the NATO and ABCA nations, there will always be a role on the battlefield for the infantry forces of the developed world. The Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) has seen demand for the west's infantry formations rise dramatically. 'COIN operations place a premium', notes the recently released US doctrinal publication *Tactics in Counterinsurgency FM3-24.2*, 'on boots on the ground.' The necessity to secure and engage a population through sustained and persistent patrolling is most easily fulfilled by a dedicated infantry force. While there no doubt remains a place for supporting arms in the counterinsurgency fight the ease through which an infantry formation can navigate, sustain itself within and persecute offensive, defensive and support operations within the human geography of a foreign culture has made the infantry synonymous with COIN campaigning.

Even if one views future conflict as being characterised by high-intensity, conventional conflict the existence of an infantry arm remains entirely necessary for the conduct of operations across differing types of terrain. The ability of the developed world's infantry to adapt to and assimilate technological and doctrinal innovation in military campaigning will be important to future battlefield success and minimisation of casualties and tactical failure.

Has the infantry adjusted or adapted to the Contemporary Operating Environment? It is easy to argue 'yes'. At the tactical level, the majority of the infantry Battalion's within the developed world are now far better prepared and postured to participate in the '3 Block War' where violence is administered surgically and sparingly. Doctrinally COIN philosophy has taken hold through the vast majority of armies, with 'non-kinetic' effects and lines of operation having gained currency in the military's professional vocabulary. Multi-national exercises such as 'Co-Operative Spirit' held between ABCA nations in Germany last year are now based upon the full-spectrum environment necessitated in the fight against an insurgency, whereas a similar exercise a decade ago would have seen the forces facing a conventional, Soviet-influenced foe.

Yet a lot of the adaptation required for infantry forces to operate in the COE has been a result of parallel invention or improvisation at the lowest level. The infantry force structure has remained essentially unchanged in all commonwealth armies, despite over a decade of operations in the

modern, non-contiguous threat environment. The infantry section that the British Army introduced in 1937 has remained largely unchanged in terms of capability within commonwealth armies – three infantry sections, each possessing their own organic light machine gun, compromise a rifle platoon (English, J. and Gudmundsson, B., *On Infantry*, Praeger Publishers, Connecticut, 1994). Prior to the British experience in the Falklands each section was further broken down into two half-sections ('bricks' or 'fire-teams'), each half-section having their own machine gun, with this innovation finding it's way into the Australian and New Zealand armies over time.

This force structure has survived conventional war and unconventional conflict – from Korea through to Vietnam, East Timor and now Afghanistan and Iraq, the existence of the 'divisible' rifle section as a third of a rifle platoon has remained. The weapons and communication systems inherent to each section has changed in-keeping with technology, so the Bren gun of 1937 is now superseded by the likes of the 5.56mm Minimi and each 'fire-team' normally possesses a M203 grenade launcher and a precision-fire rifle (frequently the standard issue weapon with superior optics). The modern-day infantry section, despite having a similar ORBAT to their 1937 counter-parts, now possesses communication gear and target-designating equipment that far surpasses anything available to the World-War Two era infantryman. The American rifle platoon is substantially different in that, in addition to the three divisible rifle sections (called 'squads' in US nomenclature) the American platoon commander has a specialised weapons squad for fire support.

To argue against the effectiveness of the British system of organising their rifle sections is to face repealing many battle-proven and entrenched philosophies inherent to the western military system. Yet, despite the effectiveness of the current system, rifle section commanders are being asked to conduct tasks and command their men in situations of far greater complexity and sophistication than the section was ever intended for. Permanent and snap vehicle check points, the command and mentoring of Host Nation (HN) forces, the conduct of civil affairs, psychological operations and intelligence gathering are all tasks frequently conducted in the course of a COIN deployment by the rifle section, either independently or as part of a larger organisation. In addition the attachment of the likes of a THT (Tactical Human Intelligence Teams) or a LEWT (Localised Electronic Warfare Team) are possible support elements a section commander may find himself in command of. The success seen by western forces in adapting to both the non-kinetic and the unpredictable COIN environment is testament to a number of factors, above all the ability of the developed world to produce junior military leaders who are adaptable, innovative and show high degrees of initiative.

