

KCTC 20-08, Thunder on the Pen

by CPT Kevin Comiskey, CPT Anthony Rombold, MAJ E. Jerome Hilliard, and SGM Robert Frame

2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, the Thunder Battalion, conducted Korea Combat Training Center (KCTC) Rotation 20-08 during the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division's rotation to the Republic of Korea (ROK). The battalion's Mechanized Infantry Company trained in the mountains of Kangwon province and were task organized under and operationally controlled by the 112th Infantry Battalion (ROK Army). The unique partnership opportunity provided valuable lessons for 2-70 AR during a little known yet worthwhile training event at KCTC.

History of KCTC. The Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) established KCTC in April 2002. Similar to the United States (US) Army Combined Training Centers (CTCs), KCTC pits a rotational training unit (RTU) against an opposing force (OPFOR) to assess a brigade's ability to fight and win in a contested environment. ROKA Observer Coach/Trainers (OC/Ts) embed with both staffs and maneuver units from platoon to brigade echelon to validate the RTU's SOPs, provide feedback through After Action Reviews (AARs), and ensure the safe conduct of training. OC/Ts adjudicate casualties using a multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES) system similar to the National Training Center (NTC) or Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC).¹

The KCTC training area, or "box," is 120 km², less than one-twentieth the size of NTC. It consists of 160 km of roads with three military operations in urban terrain (MOUT) sites, three bunkers, and 19 helipads for air assault operations.² A typical KCTC rotation follows a 14-day model consisting of three days of reception, staging, onward movement, and integration (RSOI); six days of offensive and defensive operations; and three days of reverse RSOI. OC/Ts do not dictate when units transition to the defense; rather, the unit's transition to defensive operations once they no longer possess the combat power to continue offensive operations. Additionally, there are neither suspension of battlefield effects (SOBE) or "administrative movements" at KCTC, even for emergency Class I re-supply. While shorter in duration, KCTC is less scripted than US CTC rotations.

Terrain. KCTC consists of mountains terrain with dense, lush, triple canopy vegetation. The terrain results in narrow mobility corridors for mounted formations. The area is very similar to the mountainous terrain in eastern Afghanistan with thicker forestation. The areas not subject to these conditions are generally open fields and clearings in areas of low elevation. Figure 1, below, is the KCTC elevation heat map and illustrates the challenging environment in this training area and Figure 2 provides a Soldier's ground view of the terrain.

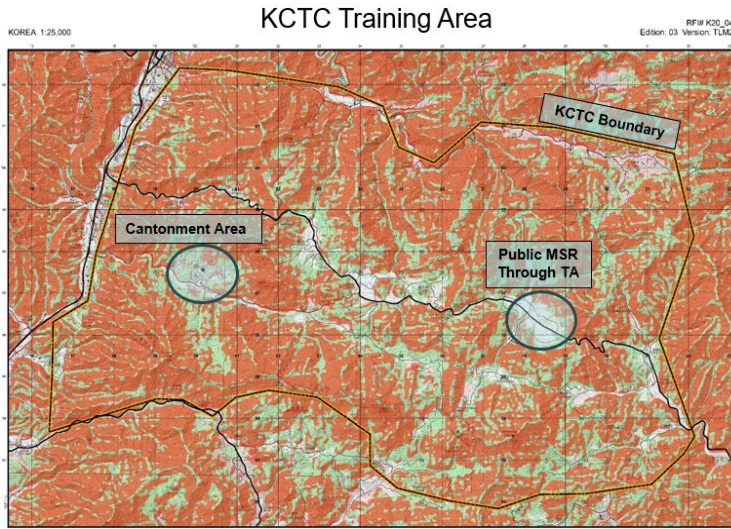


Figure 1. KCTC training area elevation heat map.

Obstacles within KCTC consist of extreme variations in elevation, which reduces speed and canalizes movement of both mounted and dismounted formations. Low lying areas are prone to flooding during monsoon season (JUN – AUG) and create bodies of water too deep for a Combined Arms Battalion (CAB) to forge with organic equipment. These constant weather effects have the potential to cause landslides and subsequently, vehicle rollovers in elevated locations indicated on the heat map in red (Figure 1).



