Training, Training, Training

With no formal Soldier Modernisation Programme, the Danish Army Combat Centre is emphasising longer and better training to exploit the advanced technology they are incorporating as building blocks for their dismounted infantry

Since the 1970s, the Danish Army has combined infantry armour and reconnaissance forces within a single concept known as Combat Troops. This provides the Danish Army Combat Centre (DACC), a wide ranging remit, according to its Commanding Officer, Colonel Eigil Schjønning, "That mix means that when the Combat Centre talks about equipment, it is from the single soldier to the main battle tank and when we talk organisationally, it's from the single soldier or vehicle to the platoon, company, battalion and battlegroup. It's the same with doctrine and Tactics, Techniques and Procedures and we are also responsible for the training of platoons, companies and battlegroups."

"This mixture in Combat Troops makes it possible to have a career where I started as a platoon leader in a tank platoon and later becoming the commander of a light infantry battalion and mechanised infantry brigade. My career gave me the opportunity to take good experiences from armour into infantry and vice versa. One of the experiences I had from my career in the late 1980s where, in my MBT unit it was normal procedure that all ten MBTs would not use the platoon radio net. Even in combat it was more or less quiet and we ordered each other calmly around. That was not the same picture when I went into the radio procedures in an infantry company I must say."

"My mission at the Combat Centre when I started in 2005, was to have intelligent infantry soldiers and smaller units. We have succeed in getting our dismounted section in the Danish Army today to consist of six soldiers. That is I must say an area of continuing discussion in the Army, but that is the way we have gone."

There is currently no Soldier Modernisation Programme in the Danish Army. That was not always the case, with Denmark initially embarking on an effort to generate a networked soldier with generic situational awareness, accurate and effective firepower and able to operate for up to 48 hours. Col. Schjønning said of this original vision, "we were very optimistic at that time."

This system built on the normal five NATO capability pillars. Under the programme, the plan was to select two systems from those systems perceived as being the leaders of their time: namely Land Warrior, IdZ, Felin and FIST. In 2005 the plan was to down select to two systems that would be rented or bought for company level trials. That selection didn't happen as Col. Schjønning explained, "In 2005 these four systems, seen from our perspective, were seen as suffering delays and we heard rumours of cost escalations too. We did not manage to make a down selection and it never materialised."

"It was clear to us however that the Danish Army would not wait on a system or a programme that could be ready perhaps in 2015 or 2020. At the same time, we realised that we were talking about a price in the neighbourhood of $25,000 to $30,000 a soldier. The system was postponed. In 2006 we were in firefights in Iraq and in Afghanistan and we couldn't wait so we changed our programme into a building block or Lego approach as we might call it. That systems ended up being the soldier as he is today on the battlefield in Helmand province."

Today this equipment consists of, among other things, an Aimpoint laser light module, ballistic eye protection, first aid kit, combat vest and Personal Role Radio.

Col. Schjønning explained that the benefits were mixed, "The advantage is of course that it is less expensive and it is very flexible, based on what is on the market at the time. The disadvantages of this are of course that the next building block to put on top, depends on what we already have bought as to whether it fits onto the Lego blocks. There is no single producer responsible for systems integration and interoperability."

The structure of the communications network used by the soldier continues to need addressing before the benefits of more advanced C4I applications can be fully exploited according to Col. Schjønning, "When I evaluate radio traffic at the platoon and section level, from what I hear, we are far from a professional level. Before we go on putting battle management systems and more difficult to handle equipment out to the soldier, we have to learn to use what we have. Combat effectiveness is 30 percent equipment and 70 percent training. If the training is poor or insufficient, then the combat effectiveness in the unit is very low and we are not using the full potential in the equipment that we have."

Denmark has recently embarked on the next phase of soldier equipment purchase recommendations lasting for the next five years. These include a dismounted battle management system which will also work with a vehicle mounted BMS and new tactical radios, currently in the process of being acquired. Col. Schjønning said, "A dismounted BMS should come as a natural extension of these projects."

The Combat Centre recently sent a team to monitor Danish Infantry Company throughout its recent six month tour of Afghanistan to report back on injuries attributable to the heavy loads being carried by troops.

The official report, found that 10 to 15 percent of the company suffered permanent debilitating injures due to heavy loads, injuries that they will have to live with for the rest of their lives.

Col. Schjønning explained, "In some platoons up to half are on painkillers for parts of operations. They continued on fighting and patrolling to support their comrades. We have the problem, they don't."

It is currently only possible to provide physiotherapy in Denmark either while soldiers are on leave or after they return from their tour of duty. The Combat Centre's solution is that a physiotherapist be embedded with the unit when deployed.

In addition to palliative methods, further attention if being focussed on reducing the load and improving ergonomics. Col. Schjønning explained, "Some of the weight load reductions can be achieved through for example modular multifunction body armour."

Further short term recommendations are for combat identification and well as to better understand the need for observation equipment at lower tactical levels.

A further recommendation is for the redesign of Physical Training to better prepare soldiers for operational conditions. "We have real problems with our training times. We don't think we can't take a civilian and train him for combat in Helmand in 12 months unless he is a rare sportsman before he starts."

Moving beyond the shorter term limit of five years, the DACC has recommended giving greater priority to C4I and it is in this timeframe that a dismounted BMS will be required. To prepare the way for this the DACC is working to expand the capabilities of the Danish Army Reference Centre to develop understanding of C2 to inform the acquisition of future building blocks.

Colonel Schjønning said, "This programme and the development is too important. Later on we will continue with the vehicle platform C4I system and tactical radio. They would be implemented and the technology would therefore be mature enough to start the acquisition of dismounted BMS."

Col. Schjønning emphasises that training be done with the equipment that Denmark already has, citing the example of communications. "If you don't have well trained troops, the only affect will be to have more chat on the net but, if you give a PRR to a well trained infantry section, you have synergy. Good equipment can't be a stand in for good training, it is the other way around."

Colonel Schjønning was speaking at WBR's Soldier Technology Europe. ■

Denmark is emphasising greater physical fitness and additional training in its solder modernisation approach © DoD