Despite the ability of the traditional infantry section to adapt to the COE, the environment infantry small-unit activities are expected to be conducted in now and in the future should be considered to see if the 'done way' could be 'done better'.

Opportunity Costs

Firstly, in altering the lowest common denominator of infantry operations (the section) it should be asked – are we organising specifically for COIN? Weakening the rifle section which,

essentially, is the building block of any infantry force would inevitably have grave consequences should the western armies find themselves involved in a high-intensity, conventional war.

Examples of what form future war may take are heavily debated and uncertainty reigns. Whether it is low-level intervention efforts and unconventional conflicts or a return to the high-intensity, conventional conflicts or even a 'hybrid war' of a combination between either extreme, future battle will continue to be shaped by advanced technology and modern military doctrine. The inability to rule out either extreme of either conventional or unconventional war is firmly entrenched in the ABCA Strategic Assessment that states:

> ABCA armies must develop effective measures to counter a hybrid of regular and irregular threats in a non-linear, multi-dimensional environment. The threat of a return to state on state warfare means that ABCA armies must develop the capacity to train and prepare for combined arms warfighting operations whilst concurrently engaged on expeditionary operations. (ABCA Report Number 048, *Strategic Assessment of the Security Environment 2008 – 2030*, Version 3.1, 16 April 2008)

If one works to the 'worst case scenario' of a short-notice, high intensity conflict involving the developed world's infantry forces, what would the 'face of battle' be like to the infantry sections involved? Taking the underpinnings of Stephen Biddle's *Military Power* as a theoretical framework and with the recent examples of the Israeli experience in Lebanon and the higher-intensity conflict endured by Coalition Forces in Afghanistan a possible picture emerges. Biddle's belief in the 'Modern System' of tactics necessitates dispersed, concealed positions integrated with depth through the presence of reserves as an answer to the increasingly omnipresent capabilities of over-head surveillance and indirect and air-support.

In his tactical narrative of the last century the improvements in technology has necessitated the movement away from concentrated land formations towards dispersed and decentralised units that can hide from or absorb the effects of bombardment and are 'elastic' enough in defence to concentrate combat power against an enemy without being fixed or isolated in position. In many ways Biddle has applied the increasingly potent effects of aerial and indirect surveillance and fire and assessed that high intensity land combat is characterised by less concentrated and more dispersion.

According to Biddle, conventional conflict demands:

> … techniques for rapid decisive application of firepower ... Methods such as large-scale combined arms manoeuvre, tight synchronization of movement and indirect fire support... (Biddle, S. and Friedman, J., *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Strategic Studies Institute, September 2008)

The necessary tactics, techniques and procedures required by an infantry component in a conventional war have remained largely unchanged since the opening phases of World War 2, and are unlikely to change in actual nature. Distances, tempo and the necessity for decentralisation may increase but the underlying principles for overcoming another modern,

capable military force still encompass the central dilemma of combined arms fire-and-manoeuvre at various scales, from the tactical through to the theatre-level.

For an infantry force involved in a COIN campaign, however, the requirements for combined arms action and the intimate co-ordination required with supporting arms to enable manoeuvre evaporates in favour of a force suited to skill-sets that:

> … place a premium on restricting the use of violence and distinguishing necessary from unnecessary acts of force; on persistent, widely distributed dismounted presence; and on population control and direct, close interaction with host nation civilians. (Biddle, S. and Friedman, J.)

While there are tactics and skills that are diametrically opposed between COIN and conventional war –Vehicle Check Point procedures as opposed to the breaching of a minefield – there are also common areas across both realms, COIN and conventional war, that an infantry force needs to grasp. Stephen Biddle identified some of these as:

> … safe, accurate small arms marksmanship, disciplined control of fires and use of communications, secure movement in urban environments, first aid, casualty evacuation.. (Biddle, S. and Friedman, J.)

