

Unit prepares for drawdown mission with 'game-changer' network

U.S. Army

FORT POLK, La. (March 25, 2013) -- Confronted by simulated insurgent fire outside a remote Afghan village, the isolated platoon fired back, called for air support and requested an evacuation helicopter for a wounded Soldier.

Using data radios and handheld digital devices tied into the Army's tactical network, the platoon communicated with its headquarters, while the leadership followed the status of the operation and location of forces from miles away.

"You can reach out to get help, call for a Medevac, inform your higher, request air assets, coordinate with your Afghan National Security Forces partners -- all of those kinds of things at the company and below level are here with this system," said Lt. Col. Alan Boyer, commander of the 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, or BCT, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry). "I think it will save people's lives in combat. I think it will help us save our partners' lives."

The scenario that unfolded at the Joint Readiness Training Center, or JRTC, here began with U.S. forces in an advisory role as their Afghan partners met with village leaders, with role players acting as the Afghan army, civilians and insurgents. It was part of the brigade's intensive training for deployment later this year, when they will serve as a key part in continuing efforts to improve Afghan National Security Forces, known as ANSF, capability and to help the ANSF take on increasing responsibility for the security of their country.

In preparation for the challenges of the Security Forces Advise and Assist Team, or SFAAT, mission -- including fewer U.S. Soldiers, more mobile and dispersed operations -- the Army is equipping SFAAT brigades such as the 4th and 3rd BCTs of the 10th Mountain Division with Capability Set 13, known as CS 13, an on-the-move communications network that stays connected over vast distances, providing information throughout the brigade down to the lowest echelons.

"As you go smaller and you go over to advise, you need to be more aware of your environment and your partners," Boyer said. "These capabilities provide force protection and situational awareness that I never experienced when I was in these guys' shoes as a platoon leader 15 years ago."

The Army's first such integrated communications package, CS 13 will allow units to utilize advanced satellite-based systems -- augmented by data radios, handheld devices and the latest mission command software -- to transmit voice/chat communications and situational awareness data throughout the SFAAT. On patrol inside mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles configured with components of CS 13, leaders will be able to exchange information and execute mission command

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using mobile communications technologies, rather than having to remain in a fixed location to access the network.

"One of the things that our systems do right now is it tethers our leaders to a fixed location -- it does not afford them the ability to travel and be as mobile as they'd like to be," said Col. Mark Elliott, director of the Army G-3/5/7 LandWarNet-Mission Command Directorate. "As we retrograde, we're turning over fixed infrastructure, and Capability Set 13 no longer has that requirement to be tethered to that fixed facility -- but they still have that same or enhanced capability."

As first in line to be fielded with CS 13, 4/10 is now in the midst of a JRTC rotation designed to prepare Soldiers for the complexity and demands of the Afghan environment. Spread across its own outposts and 22 mock villages, the unit must coordinate with role played local military and police forces as they encounter everything from routine patrols and base defense to insurgent ambushes with improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers and full scale force on force contact.

"You get the whole realm here," said John Beckwith, a spokesman for JRTC. "It's very realistic."

Throughout the training, the Soldiers are recorded on video that is used to provide feedback on their decisions and tactics. Whether operations go smoothly or they hit stumbling blocks, the units participate in detailed after-action reviews to implement lessons-learned from the experience.

"The fundamentals have to be practiced -- they have to be rehearsed and understood (so Soldiers can) become experts at it," said Sgt. Maj. Joe Singerhouse, also of 4/10's 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment. "And that's what we're doing, but we're using the Capability Set 13 to flatten that organization, speed up those fundamentals and provide situational awareness."

As the brigade prepares for the new advise-and-assist mission on a tight training schedule, the young Soldiers' familiarity with digital technology has proved a great asset as they incorporate CS 13, Singerhouse said.

"They're dealing with iPhones and Androids and Playstations and computers every day," he said. "That's the beauty of this system is these Soldiers, once they've figured out the architecture and what makes it go, now they know, 'Hey I can take this capability, move it over here and be responsive to what the commander wants for mission command on the battlefield.'"

The network equipment is also tailorable to different missions and flexible to accommodate upgrades, Boyer said. For example, after the unit completes its Mission Rehearsal Exercise at JRTC, it will turn in its Android-based handheld devices to be updated with additional new applications before the equipment is shipped to theater. In a stroke of creativity, Boyer's battalion also configured CS 13 equipment -- including satellite communications, tactical radios and friendly force tracking technology -- on a Gator All Terrain Vehicle that can be transported by

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helicopter to remote locations and powered with a small generator designed to charge the handhelds.

"It gives us the opportunity to get somewhere faster than a truck," said Pfc. Jonathan Bole, who helped assemble the solution. "You can talk, see what's going on, see where the Soldiers are."

Prior to fielding to the 10th Mountain Division, CS 13 was vetted through the Army's Network Integration Evaluation, or NIE, process. The semi-annual field exercises involve 3,800 Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, who use networked equipment as they execute mission threads in the rough terrain of White Sands Missile Range, N.M. The NIEs were used to integrate the CS 13 network and validate its performance prior to fielding. They also produced voluminous Soldier feedback that was incorporated into vehicle designs, handheld device configurations, software features and other elements of the capability set.

That approach helped result in a "90 percent-plus solution" by the time the new gear reached 4/10, Boyer said.

"This system's been validated. This system works, and my guys were able to operationalize that system so we can take it to the fight," he said. "I think it's a game changer of how we employ our company and platoon echelons in the operating environment we've been operating in and have the potential to operate in in the future."

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