Nowhere To Hide

*Experimental distributed ops unit proves its worth in Afghanistan*

By Christian Lowe, Times Staff Writer

They were about seven miles away, nestled deep within Afghanistan’s high mountain ridges that soak up radio transmissions like rounds into body armor. It was the kind of terrain that lends itself more to communicating via smoke signal than high-tech radios.

The convoy was cut off from its base. A Marine was down, and the convoy was taking fire from Afghan fighters on a peak high above.

That’s when 1st Lt. Carlo DeSantis stepped in.

Just below another ridge to the west, DeSantis heard the desperate calls from his fellow Marine, 1st Lt. Phuong Phan, who was leading a convoy out of their forward operating base, Camp Blessing, when it was hit by a roadside bomb and ambushed by Afghan fighters firing rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns.

Phan’s calls for help couldn’t get through the mountainous terrain to Camp Blessing.

So, using sophisticated communications gear normally found with commanders above his grade and using training previously bestowed solely to aviators, DeSantis fired up his satellite radio to relay Phan’s reports to Camp Blessing, redirected aircraft trolling the Afghan skies for close-air support and coordinated a helo-borne casualty evacuation — all well beyond visual range of the convoy he stepped in to help.

“At the time, I was the only qualified person in the vicinity to control the aircraft,” said DeSantis, whose infantry platoon has been trained as an experimental “distributed operations” unit, during a May 10 telephone interview from his base camp in Afghanistan.

“I could see the aircraft, but I couldn’t see Lt. Phan’s convoy. So it got a little tricky.”

A top Corps initiative that officials claim will change how the service trains and equips its infantrymen, distributed operations envisions a rifle platoon equipped with sophisticated, long-range communications gear using special training and tactics that make it capable of dividing into smaller units and operating far from support or higher command.

The exploits of DeSantis’ platoon — 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines — have garnered the attention of top Marine Corps brass, who describe the unit’s special capabilities as the wave of the Corps’ future.
Even the Pentagon’s 20-year strategy, detailed in this year’s Quadrennial Defense Review, said the Corps’ distributed operations concept provides “commanders with an expeditionary force able to conduct ‘low-end’ [special operations forces] missions as well as traditional operations.”

The training and equipment is meant to give Marines at lower levels the capabilities normally found in company or battalion staffs. But after years of lofty talk, the DO concept was put to the ultimate test in a combat environment with the deployment of DeSantis’ platoon to Afghanistan.

By all accounts the experiment was a success. But it certainly didn’t end with the dramatic rescue of Phan’s Jan. 25 ambush.

“One of the problems with distributed ops is it is much more capable, but people don’t know how to employ us,” DeSantis said. “They think we have the same limitations as a normal platoon, and they restrict us in those same ways.”

**Specialized training**

An idea that was born in the Millennium Dragon experiments of 2000, distributed ops rebounded after Lt. Gen. Jim Mattis stepped in to lead Marine Corps Combat Development Command at Quantico, Va., two years ago.

Not long after, the Corps’ Warfighting Lab got into the mix, developing the “small unit of excellence” training package built to stretch a platoon to the limits of far-flung operations.

Last August, the lab put together a pre-deployment training package for the Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii-based 1/3, splitting DeSantis’ 44-man platoon off for specialized DO training.

The experimental syllabus is packed with exercises meant to reinforce skills that will help a unit survive on its own, including land navigation, patrolling, setting up ambushes, operating long-range communications and conducting small-unit logistics.

“Some of the skills we gave this unit before they deployed seem to have paid off,” said Vince Goulding, director of the lab’s Sea Viking Division, which runs the distributed ops experiment. “The … training that our experiment division gave these guys appears to have been on the money.”

DeSantis and one of his staff noncommissioned officers were sent to Tactical Air Control Party school, where they learned how to control aircraft from the ground and talk pilots onto bombing targets over the radio — a skill normally reserved for forward air controllers.
Early this year, the unit deployed to Afghanistan, a battlefield that officials claimed would be the perfect place to test whether distributed ops was all it was cracked up to be.