Above all, once an infantry section has achieved the ability to conduct its own organic fire-and-manoeuvre the next, most important output for any conceivable engagement is the ability of that section to employ inorganic supporting elements. The isolation and dispersion the modern and future infantry forces are forced to work with means that support will, in the vast majority of situations, not be coming from a neighbouring section but from air or indirect assets. Contemporary operations in Afghanistan are frequently seeing formations from an infantry company right down to the single infantry section being engaged in their own independent fight. Working from the smallest building block – the section – upwards, each component must be able to call for and orchestrate external support whilst they are part of a larger force. The necessity of being able to call on external support is even more obvious when that section is operating independently of mutually supporting ground units. This was seen in the conclusion to a 'lessons learnt' power-point brief prepared by a USMC Force Reconnaissance Platoon that had completed a tour in the Helmand and Farah provinces of Afghanistan:

> 'An infantry squad that successfully integrates mortars and Close Air Support into their maneuver is nearly undefeatable.' (Enemy TTP and After Action Review PowerPoint presentation, Force Reconnaissance Platoon, SPMAGTF Afghanistan)

Thus, to achieve competency in operations in either the conventional warfare or COIN scenarios the infantry section must first be capable of independent, small unit manoeuvre integrated with indirect fires. This forms the foundation before which competency in neither high-end COIN nor conventional war operations is possible.

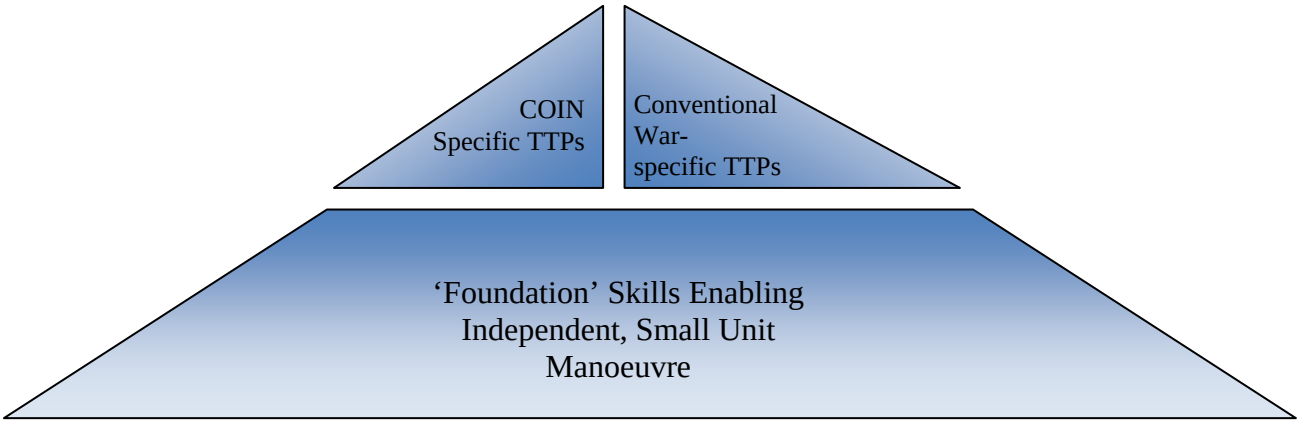


FIGURE 1: THE PROGRESSION OF AN INFANTRY SECTIONS' SKILL-SETS

Infantry Specialisation

The difference between the various types of conflict brings about differing requirements in the composition of forces required. Towards the extreme of higher intensity conflict is the need for the combined effects of infantry in all its forms. Mechanised infantry – that is, infantry that are organic to armoured formations that possess organic protected mobility and fire support – fulfil a specific role in conventional war, as does the existence of more unconventionally-focussed forces such as commando/ ranger style elements. At the very lowest level of intensity of military operations (peacekeeping) the need is primarily for infantry re-rolled into or a unit specifically established for high-end policing. In between either extreme is the realm of COIN, where the intensity of conflict for the 'hearts, minds and acquiescence' of a local population is below that of conventional war but far above that of a peacekeeping operation.

