

ISSUE:

Paladin batteries are not prepared to conduct degraded operations during National Training Center rotations. Too often howitzers that become degraded are not incorporated into the fight, thereby reducing the overall firing capability of the battalion.

DISCUSSION:

TM 9-2350-314-10 and FM 3-09.70 both contain specific procedures for dealing with degraded howitzers and POCs.

The first step in degraded operations is to determine the level to which the howitzer is degraded. Guns are classified as either “partially degraded” or “fully degraded”. Section 3-40 of the –10 contains a troubleshooting chart to assist section chiefs in making this assessment. Additionally, section 3-5 (Change 1) discusses fault detection during start-up procedures.

Sections experience the most difficulty when Paladin howitzers become fully degraded. This problem is especially true with younger soldiers and NCO’s who have spent their entire careers on the M109A6. Over-reliance on the AFCS and inexperience with manual lay and verification procedures often lead to sections being out of the fight for hours.

While degraded operations focus mainly on the gun line, POCs often become degraded as well, either due to a loss of communications or because of an automotive malfunction that prevents the FDC from moving effectively to control the guns. POCs must also be familiar with troubleshooting techniques, particularly for radios and digital systems. However, it is often necessary to execute a POC handover to maintain the maximum firing capability of the battery. Procedures for POC handover are covered in FM 3-09.70; FDO’s and FDNCO’s should pay attention to Appendix B, page 5 for a discussion on the entering of legal digital subscribers to make the handover process more timely and efficient.

As with any critical point of the battle, supervision by the battery leadership is paramount during degraded operations. The goal of any battery is to have the maximum number of guns in the fight. Leaders, especially at the platoon level, direct the occupation of the battery to ensure that firing capability is established quickly. For example, if a platoon has a howitzer that is simply degraded for loss of digital communications, then the unit is focused on the other two guns occupying. The degraded howitzer then occupies adjacent to one of the fully-functioning guns (normally the gun that is ready to fire fastest) in order to shoot ‘same data’. Leader involvement is even more important when managing a fully degraded gun. A lay howitzer for the degraded gun should be decided in advance. The crews of both guns must be trained and ready to conduct lay procedures IAW FM 6-50. Finally, the platoon leader or platoon sergeant must be trained on verification procedures with the aiming circle.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Degraded operations must be incorporated into a unit's home station training program. The logical place to introduce degraded operations training is at the lowest level—the gunner's test. While many units include degraded operations as part of their gunner's test, it is often the station given the least amount of support and importance. Although the focus must remain on skills relating to the Paladin in a fully automated mode, degraded crew drill and needs greater attention. Units at every NTC rotation experience difficulty with the tasks, and often take until late in the rotation to fully integrate degraded howitzers into the fight. Strict adherence to lay commands and crew drill procedures serve to build confidence in performing degraded tasks. Because most units place platoon sergeants and master gunners as evaluators for gunner's tests, it is the best place to ensure individual soldiers and NCO's know the requirements well. Batteries can also supply platoon leaders on a rotating basis to man the aiming circle during the conduct of these particular tasks. Units should sustain the policy of requiring all officers in the battalion to complete the gunner's test; this allows them to gain an appreciation for the tasks their section chiefs and gunners must execute during degraded operations.

In addition to the gunner's test, artillery batteries should dedicate a portion or all of at least one Sergeant's Time period per month to the execution of degraded tasks. Commanders take advantage of these Sergeant's Time periods by conducting OPD's with their officers on aiming circle, lay, and verification procedures. Chapter 4 of FM 6-50 provides a solid base for this training. It is worth noting that the MTP standard for a non-Paladin battery to be laid and verified is 12 minutes in the day and 17 minutes at night. These time standards provide a basis for degraded training in the battery. In other words, the time to get one or two degraded guns into the fight should not exceed the time required to get an entire battery into the fight.

Finally, battery commanders should not wait for a gun to become degraded to rehearse these operations in the field. As a stand-alone rehearsal or in conjunction with a counterfire rehearsal, commanders designate one or more guns as degraded (perhaps one partially degraded and one fully degraded). By incorporating such rehearsals, the battery develops a battle drill that will save time and increase the unit's lethality in the next fight.