**Figure 2. Ground view of KCTC showing the mountainous terrain.
Photo courtesy of CPT Anthony Rombold, AR, Assistant Battalion S3.**

Avenues of approach (AoAs) for mounted elements mainly consist of improved gravel surfaces running northwest to southeast wedged between mountain ranges and large hill masses, canalizing units to column formations. Dismounted AoAs are comprised of foot trails located along the military crest of mountainous areas and hills; however, the steep changes in elevation significantly reduce movement speeds of dismount formations. There is one paved MSR large enough to facilitate two-lane travel for non-tactical vehicles; however, this route is open to the public and is unrestricted during training exercises (Figure 3).

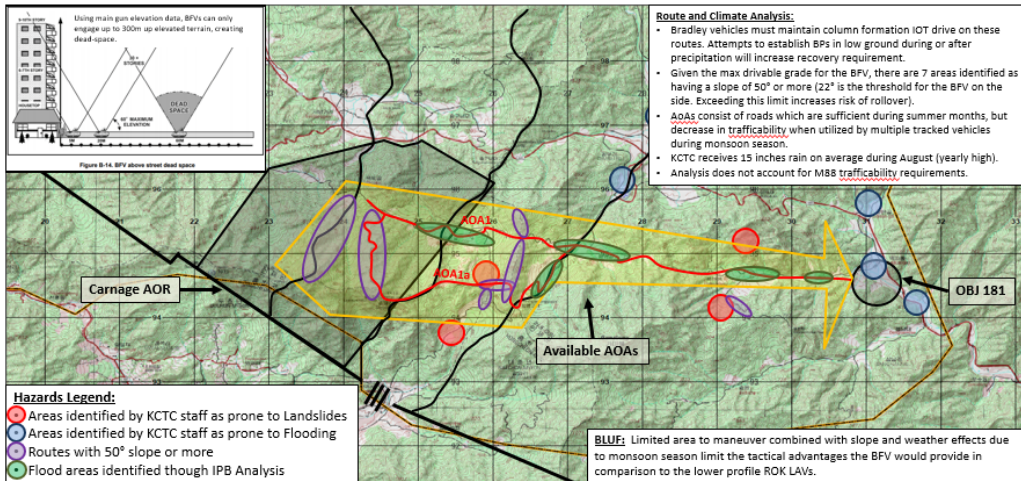


Figure 3. Terrain analysis for the employment of the M2A3 BFV (Bradley Fighting Vehicle).

While key terrain varies depending on an RTU's mission, pieces of key terrain at KCTC generally give the occupying force the ability to observe multiple AoAs while maintaining an abundance of cover and concealment. Due to the limited number of mounted AoAs, the possession of key terrain enables either force to accomplish several objectives such as: cutting supply lines, providing early warning, and facilitating command and control during offensive operations.

Dense vegetation and varying elevation limit observation and fields of fire to 150 – 450 meters on average, with open areas allowing 550 – 1600 meters of observation along the length of AoAs. The dense vegetation and elevation also provide intervisibility (IV) lines and cover and concealment for forces. The canopy at KCTC denies a CAB the ability to leverage unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for intelligence, security, and reconnaissance (ISR), because of the inability to penetrate canopy coverage. Additionally, the combination of foliage and significant terrain features severely impacts radio frequency communication.

Weather. C Company, 2-70 AR completed its KCTC rotation from 13 to 24 August 2020. August is the peak of monsoon season in the ROK, averaging rainfall on 21 of 31 days of the month. This rainfall saturates unimproved AoAs, resulting in muddy roads. Additionally, the inclement weather conditions degrade or completely deny the use of lower echelon UAS ISR assets and force the scouts to gain direct observation of their Named Areas of Interest (NAIs).

Train-Up. C Company, 2-70th AR, conducted a condensed comprehensive train up to KCTC 20-08 over the course of sixty days from June through July 2020. The training progressed from small arms marksmanship to a squad live fire exercise. The culminating training event before KCTC was a joint field training exercise with the 81st Infantry Regiment (ROKA). COVID-19 restricted a large portion of the training progression before conducting KCTC. Because of the lack of collective training at the platoon and company level, the company seized every opportunity during squad training to train repetitions for critical company systems. The company conducted squad live fire at the Rodriguez Live Fire Complex. C Company executed a scenario to mimic a defile drill in preparation for finding and destroying anti-tank bunkers during KCTC. Two weeks before KCTC, C Company conducted a three day field training exercise with the 81st IN Regiment. This experience helped the company recognize gaps in capability and build relationships.