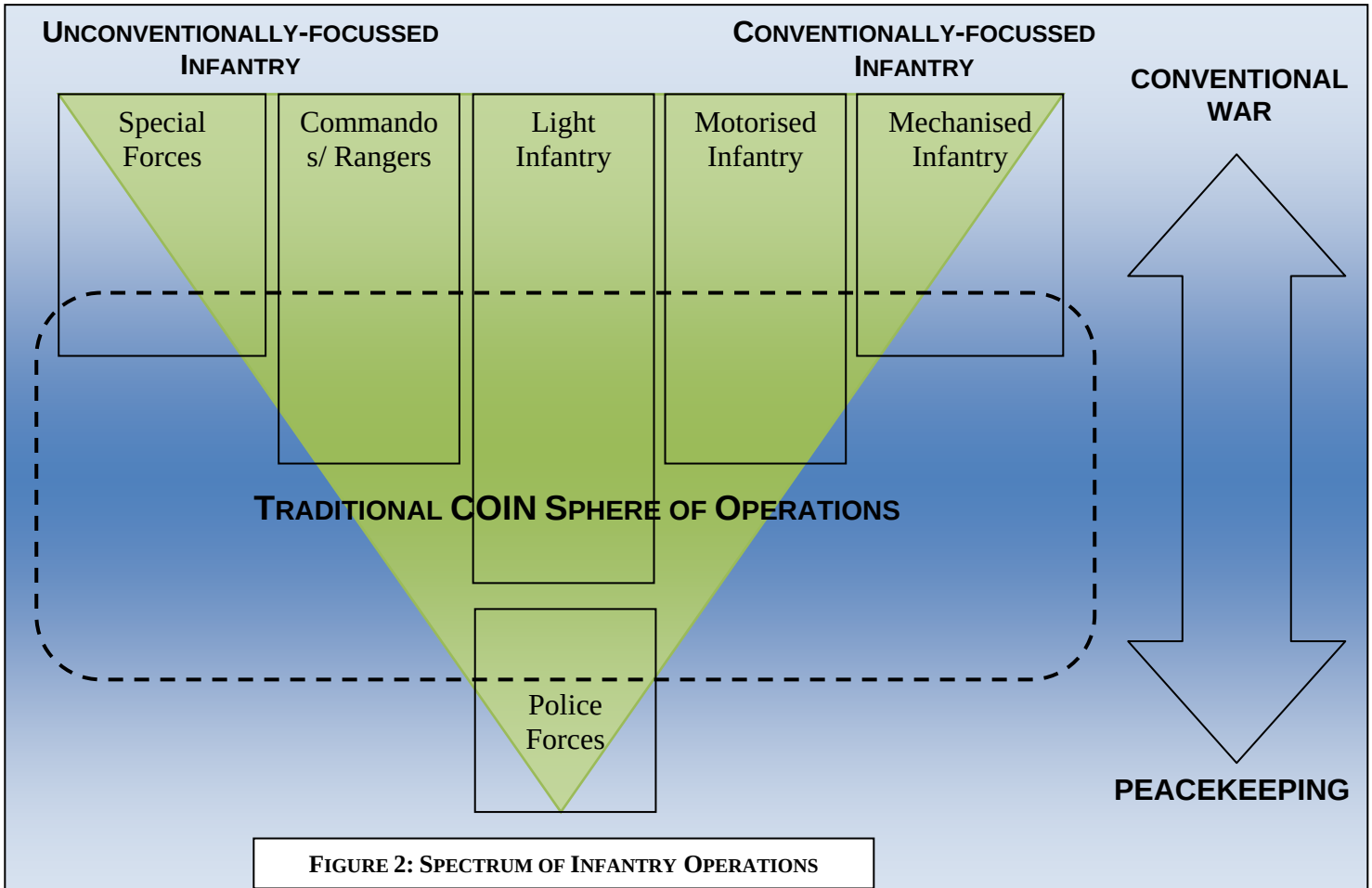


FIGURE 2: SPECTRUM OF INFANTRY OPERATIONS

greater ratio of all forms of infantry from special-forces through to mechanised infantry; or low-end COIN demanding a greater component of light infantry and police forces – dictates the infantry-force mix needed.

