

Combined Arms and Tactics Division
UNITED STATES ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL
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Operations of the 5th Battalion, 16th Infantry
Regiment (1st Infantry Division) during breaching
operations of the Iraqi main defenses.

24-28 February, 1991

(OPERATION DESERT STORM)

Type of operation described: M1/M2 equipped mechanized Task
Force breaching prepared company positions in a desert
environment

Captain James M. Petro, Infantry
IOAC Class 5-91

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- A-3: Discussions with 1LT Jeff Smitherman, Executive Officer, Team Alpha, Task Force 2-34, 1st ID(M)

During OPERATION DESERT STORM, I was assigned to Bravo Company, 5th Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized) as executive officer and was part of the initial breach for VII CORPS, the relief of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment in the Battle of Norfolk, and the subsequent securing of the Safwan Airfield for the peace talks.

~~BACKGROUND~~

On 2 Aug 1990, Iraqi forces invaded its neighbor to the east, Kuwait, to secure oil reserves, refining capabilities, and Persian Gulf port facilities. A United Nations coalition, led by the United States, rejected Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait and demanded the immediate withdrawal of all forces from Kuwait. Iraq refused, and a build-up of America forces began in South West Asia (SWA) to prevent the invasion of Saudi Arabia and force the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

~~DEPLOYMENT~~

The Big Red One was alerted for deployment to South West Asia on 8 November 1989. The 5th Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, painted its 100+ vehicles with special Chemical Agent Resistant Coating (CARC) paint, using the division paint facility and a hasty paint shop built in a brigade motor pool. Ammunition for the Bradley Fighting Vehicle's 25mm gun, 7.62mm co-ax machine gun, and TOW missile system was issued and stored aboard the vehicles before movement to the division rail load site. The

vehicles were loaded in about six hours aboard flatcars for movement to the port at Galviston, Texas, ^P and shipment to Saudi Arabia.

Troops were issued desert uniforms and desert environment items in addition to receiving needed dental treatment and medical shots. Refresher training in NBC, air defense, combat lifesaver, and desert operations filled the few weeks prior to troop departure. An unexpected ^{spill over} 7-day leave during this period put a lot of pressure on commanders and individuals to perform even better under already stressful conditions, but saved many marriages and tied up many personal loose ends that would have caused trouble later.

As executive officer of Bravo Company, I was responsible for advance party operations in preparation to receive the company main body. I deployed with about 15 other Bravo Company infantryman early on the 27th of December 1990 from Forbes Airfield in Topeka, Kansas, and landed late on the 28th at Dahrain International Airport, Saudi Arabia.

PREPARATION FOR ATTACK

^{where?}
The Devil Ranger Battalion drew its Bradley Fighting Vehicles from the down loading ships and moved out along Tapline Road to TAA Roosevelt to build combat power and prepare for its primary mission: Breach the Iraqi defenses and open a lane for VII CORPS units to attack Iraqi Republican Guard units.

TAA Roosevelt was a division assembly area near the Wadi-Al-Batin, straddling Tapline road (Figure 1). As the 15 January 1991 United Nations deadline approached, tensions began to grow amongst the troops. On the afternoon of 13 January, a mission came over the radio: Bravo Company move as part of 5-16 Infantry to the southwest corner of TAA Roosevelt and set up a blocking position to protect the 1st Infantry Division's open flank from a possible Iraqi attack (Figure 1) (We were told that the Iraqis were planning a five armored division attack down the Wadi Al Batin to disrupt VII CORPS's building of combat power and to embarrass the United States, there by swaying media support away from the United States). ^{Source?}

The company commander and platoon leaders were doing a reconnaissance of other company assembly areas when the order came down from battalion and did not answer radio calls. I took charge and had the platoon sergeants break down our three day old camp and upload for combat. The soldiers worked at a feverish pace packing, loading, and preparing for a completely unexpected mission. Within 60 minutes, the vehicles were lined up and beginning to move south as the commander returned with the platoon leaders. Each linked up with their element and we continued without a pause. I was impressed with the company's speed, competence, and ability to perform without their primary leaders, a good omen for a unit with a trench clearing mission.