C Company is equipped with the Enhanced Night Vision Goggle (ENVG) and the Family of Weapons Sight Individual (FWSI). Both pieces of equipment brought an immediate decisive impact to the unit's ability to operate during hours of limited visibility and destroy the enemy. Before conducting collective training with the FWSI and ENVG, Soldiers participated in initial fielding classes and ranges conducted at Fort Riley, Kansas by the Program Executive Office (PEO) Soldier and used the ENVG and FWSI for over 96 hours of patrolling and live-fire operations between marksmanship ranges and KCTC.

Task Organization. C Company, is a mechanized infantry company; composed of three mechanized rifle platoons, a headquarters section, and an attached field maintenance team. During KCTC 20-08, 112th Mechanized Infantry Battalion (112 IN), 13th Mechanized Brigade (13 MECH BDE) of the ROK Army had operational control of C Company, 2-70th Armor Battalion. The rugged terrain of KCTC forced the company to task organize as a light infantry company with three rifle platoons (two rifle squads and 1 weapons squad), a headquarters section, a battalion dismounted scout squad, and a joint terminal attack controller (JTAC). The company minus also had an attached troops transportation section composed of three light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs). The 112 IN Commander chose to retain control of the American Scout Squad for the duration of the operation (Figure 4).

KCTC Task Organization

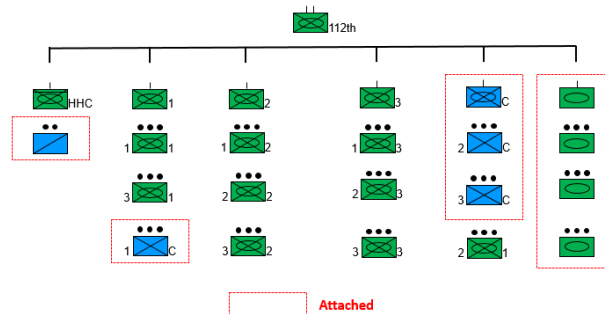


Figure 4. 112th IN Task Org for KCTC 20-08.

One of the major task organization changes was the attachment of 2nd Platoon, 1st Company, 112 IN to C Company. This platoon was comprised of three K200 Armored Personnel Carriers with heavy machine guns. Working with the ROK Army required additional enabler support to facilitate mission command and fire support communication between the two elements. 112 IN attached one fire support officer (with radio), two forward observers, and two radiotelephone operators (ROK BN Net and ROK PLT Net). The addition of the ROK RTO's was invaluable in maintaining communication with 112 IN.

1st Platoon, C Company attached to 1st Company, 112 IN with a JTAC, troop transportation section of two LMTV's, two high mobility multipurpose wheel vehicles (HMMMV) for security under the control of the company executive officer. To facilitate communication between 112 IN and the 2-70 AR LNO element in the ROK BN TOC, a US Liaison Officer worked with the 1st Company Commander. 1st Platoon, Carnage sustained itself with all classes of supply for the duration of the exercise.

Tempo became the hardest element to maintain during the course of the exercise because the company relied on LMTV troop transportation. The mechanized nature of the fight proved difficult for the light infantry task organization to maintain tempo. US LMTVs struggled on narrow mountain switchbacks that were easily traversed by ROKA two and a half-ton trucks, K200 APC's, and tanks. The top-heavy nature of the LMTV forced the company to conduct a vehicle drop off operations at the base of the hills and walk up switchbacks in full kit. To preserve combat power future units should insist on the use of ROKA two and a half-ton trucks for movement up switchbacks. The low center of gravity of the vehicle proved better suited for the mountain roads.