By virtue of their logistical austerity and adaptability, light infantry are one of the most adaptable and economical arms of the infantry. In essence all about delivering 'boots on the ground', the light infantry are able to quickly and easily adjust to the task at hand. Where other elements such as motorised infantry are tied to their vehicles, light infantry do not need to adjust or adapt the majority of their TTPs to the environment in which they face, even as the capabilities of the enemy or threat group drop. Their emphasis on patrolling either dismounted or in largely unprotected vehicles automatically lends itself towards the lower-intensity environments whereby interaction with a population becomes paramount.

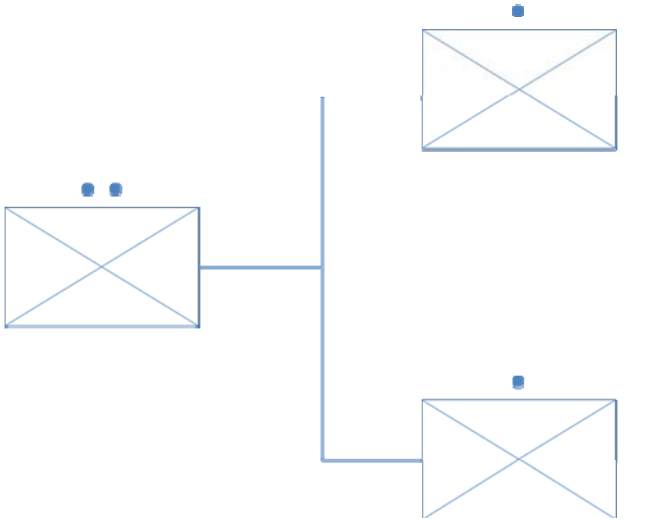
Improving the Organisation of the Light Infantry Platoon

With light infantry forces expected to be able to operate in a range of environments ranging from high-intensity warfare through to high-end peacekeeping, the hallmark of the light infantry platoon must be flexibility. Additionally, given that the current system does work, the concept should be on improvement, not revolution.

The key argument presented is that the infantry section commander requires a more robust, adaptable organisation than currently allowed. Injecting extra soldiers into the section is, no matter how desirable, unrealistic given the difficulties in increasing soldier numbers without political involvement. Reorganisation or improvement must thus work with what is currently available to the rifle platoon in its current form.

The central concept is to re-envisage the rifle section as the sole manoeuvre unit through which all other levels of command enable. The rifle platoon should be looked upon as a service provider to the infantry section, providing the section commander with the fire support and battlefield preparation necessary for the decisive element – the section – to succeed. In much the same way, resources should be pushed down to the lowest possible level. Instead of keeping attached assets at the platoon level, there should be an easily accepted process for 'pushing down' various force-multiplying elements to the section itself. In this way further dispersion and independence is engendered at the section level, allowing the section to function as an independent asset within a larger plan and not necessarily being tied to the platoon or company's physical area of influence.

FIGURE 3: THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH-STYLE RIFLE SECTION (GENERIC)



In many ways the concept follows the Israeli commander Yigael Allon's views, entrenching his views of a rifle section in its composition:

> … 'section-leaders are trained to command independently in the field in every instance in which they are required to operate alone with their units... All levels of command must therefore be trained to think and act independently whenever circumstances demand that they should, and section-leaders are no exception to this rule. Besides, modern weapons which provide small groups of men with greater firepower and more flexibility of movement, call for a high standard of command at all levels. The section-leader is therefore to be trained technically as an officer, not as a corporal.' (Allon, Y quoted in English, J. and Gudmundsson, B., *On Infantry*, Praeger Publishers, Connecticut, 1994).

