

EXERCISE BARAVORE

THE PLATOON, under the command of 2/Lt Comiskey ('A' Coy) consisted of three sections, drawn from the 2- and 3-Star soldiers of both 'A' and 'B' Coys of the battalion. All the troops had participated in the recent Military Skills competition organised by ECFA, and were enthusiastic and confident. Specialist support came from two other units from Cathal Brugha Bks. 11 Fd Med Coy provided six medical personnel under the supervision of Coy Sgt Fleming, while 11 Fd Sigs Coy supported the exercise with a detail of four Signalmen, under the command of Cpl Duff. The exercise scenario envisaged an enemy insurgent unit operating in the Table Mountain area of County Wicklow. The platoon's mission was to enter the insurgent-held area by means of a tactical route march, to establish a secure Base Camp in a forest locality, and to contact a 'friendly agent' who would provide information on the whereabouts of the insurgents.

The first stage was the route march to the summit of Table Mountain, an uphill movement of approximately 6km. The platoon crossed the Start Line at 1330hrs. Each soldier wore combats and full

webbing. The webbing contained all the necessities for the duration of the exercise – a sleeping bag, poncho, rations and water bottles, spare clothes and, of course, personal issue FN rifle with blank ammunition.

The brisk pace caused a struggle for some members of the platoon. The terrain was punishingly hard, sometimes rocky (when one had to avoid twisting the ankle at almost every step), then marshy, with the soft, wet soil sucking the feet in deep. Despite aching feet, the platoon pushed on to the summit of Table Mountain. Then began the welcome descent of 4km to Stranahely Forest. In Stranahely, the Platoon Commander made contact with the 'friendly agent' (a member of the PDF staff) who provided information on a suitable forest location for a Base Camp. By 1730hrs the platoon had occupied the Base Camp and began preparing their meals before the onset of darkness. In less than an hour after arrival, darkness had fallen,

and the night routine began. The night was mild and calm, ideal for the travel of 'tell tale' sound.

The friendly agent informed the Platoon Commander that the enemy insurgents would be active in the Seskin Bridge area later that night. To counter this, a fighting patrol was dispatched at 2030hrs, which reached the area without incident and deployed to form an ambush. A long, lonely wait yielded no sign of the enemy, however, and the Commander ordered a return to Base Camp.

Night operations are difficult, and confidence is essential for this type of training. The sense of isolation in unfamiliar countryside in total darkness can be overwhelming. It is easy when operating in these conditions, to appreciate the importance of night vision equipment (NVE) in modern warfare.



Before the Exercise, Section Orders Group.

Cpl Murray, point section commander, on the route march towards the summit of Table Mountain. All photo: Comdt J. Mully.

By 2300hrs all the platoon were back inside the Base Camp. Apart from the sentries, everyone settled down to sleep. The short night passed uneventfully and although the weather remained dry, the air turned very cold.

Reveille was at 0430hrs and with the verbal encouragement of the platoon sergeant the remainder of the exercise began.

First on the agenda was breakfast and very soon the troops basked in the aroma of chicken curry and other boiled delicacies from the ration packs. Then began the repacking of all

stores and equipment into the webbing. To do all this in a close forest in total darkness must be experienced to be appreciated.

0530hrs saw an Orders Group by the Platoon Commander for all NCOs. Acting on information from our agent, we would move to a road junction approximately 3km away, through which the enemy insurgents would pass at around dawn. It was the platoon's task to ambush and destroy them. Section ambush positions were allocated and while section commanders briefed their sections, the Platoon Commander planned the route to be taken while leaving the Base Camp. The platoon began to leave the Base Camp at 0545hrs. Rain began to fall, adding to the difficulties which the NCOs had in controlling the troops.

The brisk, cautious move to the objective passed without incident. The first glimmer of dawn began to appear as the platoon ditched the heavy webbing at the Pick Up Point close to the ambush site. The sections deployed to their prearranged fire points. A killing zone had been decided on and tripflares sited. Everyone was in position, awaiting the enemy. The time was 0730hrs.

The site of the ambush was a road T-junction in the Seskin Bridge area. The killing zone would be in the centre of the junction. The rain continued to fall incessantly, but the platoon, wearing ponchos and wet suits, avoided the drench.

After 20 minutes, the insurgents were detected approaching the ambush point in the dim light. This was the moment of truth; the decisive moment of the exercise. As the leading insurgent advanced, he unknowingly triggered the tripflares and suddenly the killing area was illuminated with burning orange-

coloured light. The enemy, numbering eight, could easily be seen as they stopped in their tracks. The early morning silence was shattered by the first shots from the platoon's FN rifles. For the next minute or two a fusillade of several hundred rounds of blank 7.62mm ammunition was directed at the killing zone, where the bewildered, surprised insurgents crouched.

The ambush completed, the platoon moved back to the Pick Up Point to retrieve the webbing and equipment. The Platoon Commander then ordered a tactical withdrawal from the ambush area towards Cemetery Hill, and from there to the waiting transport vehicles. Once aboard the transport the exercise was effectively over.

The personnel were transported back to Coolmoney Camp where they changed into dry working dress. By 0900hrs everybody was on the transport back to Cathal Brugha Bks. Once there, the platoon began cleaning the weapons and handing back equipment to the 'O' stores. The exercise, although strenuous, was enjoyed by all and provided a rare experience of counter-insurgency warfare training.

For FCA units contemplating such an exercise, the following points raised at the debrief may be of interest:

- Physical conditioning is essential. Unfit soldiers will struggle to keep up and may even have to drop out of the route march.
- Packing of equipment. Carry only what is necessary. Remember, what you pack is what you carry on your back. Keep your load as light as possible.
- Night vision equipment (NVE) greatly enhances the performance of soldiers. If available, make use of it.



Setting up base camp in darkness.

Counter-insurgency training is a sphere of military activity seldom practiced by FCA units, so it was with some trepidation, writes Sgt Michael Barrett, that a platoon from the Dublin-based 20 Inf Bn (FCA) arrived in the Glen of Imaal on the morning of Saturday October 19th to initiate Exercise Baravore...