Execution. Thunder's KCTC rotation was shorter than the standard 14 day model with 13 MECH BDE after 2-70's original training partner, the 81st Infantry Regiment, was not able to participate. The condensed timeline consisted of two days of RSOI, three days of operations, and two days of reverse RSOI. For the rotation, the 13 MECH BDE tasked 112 IN as the higher command (HICOM) for C Company (Figure 4). RSOI consisted of MILES gear draw and validation, a communication exercise (COMEX) coupled with a terrain walk, medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) rehearsals with the MEDEVAC pilots, and a battalion rehearsal. Usually, units conduct RSOI at KCTC while in the "box" as opposed to within a rotational unit bivouac area (RUBA); however, the 13 MECH BDE stayed in barracks for the two day RSOI period due to heavy rain.

The COMEX/terrain walk served as the next notable difference between KCTC and US CTCs. 112 IN leadership from platoon leaders to the battalion commander drove throughout the training area and stopped at key terrain and objectives around the battlefield to test communications systems and adjust the plan (OPLAN) as necessary. The ability to see the battlefield greatly helped create shared understanding before the beginning of operations.

Following the terrain walk, the 112 IN conducted a combined arms rehearsal. The rehearsal lasted approximately 30 minutes and focused solely on movement and maneuver. The battalion did not conduct an intelligence collection/fires rehearsal or sustainment rehearsal. Leaders brought their maps and operational graphics and listened to the battalion operations officer note important checkpoints to confirm that all leaders down to platoon level had the correct graphics. The ROKA used multiple checkpoints to control movement and maneuver similar to how the US Army uses phase lines, another noted procedural difference between the two forces. This rehearsal served as the final event before beginning movement to the 112 IN's Tactical Assembly Area (TAA).

The establishment of the TAA served as the beginning of operations for the training unit. Once established in the TAA, both blue forces (BLUFOR) and OPFOR were able to begin force on force operations. 1st Platoon, C Company, OPCON to a ROK Infantry Company, moved to seize a bunker on a hill, key terrain that allowed the 112 IN freedom of maneuver through the area of operations (AO). Once the bunker was seized, the remainder of C Company, operationally controlling a ROK Mechanized Infantry Platoon, moved to seize a foothold at OBJ CHARLIE east of 112 IN's objective, a large MOUT site in the eastern portion of KCTC (ref. Figure 5). The operation did not come without heavy casualties due to the heavy OPFOR presence throughout the AO. OPFOR at KCTC model North Korean Soldiers by wearing similar uniforms, using the same Soviet-era equipment, and fighting using North Korean tactics, techniques, and procedures. Of note, the KCTC OPFOR Soldiers receive rewards such as four day weekends for killing company or battalion leadership, further incentivizing an already well

trained and disciplined OPFOR. After three days of intense fighting in the intense heat and mountainous terrain, the OPFOR rendered 112 IN combat ineffective.

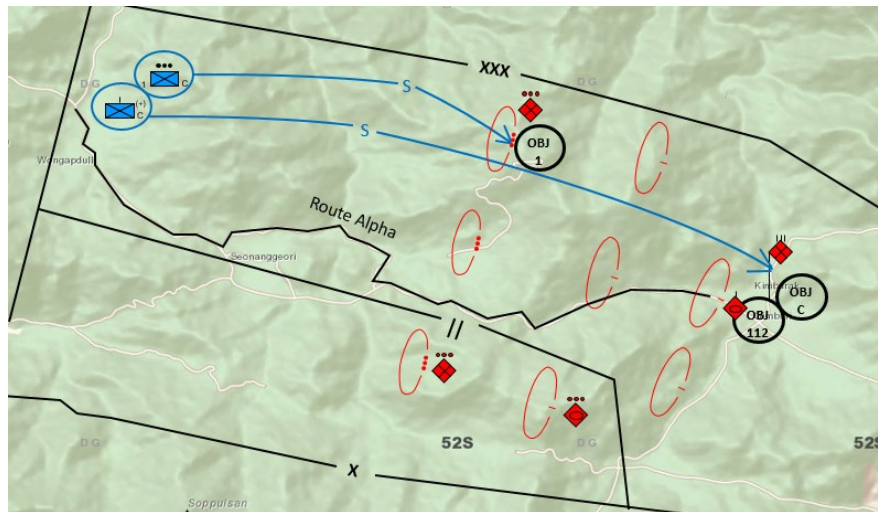


Figure 5. Carnage Company's AO at KCTC.