The concept is that the light infantry section be compromised, as it is now, of two divisible elements – the 'fire-teams' that balance the suppressive fire of a machine gun with the addition of rifles and a grenade launcher between two roughly symmetrical groupings. Whether the section commander himself has to command a fire team or, if numbers permit, separate himself from a fire team is a luxury dependent on numbers and is not crucial. The difference proposed is that *the section commander is always trained and deployed with an attached third element of fire-team size.* Without the third element the section is classified as a section (-), able to conduct basic security tasks such as VCPs or base defence, but is not properly postured for offensive, defensive or stability-orientated tasks (in other words, it is not viewed as capable of independent action). However the addition of a third 'fire-team' sized detachment creates a full strength section, two fire-teams of which are organic and one of which is attached. In a warfighting scenario this third fire-team can either be an additional rifle fire-team from the third section of the platoon or an attached asset from the Battalion's support company. Dependent on the task, a

section commander should be able to command assets as wide ranging as a recon detachment (for tasks requiring specialist route selection, tracking, surveillance, pursuit tasks, marking tasks, etc) a machine-gun detachment for added firepower at the cost of mobility, an anti-armoured detachment for either fire support or surveillance, a sniper pair or detachment for any task requiring observation or precision fire or a MFC/ FO/ FAC group should the mission demand the ability to support their task with external fire support.

In the COIN or peacekeeping environment the added fire-team group could be as diverse as a THT (Tactical Humint Team), MP team, engineer search or survey team, PSYOPs team, Civil Affairs team, et al. Additionally the third fire-team slot could be compromised of Host Nation (HN) security forces, allowing an effective and rapid way of temporarily embedding HN elements for operational tasks and mentoring.

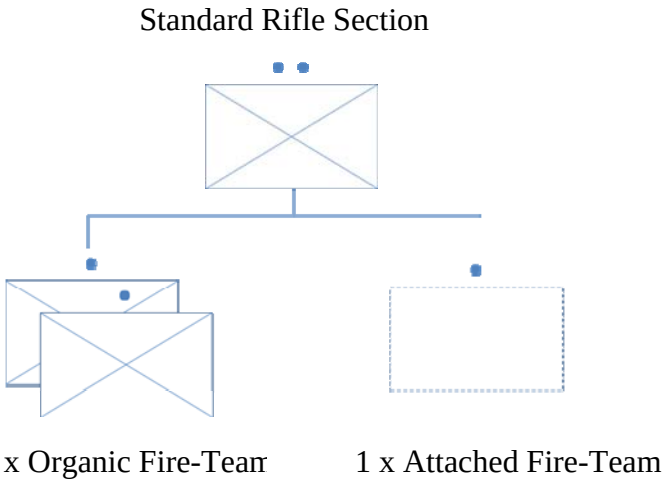


FIGURE 4: THE PROPOSED INFANTRY SECTION

The two organic fire-teams to the section provide force protection to whatever attached assets, allowing the operation of other arms at the lowest level. Ad-hoc attachments are often made to contemporary rifle sections, but by standardising the expectation that the section commander will always be expected to command a third non-organic fire-team of differing capabilities the mind-set and role of the section is changed. The section should always be the prime manoeuvre or executing element, expected to be the decisive force in any mission. They should not need another section in close proximity to them as reinforcement as this creates unnecessary concentration when dispersion and decentralisation is a key factor for success within the concept of the 'Modern System.'