The Iraqi attack never came, but the American air attack did. At 0220 on 17 January 1991, we became aware of the air war with

the order to don protective mask in anticipation of an Iraqi chemical retaliation. Men moved quickly from a deep sleep when the word "Gas" ^{LS} ~~was~~ ^{SK} yelled. They understand what can save them from a death they cannot see. The "All Clear" was received about 45 minutes later, and the mask always stayed close afterwards.

The battalion task organized with the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, swapping two infantry company for two M1A1 equipped tank companies. Bravo Company task organized with Alpha Company, exchanging its 2nd Platoon for Alpha's 1st Platoon. With the addition of a Fire Support Team, a medic team, and a maintenance team, Bravo Team now began to train for its primary mission: open two lanes through the Iraqi obstacles and secure OBJECTIVE 2KB to allow the remainder of the brigade and CORPS to pass through.

~~The engineer battalion attached to the brigade built~~ replicas of the battalion objectives based on intelligence from the S-2. It included concertina wire, training mines, and the trench system we were to attack (Figure 3). The task force leaders assembled to wargame the initial plan (Figure 4). The task force would attack with Teams Delta and Bravo abreast, ^U company columns, to open two lanes in the obstacles. Team Charlie would deploy in a Support By Fire (SBF) position to the right of Team Bravo, providing suppressive fire from left to right on the objective. Alpha Team would follow Delta and Bravo through the lanes and set up a blocking position [↓] north of the trenches to prevent counterattack from a tank company.

DEVELOPING THE PLAN

To open the lanes, current U.S. Army technique was drastically modified. Although the Task Force planned for Support, Breach, and Secure missions, the breach method was completely different from training. Traditionally, a lane is blown in the mine field with MICLIC or cleared by hand with engineers, then engineers or infantrymen open the wire obstacle with grappling hooks or wire cutters. Instead, the Task Force used M1A1 tanks fitted with mine plows and mine rollers to quickly cut lanes.

Practicing on the engineer mock-up showed this technique to work very well. Instead of 30 minutes to several hours to open the obstacle, from plows down to plows up took only 2.5 to 3 minutes for a 400 meter deep obstacle. No one was exposed to enemy small arms fire or artillery since ^{the task} it was done completely buttoned up.

Once the lane was open, the next task was to clear three 500 meter trenches (Ill 3). Team A, with one infantry platoon, would take the northern 500 meter trench. Team Bravo, with two infantry platoons, would clear the two southern trenches. Three-man teams practiced trench clearing while ammunition was assembled to cover the requirement. The idea of putting men into the trenches did not sit well with the battalion commander, LTC Sidney F. Baker, Jr., so wargaming continued in the TOC and at the obstacle mock-up.

During one session at the mock-up, M9 ACEs followed the lead company through the lanes to push sand into the trenches, but troops still had to get into the trench and go toe-to-toe with other infantry man. I was standing with LTC Baker, the S-3, MAJ Brian Zahn, Team B Commander, Echo Company Commander, and several lieutenants when it was suggested to use the tank plows to fill in the trenches. By driving a tank on either side of the trench with the inboard blade down, a four foot trenchline would turn into a small mound of sand.

After a test proved the plows would work, a Bradley was added to the outer side of each tank to suppress down the trench while two followed the tanks to destroy anything missed by the lead ~~Bradleys~~ Bradleys and the plows. Having stood in the trench during a rehearsal, I know how terrifying 120 tons of tank with steel teeth bearing down on you at 8 mph feels.

Word of the trench filling plan was passed up to division, and it became the method for the division to clear the trenchline and minimize the exposure to troops. (Initial estimates of casualties for Task Force 5-16 for the mission was 750 soldiers!).