Day 1. After moving to the TAA from the RUBA, C Company established a perimeter defense while the rest of the 112 IN prepared their defensive positions. The enemy situation at the time of TAA operations saw one platoon of enemy special purpose forces attempting to infiltrate the BN TAA. Following a recon of the company perimeter defense, C Company established local security and each platoon occupied their respective position. For 24 hours C Company conducted engagement area development, troop leading procedures, and reconnaissance and security patrols within its area of responsibility in preparation for the upcoming seizure of "OBJ CHARLIE". During the late afternoon, C Company and the rest of 112 IN began to receive consistent artillery fire. Although consistent, the enemy had minimal effects on the company inflicting zero casualties with bursts coming within 400m of positions. In response multiple indirect fire missions were called to the 112 IN TOC, targeting the hilltop east of the TAA to neutralize potential enemy observers. Each mission called had zero effects because the Fires BN Fire Direction Center was destroyed by enemy counter-battery fires.

Before dusk, an OPFOR platoon maneuvered down the mountain east of C Company into the engagement area. The company made contact with 25 OPFOR Soldiers. The OPFOR was observed 150m to the east moving towards the company near a fast-running creek. The OPFOR attempted to use the sound of the running creek to mask their movement, but 2nd and 3rd Platoons engaged the enemy with M240B Medium Machine guns from the elevated northern and northeastern positions of the company defense. The fighting resulted in 14 US KIA, 23 OPFOR KIA, and two OPFOR WIA. All casualties on both were the result of MILES small arms fire and MILES hand grenades.

Following the engagement, C Company re-established local security and evacuated casualties to the BN Aid Station. The company spent the remainder of the evening conducting reconnaissance and security patrols. 112 IN decided not to move the defense even though the OPFOR compromised the position, because the position over watched a key avenue of approach east of the battalions combat service and support. Any move north or south would have exposed a valuable seam to the OPFOR.

1st Platoon, Charlie Company along with 1st Company, 112th MECH BN conducted TAA defensive operations in preparation for the attack the following morning. C Company could not commence movement towards OBJ CHARLIE until 1st Company, 112 IN set conditions by breaching the minefield on Route Bravo and seizing OBJ 1 "Bunker Hill".

Day 2. Following stand to, the company boarded LMTVs and initiated movement towards OBJ CHARLIE. 112 IN tasked 1st Company to assault OBJ 1 "Bunker Hill" and C Company to move east towards OBJ 112. C Company's order of movement was 2nd Platoon, followed by 2nd Platoon, 1st Company (MECH), and finally 3rd Platoon. Although the 112 IN destroyed some anti-tank teams early in the morning along the route, C Company dismounted from the LMTVs and cleared a defile after receiving a radio call that the area consisted of anti-tank teams. 2nd platoon dismounted and cleared a hilltop. 3rd Platoon and 2nd Platoon, 1st Company continued movement following clearance of the hilltop. At this point in the battle 1st Platoon and the majority of 1st Company remained engaged by an OPFOR company in the defense.

By the time C Company consolidated, an OPFOR Company dug in a strong point defense on OBJ 1 "Bunker Hill", destroyed 1st Platoon, and the entirety of 1st Company, 112 IN. Four Soldiers from 1st Platoon, led by a corporal, moved 2.5km to link up with the main body of the company. All four Soldiers made it successfully to the main body.

Following water resupply, C Company started the foot movement up Route ALPHA, with Soldier load management playing a key part in preserving combat power during movement. Once on top of the ridgeline the company began a movement to contact east towards OBJ CHARLIE. Taking indirect fire the entire time while moving along the road, 2nd platoon destroyed a two-man observer team with radios, maps, and binoculars.

The 112 IN battalion commander ordered the company to halt its advance towards OBJ CHARLIE because the brigade had taken significant casualties. C Company reconsolidated and received the order to attack OBJ 112 in conjunction with an armor company from 259 AR BN. C Company would attack the Town of Gimhuri and set the conditions for 259th AR to destroy the enemy armor company defending the town.