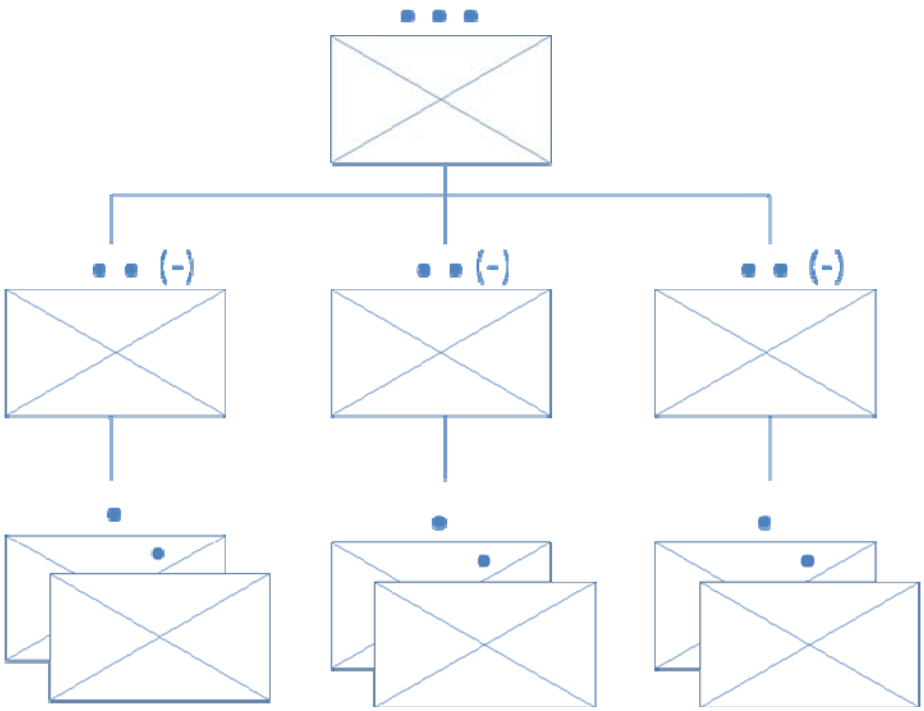
By adding the 'rule of three' to the rifle section the section commander gets to employ and practise the principle behind current rifle platoon tactics – that is, he is able to conduct and execute tasks while maintaining a situational reserve or depth element. If a section commander in a current rifle section ORBAT is given a tactical task necessitating assault he has limited options in terms of advancing and requires support from the platoon as the two fire-team section can

quickly become decisively engaged. By adding a third element the options of deploying a fire-team in fire-support, assaulting with one fire-team and holding one in reserve is added, expanding the scope in which a section commander is able to think and command.

In COIN operations the third non-organic fire-team may be a non-kinetic force element. The concept is that the section in its section (-) form has sufficient force protection to enable the attached group to conduct their task. The expectation of an attached element, as opposed to an ad hoc 'addition' of a supporting asset, assists in creating the mind-set of executing non-traditional infantry tasks as the main effort. Attaching a HN element likewise allows the rifle section to maintain its cohesion while focussing on another line of operation – in this example, the support to the HN through the mentoring, training and integration of indigenous forces.

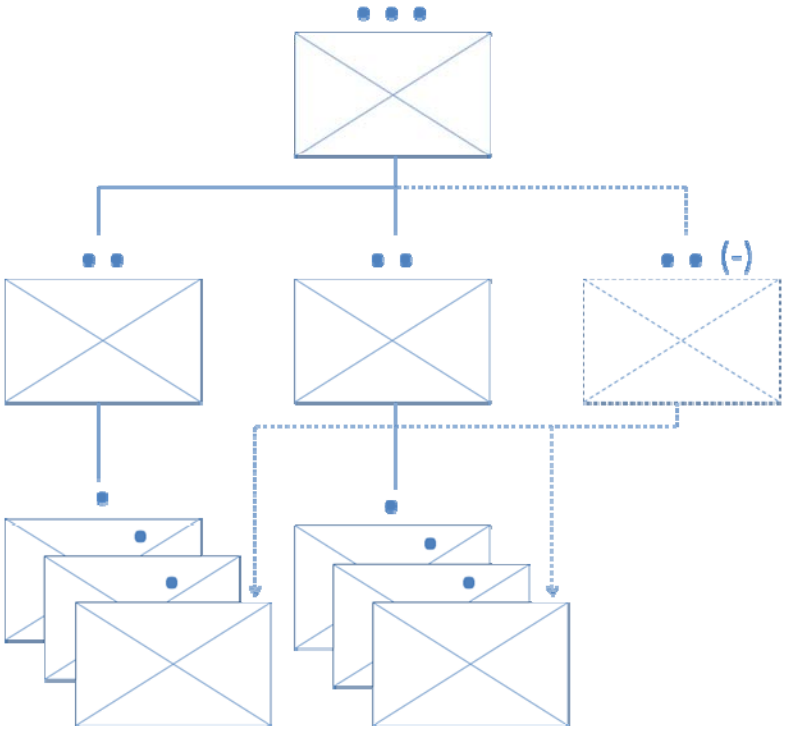
This is not to say that all support assets need to be employed as isolated detachments under a rifle section commander. The need no doubt remains to concentrate or 'brigade' weapon systems and capabilities together as a support platoon to achieve an effect at the decisive point of an operation. Reconnaissance elements would normally be pushed forward of the rifle sections; sniper detachments will often operate independently of a conventional section for reasons of concealment and anti-armour assets may be concentrated either in reserve or deployed together as a tank-killing force. It is to say, however, that the rifle section commander is both expected to have an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of all assets available and be able, with the advice and expertise of the attached sub-commander, be able to integrate varying capabilities and effects for any given mission. By creating the expectation that the section commander will possess and deploy a varied range of mission-enabling elements, the platoon commander's realm of tactics and mission appreciation is devolved to the section commander level.

