

Seeing without being seen

Reconnaissance commanders are the eyes and ears of the battle-group. A recently-formed division is where these intelligence gatherers learn to fine-tune their skills

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STEALTH is the weapon of choice for the reconnaissance commander.

Even though satellites and unmanned air vehicles scan the skies to gather intelligence, there is still no substitute on the modern battlefield for a well-trained soldier with a radio and a pair of binoculars.

For the first time, vital recon skills are now taught under one roof within the newly-formed Reconnaissance Division, based at the Land Warfare School at Warminster.

All commanders responsible for providing their chain with intelligence through reconnaissance are eligible to attend for master-classes.

The need for good recon skills is greater now than it has ever been. As Capt Andy Simpson, 9th/12th Royal Lancers (Prince of Wales's), an instructor on the armoured formation reconnaissance troop leaders' course, explained: "Nothing beats a set of eyes and ears on the ground. The info is fast and, unlike unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), soldiers are not easy to deceive."

Recent exercises, particularly Saif Sareea 2 in Oman, bear this out. The best information-gathering assets the brigade commanders had were formation recon squadrons.

"A soldier can man an observation post and radio for a longer period than a UAV can stay in the air," said Capt Simpson. "And satellite technology is not an option at brigade level."

Lt Col Andrew Chapman,

who heads up the division, said reconnaissance remained vital, which is why the Army concentrates on improving its capability.

"If you can't win the recon battle then the main battle can't take place," he said. "You have got to find the enemy before you can engage him, or protect yourself from him."

The division runs formation, arm-

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oured, mechanized and light-role reconnaissance courses and specialist modules for advanced forces including the Royal Marines Brigade Patrol Troop, the Pathfinders and The Honourable Artillery Company.

The division also trains platoons for

specialist surveillance operations in the Balkans. It is the focus for the production and development of tactical doctrine and instruction of recon soldiers.

Experts from the Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Night Observation Centre, the camouflage specialists, have also moved recently and are now under the command of the division.

Willpower is one of the key qualities leaders have to instil and it is particularly true in reconnaissance. Second best is not good enough.

With a good recon platoon, the commander will be able to ease

his battle-group into attack with fewer casualties than if he had gone in blind.

Information obtained needs to be timely and accurate. Dug-in, camouflaged, well-hidden, recon troops wait for the enemy to pass, report and then extract.

"They need to be very proficient at traditional infantry skills and tend to be the better soldiers of the battalion - mature, with good communication skills. And as they may have to spend long periods silently waiting, they also need plenty of patience.

Recon is sharp-end stuff. With five days' rations on board, vehicles push forward up to 50km from their base-



Stealthily does it:



It must be around here somewhere: LCoH Andrew Marsh, HCR, left, looks for reference points as indicated by 2nd Lt Richard Moger, HCR



Sgt Bob Jenner, 1 WFR, and Sgt John Becker, 1 RGJ, stay alert and unseen in a forward screen on exercise on SPTA

line and must be robust enough to survive and be recovered.

"They are very much operating forward with limited offensive support, hopefully within range of artillery, but sometimes beyond that," said Lt Col Chapman.

"The direction and outcome of a battle can depend on one corporal who happens to be in the right place at the right time and sees the critical thing going wrong."

Courses encourage soldiers to use their initiative while being aware of the big picture, always remembering the battle could be won or lost depending on what the corporal with a pair of binoculars reports.

Quick recce of some courses on offer

ARMoured Formation Reconnaissance Crew Commanders' course:

Attended by newly-commissioned officers learning to be troop leaders and newly-promoted corporals learning to be vehicle commanders.

While officers learn from the experiences of NCOs, most of whom have numerous operational tours under their belt, troop leaders assist NCOs with skills needed to plan operations.

Among the key recce skills learnt and practised are command and control, tactical vehicle movement, camouflage and concealment, observation posts and dismounted patrolling.

Successful students become qualified to command a troop or Scimitar on operations or demanding exercises.

Armoured Close Reconnaissance Course:

Aims to train commanders capable of delivering timely and accurate information on the battle-space to the relevant commander.

Infantry Reconnaissance Course:

Attended by recce platoon commanders, platoon 2ICs and section commanders. Physically and mentally demanding, concentrating on the command elements of recce.



"It may be an excellent OP to you sir... but you've ruined one of the best drives the garrison shoot's had this season!"