After issuing a FRAGORD, C Company initiated movement east on RTE ALPHA. The main concern moving down the mountain was losing communications with 112 IN. A communication blackout did occur because OPFOR destroyed the BN retransmission (retrans) section, and the BN TOC could not reach the company via radio communication. While moving towards OBJ 112, Carnage engaged and destroyed an OPFOR anti-tank section. 2nd platoon, 1st Company left its K200 Armored Personnel Carriers on RTE ALPHA because of mines and craters on the only bridge to the objective.

The company moved into a long halt. The reconnaissance of OBJ 112 proved that the OPFOR conduct minimal operations during limited visibility. Unfortunately, the ROKA also possessed limited night vision capabilities and their night vision devices do not mount to their helmets, severely limiting their ability to maneuver at night. Combined operations during limited visibility require deliberate rehearsals, pre-combat equipment checks, and inspections before operations.

Day 3. Although the destroyed retrans section prohibited communication with the 112 IN headquarters (HQ), Carnage still conducted the attack per the commander's intent. The attack

commenced at 0300 during hours of darkness. As the attack started four artillery rounds destroyed the company HQ element, and C Company's 3rd platoon leader took over the attack. Halfway through the assault OPFOR T-80 tanks started to move north towards OBJ CHARLIE. 2nd platoon, 1st Company attacked OBJ CHARLIE north of OBJ 112 while the main effort of attacked OBJ 112, forcing the OPFOR to split forces. The OPFOR spent the next hour and a half conducting small squad sized spoiling attacks throughout the town of Gimhuri. Eventually, a T-80 collapsed a building with a main gun round, destroying the rest of C Company. The armored attack from 259th AR never materialized.

112 IN Liaison Package. The Thunder Battalion sent a field grade officer and a sergeant major teamed with a bilingual ROKA Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer to liaise between the Korean battalion and the attached US Infantry Company. This US/ROK liaison team facilitated 24-hour operations in the Republic of Korean Army Battalion Tactical Operations Center (ROKA BN TOC). The team's main responsibility was translating the 112 IN Commander's orders into English for C Company while capturing the commander's intent and expressing his instructions in US Army doctrinal terms that the company could use to successfully execute operations.

The liaison team was unable to effectively convey how the team would enhance the ROKA's ability to maneuver its attached subordinate company. However, as the liaison team continued to insert itself at friction points brought about by language barriers, the ROKA BN warmed to the idea of using the liaisons to talk directly to the attached infantry company commander and first sergeant in English. By the end of the rotation, the ROKA BN was directing the liaison team to make a majority of the radio communications.

2-70th Armor provided its Battalion Executive Officer and Operations Sergeant Major as its primary liaisons. The two individuals' experience and rank allowed them to respectfully insert themselves into predictable points of friction. Due to the immature working relationship between the units, we assess that a field grade and sergeant major team was the correct team to provide as liaisons. While future units may opt to use a Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) graduate Officer and a battle staff trained NCO for future liaison teams, the team must have the military skill necessary to battle track operations, understand the ROKA battalion commander's intent, and translate their intent into doctrinal terms that its US unit understands to ensure mission success.

White Cell Operations. Thunder deployed a white cell node for exercise control to track real-world casualties, logistical status (LOGSTAT), and vehicle slant. For upper tactical internet (TI), the white cell deployed its Combined Operational Very Small Aperture Terminal Network-Korea (COVN-K). This allowed Thunder to use non-classified internet protocol router (NIPR) voice, NIPR data, Centrix (CX-K) voice, and CX-K data to communicate with the Battalion TOC at Camp Humphreys. NIPR voice also served as the communication with the MEDEVAC unit.

2-70 also used a radio interoperability cable-Korea (RIC-K) to establish a bridge between U.S. Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System (SINCGARS) and the ROKA equivalent. This bridge served as a retrans in the box and allowed C Company to communicate with its HICOM. Unfortunately, the bridge failed to work, causing a four to six-second timing delay and distortion resulting in ineffective communication.