FIGURE 5: RIFLE PLATOON WITH 3 SECTIONS (-)



At the platoon level the platoon commander has two options in deploying his or her force. If not provided any attached assets, the platoon commander can leave the platoon as three sections (-), each able to conduct tasks with the mutual support of other sections (as is the case currently). However by dividing the 'third' section under the most junior section commander between the other two sections, the platoon commander is able to deploy two independent tactical groups (this division is already practised as a 'half-platoon'). This removes the close command-and-control required by the platoon commander as the section commanders now have their own reserve or depth element, letting the platoon level HQ focus on enabling and supporting the section commanders through the provision of indirect fire support, integration with surveillance assets and support with other arms.

FIGURE 6: RIFLE PLATOON WITH 2 SECTIONS



The division of the third rifle section also allows for the graduated rise into the section command slot as the junior corporal in a platoon is able to understudy a more senior section commander when he is relegated to being a fire-team commander should the platoon split into the two rifle sections.

Conclusion

The increased burden in this proposed task organisation falls unapologetically on the section commander. For the corporal in command of a section the training and educational burden required of him or her would increase dramatically – no longer expected just to master the weapon systems and capabilities inherent to his or her own ORBAT, they would now be

expected to assimilate the breadth of the army's capabilities under their command. This turns all section level activities from a rote series of battle drills to an independent problem requiring an independently created solution – requiring both a robust appreciation process and a certain flair for the 'art' of command and problem solving at the section commander level.

Reiterating Yigael Allon, the contemporary and no doubt the future operating environment needs the section commander 'to be trained technically as an officer, not as a corporal.' The concept of the 'strategic corporal' is frequently cited; with this proposed structure, the section becomes a viable independent unit that can influence the tactical environment on its own. Further, increasing the burden of analysing, planning and commanding tasks further removed from the normal role of the infantry is not seen as further hindering the corporal but rather as reinforcing success. The armies of NATO and ABCA have proven capable of producing extremely competent junior leaders – by removing the need for the section to constantly work within the framework of a platoon this phenomenon of initiative, flexibility and audacity and the lowest level would be further enhanced.

Regardless of the above proposed changes, the current British-style section undeniably works. Elevating the rifle section to an independent tactical entity that is postured for the whole spectrum of light infantry operations is one way that the current system can be improved and built upon. The corporal rank-bracket is already shouldering a huge burden in the COE and making their job easier – enabling their success – is seen as one of the key proponents required for the light infantry of the developed world to be successful in the current operating environments and in the future.

Lieutenant Chris Shaw was commissioned into the New Zealand Army in 2005, and has been a rifle platoon commander in the 2nd/1st Battalion, Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment since December 2006, including a peace-keeping tour to East Timor in 2007. He is currently deployed as a patrol commander in the New Zealand Provincial Reconstruction Team in Bamyan province, Afghanistan. He holds a Post-Graduate Diploma in Arts (Defence and Strategic Studies) with Distinction from Massey University, NZ.