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21st century tech in the field

Artillery uses digital equipment

By Sgt. Stephen Decatur

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Fort Bragg, N.C- AFATDS, LLDR, and PFED would probably get you shouted down in a normal game of scrabble, but if you were playing with the fire support specialists of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, you'd be speaking their language, because all of those terms are pieces of equipment used by the brigade's fire support specialists.

Pfc. Jared Bonnie of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, had arrived at his unit from advanced individual training less than a week before heading out to the field Jan. 21 to Jan 23 on Fort Bragg to train in the brigade's first artillery range using digital call-for-fire systems since the unit returned from Afghanistan. Like his predecessors before him, he learned to call for fire by voice using a map, a compass and a radio.

"I never touched any of this stuff before," Bonnie said. "It's a little more high speed than what I thought it would be. There's a lot more to call for fire than what I was taught in AIT."

While some Paratroopers still prefer the time-honored method of calling for fire with compass and a radio, the Army's digital systems have several advantages, said Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Hatfield, the brigade fire support non-commissioned officer.

"The information gets put into the Army Battle Command System, it's linked to other systems so it allows you to track fire missions, friendly locations, coordinate fire support, control airspace and keep a digital log of events," Hatfield said.

One of the biggest advantages of digital fires is information sharing with other elements on the battlefield, said Staff Sgt. Matthew Akers of C Co., 2-508th PIR.

"It lets everyone see what's going on as opposed to listening to the (radio)" Akers said.

Forward observers use digital fire support by first finding a grid point on a map using the Lightweight Laser Locator Designator Range Finder. The LLDR points a laser at the target, and the laser bounces back with the exact position of the target in relation to the LLDR. The LLDR uses a built-in global positioning system to calculate the exact position and elevation of the target and the forward observer.

The forward observer then punches the information into his Pocket Sized Forward Entry Device (PFED), which looks like a personal digital assistant, and the information gets sent up to command and control. The information gets reviewed by multiple echelons of command and control using digital tracking systems like the Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS). After the forward observer is cleared to fire he communicates directly with the gunners on the artillery pieces using his radio.

"It takes a lot of operator error out of the equation" said Staff Sgt. Mike Shellenberger of the brigade fire support cell. "Anything that goes through gets checked, double checked, triple checked and quadruple checked by the time of fire ... the room for error is smaller, but it still depends on the practice and experience of the observer."

High-speed technology or not, Paratroopers still have to know how to call for fire the old-fashioned way, talking to someone on the radio.

And like many other things in the 82nd Abn. Div., it has something to do with tradition.

"I'm all about voice," Akers said. "I suppose a lot of it has to do with what you're brought up on."