

Soldiers test network, shape future of Army

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WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M. (Nov. 15, 2011) -- The Army has committed 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, to evaluate new technologies and network capabilities that are shaping the Army's evolving tactical network.

Since the adoption of this mission, the brigade has built an experience base to address the requirements of the testing community and the program managers, said Col. Daniel Pinnell, commander of 2nd BCT, 1st AD.

The 2nd BCT is comprised of more than 3,800 Soldiers and is tasked organized and equipped to replicate heavy, light and Stryker formations. These Soldiers interface with systems or technologies for extended periods of time and must provide impartial feedback through a series of semi-annual network integration evaluation exercises, or NIEs.

Pinnell said it is important to understand what was really required when any one of these given systems was requested and sent in to the design process. This comprehension, he said, is critical to the brigade's ability to answer the real questions at hand.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)



Second Lt. Zachary Taylor, a platoon leader for D Company, 1-6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, role-plays an insurgent during the Network Integration Evaluation 12.1 exercise at White Sands Missile Range, N.M.

"What was the system meant to do? [In] whose hands was it intended to be placed? And what environment did we intend it to operate in?" Pinnell said.

Knowing the answers to these questions ensures the scenarios generated, the tasks given to the Soldiers and their executions are of the essential complexity in the environment required to give the right answer back to the Army, added Pinnell.

"Is this stuff doing what we wanted it to do to meet the capability gap that we identified?" he said.

Officials said having one dedicated brigade combat team, or BCT, to evaluate the systems or technologies lessens the burdens on deploying units. This means the Soldiers from 2nd BCT are balancing the testing mission and their training requirements in preparation for deployment.

Pinnell said the unit has a very aggressive timeline to meet the requirements of training on new equipment and fielding it to the Brigade. In some cases, that's 3,000 to 4,000 pieces of new equipment coming and going every four to five months.

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The Soldiers train typically through platoon level prior to deploying to the field for tests, though they sometimes do train at company level as well. Once the unit is deployed in the field and testing, it is a non-stop, on-going event, said Pinnell. Every one of these missions adds to the Soldiers' skill sets, he added.

"Because of the length of the test, we will enter at one level of competence and capability [and] we'll exit at a dramatically higher level just by the sheer investment of resources and time that have been provided," said Pinnell. "So I'm very confident, as happened last time -- we'll enter, say, at company level of competence -- [and] we will leave at battalion level of competence. [The] good news is, bottom line, it's training. While we're testing, we're getting pretty darn good resource training, and we make pretty good headway."

The brigade has a strong combat veteran ratio. About 40 percent of the Soldiers have single or multiple combat tours served in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas.

Pinnell said he committed about 600 Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, to serve as civilians on the battlefield and as opposition forces in injected insurgent scenarios. These injects allow Soldiers to execute tactics, techniques and procedures used in Afghanistan against an enemy who's replicating it as accurately as set forth in these scenarios, said Pinnell.

Soldiers role playing the opposition force said they are able to see the other side of warfare in terms of how the enemy may react and counteract what the coalition forces are doing.

"It makes you think outside the box," said 2nd Lt. Zachary Taylor, a platoon leader for D Company, 1-6th Inf. "So when you actually do deploy, you can understand how the enemy is thinking, [and] therefore you can react in a more appropriate manner, thus, hopefully, saving the lives of my Soldiers and of myself as well."

Sgt. Charles Bell, also from 1-6th Inf., is role playing a suicide bomber during the NIE 12.1 exercise. He said the experience he has from multiple deployments helps him develop the TTPs he needs to implement tasks as a member of the opposing force.

"I know how to get in the FOBs (forward operating bases) -- what kind of tactics that you use to get in [or] sneak in, [or] place IEDs (improvised explosive devices)," said Bell. "I've done [many] route clearings. We facilitate a live-action enemy so [Soldiers] can get hands-on training to [carry out] their [standard operating procedures]. Each time, we add more and more stuff to make it harder for them."

The Soldiers from 2-1 AD take the mission the Army has handed them very seriously. They say all of the time and effort are well worth it if it means helping save lives.

"It kind of gives you a sense of purpose because you know you're shaping things for the future," said Sgt. Ryan Moore, a team leader from C Company, 1st Battalion, 35th Armored Regiment. "I tell all my guys -- specially -- make sure you're very

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candid with what you say, because if you don't give accurate feedback, you'll have a system that's no good. We don't want our brothers in arms down range to get some garbage equipment."

Moore said he does not want Soldiers to carry a piece of equipment that does not function.

"That's just something else [they'll carry] around, [adding] more weight to them as opposed to being something that's functional and [is] helping them do their job and stay safe."

The Soldiers are extremely dedicated to the mission, said Pinnell.

"We take this incredibly seriously, both from a national treasure stand, as well as the lives of our brothers and sisters and our own futures as we return back into the theater," Pinnell said. "I'm just incredibly proud of these young men and women and their professional demeanor and their ability to provide very detailed feedback in a candid fashion to the leaders to really help them make the best possible decisions on acquisition."

Senior Army leaders said these Soldiers, as well as their families, are at the root and foundation of the ability to effectively conduct network integration evaluation exercises.

"I am absolutely amazed at how these Soldiers operate in the field," said Brig. Gen. Randal A. Dragon, commanding general for Brigade Modernization Command, Army Capabilities Integration Center, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. "One of the most important things that we have that is unseen here is the support of families at Fort Bliss. These Soldiers operate here knowing that their children and their families are looking after them and are being taken care of; this provides them the ability to perform this very important mission and remain focused on their tasks. The love and support we get from our families at Fort Bliss and beyond is unmatched in our Army."

Source URL (retrieved on 09/30/2014 - 2:46pm):

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