

# Maneuvering the Armored Brigade Combat Team in Restrictive Terrain

by COL Steven J. Adams

Achieving synchronization in an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) is challenging and requires quality repetitions. Maneuvering an ABCT in a country slightly larger than the commonwealth of Virginia with an estimated population of 25 million people, where the terrain is dominated by hills and mountains separated by narrow valleys, is a herculean task that requires its own discussion.

The mountain ranges of South Korea generally run north and south, creating highly restrictive maneuver corridors. Road networks run through the valleys and cross back and forth over rivers, requiring an extensive network of bridges along the route that may not be rated for the weight of heavy combat vehicles. This problem set posed by such terrain requires special consideration by ABCT staffs and commanders.

The ABCT is a combined-arms organization that is fully manned and equipped to conduct decisive action in all types of environments. Its role is to close with and destroy the enemy using fire and movement, to repel enemy attacks and to control land, populations and resources.<sup>1</sup> Mobility, protection and firepower are the ABCT's greatest strengths. To realize an ABCT's full potential, the commander must create shared understanding and effectively synchronize the brigade's operation across all warfighting functions. Synchronization is more complex when the terrain restricts movement and limits the commander's options. Key considerations for maneuvering the ABCT in restrictive terrain are: terrain management, reconnaissance, security, mission command, mobility, transitions and sustainment.

## Terrain management

Due to the incredible amount of terrain an ABCT occupies, it is imperative that planners carefully consider how to appropriately array forces on the battlefield. An ABCT has more than 4,000 Soldiers, 400 tracked vehicles and 800 wheeled vehicles. Even without allowing space between march units, an armored brigade with 100 meters between vehicles has a column length of more than 120 kilometers.

Brigades typically require at least two routes, which would reduce the column lengths to just 60 kilometers, but this is still incredibly long. Increasing the number of routes and reducing the distance between vehicles decreases the overall length of the formation. However, in restrictive terrain with limited routes, it is not hard to imagine the challenges that would ensue from the size of this formation. This is particularly apparent as the ABCT transitions from movement to maneuver at the appropriate time.

Planners must even consider routine tasks such as how the brigade uncoils from the assembly area, the time required to move and set in attack positions and the movement times from attack positions to the line of departure. What this highlights is the necessity to clearly think through the terrain management of the ABCT in time and space, especially when space is a premium. Terrain management must essentially become its own planning effort.

## Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance is a mission to obtain information about the activities and resources of an enemy or characteristics of a geographic area.<sup>2</sup> Restrictive terrain mandates dedicated reconnaissance assets to determine the best suited routes and key terrain for the ABCT. In an area with limited routes or specific water-crossing sites, the brigade must be able to employ reconnaissance assets forward of the main body to determine traffic-ability and classification of bridges, a skill all our scouts must practice. A true understanding of the operational environment, enabled by effective reconnaissance operations, is necessary for the commander to make sound decisions and effectively maneuver the force.

## Security

The ABCT must first adhere to the basic principle of "always secure yourself first."<sup>3</sup> Security is the most important priority of work and is a continuous process. Security operations are conducted to provide early and accurate

warning; provide reaction time and maneuver space; orient on the force or facility to be secured; perform continuous reconnaissance; and maintain enemy contact.<sup>4</sup> In an environment where enemy forces may hide in restrictive terrain, it is understandable that some of these forces may be bypassed by ground maneuver forces. This puts supply lines and softer targets within the formation at greater risk.

Regardless of the scenario, the ABCT must first ensure that security is in place and the team is arrayed to protect critical assets and decisively deal with any threat that dares present itself. The commander should strive to maneuver units into a position of relative advantage so the ABCT is always ready for a fight while it is still protecting its logistical assets.

## **Mission command**

“If you can’t talk, you can’t win.”<sup>5</sup> Extended distances and mountainous terrain both complicate the brigade’s ability to communicate and conduct command and control. Mission-command nodes with redundant forms of communication on the Upper and Lower Tactical Internet and a combination of line-of-sight and non-line-of-sight communications are all essential to the success of the ABCT. This must also include a well understood primary, alternate, contingency and emergency communications plan that ensures the correct information is transmitted to the right people.