Medical Observations. Thunder's medical Platoon established a role 1 at KCTC and treated 14 Soldiers, six of whom suffered from heat-related injuries resulting from hours of dismounted maneuver in mountainous terrain and 90-degree weather while wearing body

armor. The battalion learned three valuable medical-related takeaways from its KCTC experience. First, acclimating to the heat and terrain of KCTC remains paramount to a unit's success. Unlike the rolling hills of Fort Riley, Kansas, KCTC consists of extremely mountainous terrain with dense forests. Combined with the August humidity, KCTC presents a very real possibility for Soldiers to suffer heat exhaustion or even heat stroke. Few installations in the United States Army present the same combination of heat and terrain, making physical preparedness extremely important for Soldiers' well-being and mission success.

Lastly, understanding the levels of medical care is important for knowing when and how to evacuate casualties. Thunder trained its medics who provided point of injury care to identify if a Soldier needed a higher level of treatment or required "ice sheets". There was an incident at KCTC where non-medical personnel placed ice sheets on a Soldier whose core temperature was not high enough for this type of treatment; fortunately, medics quickly identified the improper ice sheet use, and the Soldier returned to the fight unharmed. Understanding when a Soldier needs ice sheets is critical because improper ice sheet use can lead to hypothermia in a Soldier whose core temperature is too low. Medics receive training to recognize specific types of heat-related illnesses and how to treat each illness.

Lessons Learned. Thunder left KCTC with an abundance of lessons learned, with the first important takeaway being sustainment operations for the ENVG and FWSI. An infantry company requires a large supply of batteries to sustain a prolonged patrolling sequence. Repair parts, field maintenance capability, and field support representatives (FSRs) were not available post fielding. Despite sustainment challenges, both pieces of equipment provided the Soldier an unparalleled advantage during hours of limited visibility.

Thunder observed many cultural differences between the United States Army and the ROK Army. The largest noticeable difference included the role of commanders during operations. In the ROKA, commanders hold much of the decision-making authority at their level, rarely allowing subordinate officers and NCOs the ability to exercise the disciplined initiative and accept the prudent risk that the US Army indoctrinates in its Soldiers through Mission Command (ADP 7-0). This reality forced the C/2-70 AR Commander to remain especially sensitive to his surroundings during back briefs and battalion level rehearsals, as providing the bottom-up refinement and providing the recommendations encouraged in the US Army made the company commander susceptible to offending the ROKA Battalion Commander. Such an incident never occurred thanks to understanding this cultural difference beforehand.

Providing a liaison team that consists of experienced ROKA officer and NCO fluent in English and US Army terminology paired with a field grade officer and a Sergeant Major was the correct combination based on the immature working relationship of the two units. The team must maintain a persistent presence in the ROKA BN TOC or mobile TOC. If the units can conduct a combined field training exercise before the KCTC rotation the US unit can reduce the liaison rank requirement of the team to a Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) graduate officer and a battle staff trained NCO for KCTC. Thunder Battalion still recommends having a field grade officer participate in the combined field training exercise before KCTC (Figure 6).

The field grade officer's primary responsibility during the FTX is to mold the key leader engagements with the ROKA Battalion in the field and integrate the liaison team before KCTC.



Figure 6. Carnage Company during its KCTC train-up.
Photo courtesy of CPT Kevin Comiskey, IN, C/2-70 AR Commander.

The two ROKA BNs Thunder Battalion worked with leading to KCTC were very prescriptive about the size of our liaison package. Thunder Battalion was directed to keep the liaison team as small as possible and this forced us to ensure every Soldier who went was well rounded on all equipment brought to the field. Soldiers had to provide security during the patrols, both mounted and dismounted, and be knowledgeable enough to operate multiple communications platforms. Soldiers that went to KCTC on the liaison team as drivers or gunners were qualified on multiple weapons platforms and had the skills necessary to place JCRs, radios (ASIP & VHF), and multiple weapons (mounted 240B and M4 rifle) into action.

Thunder Battalion learned a lot of valuable lessons during our training opportunity with our Korean counterparts and recommend that your unit seek out the opportunity to execute KCTC rotation. The KCTC rotation allowed Thunder Soldiers at echelon to train with our Korean counterparts in a realistic, tough training environment for a real-world threat. There are few instances where the US Army attaches formations under other nations' headquarters to execute tactical operations like the 2nd Infantry Division does for KCTC, making KCTC a unique, one of a kind training opportunity.

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Notes

¹ KCTC Inbrief Slides.

² Ibid.