Apparently, it was.

DeSantis’ platoon hadn’t even returned to Hawaii — 1/3’s advance party began arriving home in early May — and officials were already buzzing over its success.

During a March 29 hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee’s seapower panel, Mattis told lawmakers “the experiments have been … very encouraging.

“Right now, distributed operations is going to be an additive capability to allow us to aggregate those Marines, distribute them, bring them back together, and using various platforms … we’ll be able to move them in ways that will confront the enemy with some very menacing dilemmas,” Mattis said.

Goulding said the Quantico-based Training and Education Command has begun to incorporate lessons learned from the DO platoon’s experiment into training.

At the same time, manpower officials are looking at how to lock in school seats so infantry Marines will be able to get into the advanced schools they’ll need to become DO-capable.

“All this experimentation process has told us is this is all about training,” Goulding said.

However, DeSantis did point out that his ability to operate in a more “distributed” manner was hampered by higher commanders in Afghanistan who were loath to separate units into groups smaller than a platoon after a four-man SEAL team was compromised last June.

“Throughout our deployment, we ran against our willingness to be employed in distributed operations like we wanted to, with the higher-level commanders being risk-averse,” DeSantis said.

“There were a lot of things that we could have done that would have been perfectly facilitated that we were restricted from doing,” he said.

But the fog of war gave his unit cover to stretch its capabilities anyway.

'There were no more caves'

On April 11, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan kicked off the largest air-assault operation since Operation Anaconda in 2002. Dubbed Operation Mountain Lion, six battalions deployed into the eastern mountains along the border of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, a notorious al-Qaida and Taliban safe haven.
The DO platoon was airlifted into the mountains and mistakenly dropped at five different landing zones separated by nearly a mile — in terrain where it can take 30 minutes to travel 100 yards.

Using the extra navigation and patrol training they went through as part of the small unit of excellence package, the platoon was able to link up in less than an hour in total darkness.

After several days of patrolling and village searches, the platoon eventually pushed out to a position overlooking a 5-mile-long stretch of dirt road used by U.S. convoys.

The platoon broke up into as many as nine different units, taking up positions overlooking the road from the ridges above.

“It’s sort of funny seeing companies of 200 to 300 men having fewer positions than this platoon did,” DeSantis said.

On the night of May 1, three weeks into the operation, DeSantis’ platoon noticed some activity in a cave near a position that was the source of occasional mortar fire directed at Camp Blessing. Using the night optics provided by the Warfighting Lab for the deployment, the platoon watched as the insurgents cooked their meals on open fires deep within the caves.

Frustrated with earlier unsuccessful attempts to root out the position, DeSantis did what most infantry platoon commanders could only dream of doing.

He called in a B-52 Stratofortress bomb run.

Lining up the coordinates of the target with laser range-finding binoculars, DeSantis handed over the GPS data to the B-52 crew, who then dropped 10 2,000-pound bunker-buster bombs on the cave complex.

“I think no one in the battalion really realized I was employing [GPS-guided bombs],” DeSantis said.

“We sort of got held back for a while until we could explain what all the explosions were,” he said.

The next day, DeSantis directed more airstrikes against the cave complex, directing laser-guided assaults from F-15 Eagles and Army attack helicopters.

“The caves exploded, so there were no more caves,” DeSantis said.

Though DeSantis thinks his platoon could have done more in Afghanistan, he came back unscathed, never seeing any significant direct enemy action against his force during the Mountain Lion campaign, which lasted nearly a month.
Due to the advanced training and equipment, the DO platoon “had a pretty quiet deployment,” presenting enemy fighters with a target they didn’t want to hit.

“I really think because we were everywhere and we were in small spots, they were never able to get inside and through us,” DeSantis said. “They weren’t able to get close to us.”