The goal of this effective communication architecture is to convey a common operational picture and to provide the commander with relevant information at the right time to make sound decisions with respect to the friendly and enemy situation and the terrain. The staff plays an essential role in this process. The staff supports the commander in “understanding situations, making and implementing decisions, controlling operations, and assessing progress by providing timely and relevant information and analysis.”<sup>6</sup>

The commander, informed by the staff and subordinate commanders, drives the operations process and seeks to create situational understanding across the formation. This shared understanding enables flexibility and the synchronization of all warfighting functions to achieve the commander’s intent and accomplish the mission.

## **Mobility**

Mobility of the ABCT is a source of strength. However, restrictive terrain affords the enemy opportunities to degrade the mobility of the brigade in narrow passes, river-crossing sites or dense urban areas. With limited routes to maneuver the ABCT in these areas, mobility becomes critical for maintaining momentum. This should drive specific information requirements during planning about the terrain, routes, bridges and mobility assets to enable freedom of movement for the brigade.

The ABCT has robust breaching capabilities but is limited in terms of organic bridging capability. To successfully negotiate water obstacles, the ABCT requires augmentation of bridging assets. This focus on mobility is not new to the force. Mobility is generally the priority effort for engineers in armored units during offensive operations. Nevertheless, it’s worth spending time and effort on planning how the ABCT will conduct multiple water crossings and what assets they will need to do so.



**Figure 1. An M1A2 Abrams tank from Company B, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, conducts a situational-training exercise (STX) Nov. 13, 2017. Company B conducted platoon STX lanes to improve and hone skills in preparation for its upcoming gunnery qualification tables. (Photo by SGT Patrick Eakin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ABCT Public Affairs)**

## **Transitions**

Success not only equates to the BCT's ability to accomplish its assigned missions but to how well it transitions from one mission task to the next. Transitions require detailed planning and preparation to ensure the unit always maintains a position of advantage. The movement of ABCT forces routinely takes much longer than you would expect. So, if the team hasn't clearly planned for what's next, the brigade will lose valuable time and expend tremendous energy resetting the force for the next mission. The brigade will also lose momentum and miss opportunities to exploit the initiative gained by previous actions.

The brigade must plan for the transition between offensive and defensive tasks to allow time to reconstitute combat power and take care of critical sustainment operations to maintain its operational readiness. Aggressive leaders, ensuring the tasks are understood and supervised, make transitions work. They also seek every opportunity to transition back to the offense to gain and maintain the initiative.



**Figure 2. An M1A2 Abrams tank from Bravo Company, 1-9 Cavalry, fires its 120mm cannon during qualification Table XII at Rodriguez Live Fire Complex Aug. 4, 2017. (Photo by SGT Patrick Eakin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ABCT Public Affairs)**



**Figure 3. A 120mm round from an M1A2 Abrams tank impacts one of many targets during the qualification course at Rodriguez Live Fire Complex Aug. 4, 2017. (Photo by SGT Patrick Eakin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ABCT Public Affairs)**

## **Sustainment**

Sustaining the ABCT is not easily accomplishable. In addition to taking up lots of space, an ABCT consumes large amounts of supplies, particularly fuel, requiring a push every eight to 10 hours. The ABCT is also dependent on a continuous flow of maintenance repair parts to keep systems operational and in the fight. Long supply lines and congested routes complicate this process and may result in a loss of momentum.

Effective logistical support ensures freedom of action and extends operational reach until the unit can accomplish the mission. Retaining the initiative requires flexible plans and routine short halts for refueling operations and maintenance. Having two-way traffic available and secure lines of communication greatly enable operational success.

Throughout history armored formations have found themselves operating in complex restrictive terrain, and today's modern force is no different. Restrictive terrain may provide an adversary with a temporary opportunity to mitigate our decisive mobility and firepower, but an ABCT is expected to deploy, fight and win in any environment. Careful planning, preparation and quality repetitions under these conditions will set the unit up for victory. Carefully addressing each of the considerations laid out above will enable an ABCT to approach restrictive terrain with the same tenacity and speed for which it was designed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-96, **Brigade Combat Team**, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, Oct. 8, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> LTG Paul Funk, "Funk's Rules" (#1), June 2016.

<sup>4</sup> FM 3-96.

<sup>5</sup> "Funk's Rules" (#2).

<sup>6</sup> Field Manual 6-0, **Commander and Staff Organization and Operations**, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, May 5, 2014.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**FM** – field manual

**STX** – situational-training exercise