The plan was solidified and rehearsals continued. Squads worked on trench clearing in three man teams (just in case), and larger size elements were added until the brigade did a full-up rehearsal the first week of February, 1991.

MOVEMENT TO THE BERM

The Task Force moved up to the 20 foot high berm that designates the Saudi-Iraqi border on 16 February 1991 in a division formation, three brigades on line, and made final preparations to attack. While there, company teams rotated pulling watch from the berm to provide security from enemy reconnaissance and incursion (like Ra's al Khafji). "Berm Guard" provided not only a live ammunition practice, but occasional comic relief. Team Alpha spent ^{call me} 4 hours "Chasing" a cargo truck and dismount squad with mortars, 7.62mm coax, 25mm HE, and 125mm main gun rounds. No debris nor bodies were found the next morning. Team Bravo spotted a BMP at about 3000 meters, but a grounded-out TOW missile at 700 meters influenced the platoon leader NOT to shoot again and chance being the lieutenant who shot the ground twice! Ground Surveillance Radar attached to Delta company kept mistaking wild dogs for dismount troops, so the commander eliminated the confusion with .50 cal machine gun fire.

INITIATION OF THE GROUND ATTACK

The initiation of ground warfare was scheduled for 0530 on 21 February, 1991 (G-Day), but the Moscow peace initiative slid that back three days. On 24 February 1991, at 0538, Task Force 5-16 crossed through the berm and moved north to its assault position (Figure IV). For reasons unknown to me, the brigade held up in the assault formation for almost five hours. Sitting on a piece of high ground offered me once in lifetime view of armored

vehicles from horizon to horizon. I almost pitied the Iraqi commanders who could undoubtedly see this massive armor formation, but had no assets to stop it. It must have been a few long hours for them.

Companies transitioned into attack formation, an 11,000 round artillery prep was fired, and the lead tank dropped plows at 1535 hours.

The breach went according to rehearsal through the 600 or so meters of obstacles (there was no concertina wire), but not the clearing of the trenchline. As in two of the four rehearsals, the lead two tanks continued past the first trench and started on the northern trench (Alpha Team's objective). The lead tank/bradley group worked its way down the trench, firing two 125mm main gun rounds down the trench to get the Iraqi's attention. My APC came out of the lane and I saw the first trench had been missed. I decided the first trench still had to be cleared before the Iraqi's began firing north into the flanks and rear of the rest of Bravo Team. [The tank platoon sergeant's tank was fitted with the mine roller and was at the beginning of the northern trench uncoupling the roller.] I called him over to the southern trench and told him to parallel my APC down the trench using .50 cal machine guns to destroy anyone in the trenches. To my chagrin, he opened the hatch and began to load his machine gun. My gunner fired down the trench until the tank was ready and we proceeded down the trench using .50 cal machine to clear it until we caught up with the remainder of Bravo Team. The team

had completed clearing all three trenches while Delta Company screened north and Team Charlie suppressed the trench, occasionally shooting at us. Enemy prisoners were moved (by foot) back to the entrance of the lanes where an engineer unit staged a temporary brigade holding area. Around 2100 hours, the task force consolidated just north of the initial objective (Fig. IV).

At 0100 hours (25 Feb), a FRAGO was issued to continue the attack along AXIS JUPITER to destroy enemy on OBJ 12KB, the battalion command post. Team Charlie was the main effort with Alpha following Charlie and Bravo following Alpha. At 0500, the attack to expand the breach continued.

Team Charlie commander decided to accomplish his mission using a technique he described as "secure by fire". He instructed his men to shoot at every suspected position and anything that moved. In a completely hostile environment, this is acceptable, but to get to OBJ 12K, the Task Force had to cross back in front of the lanes opened 12 hours earlier, which were already being used to pass the 1st UK Division and support elements north. After the first few shots, the battalion commander quickly regained control of Team Charlie and guided the Task Force through the congested area and on to AXIS JUPITER. Once clear of the lanes, Team Charlie resumed the attack.

Little resistance was found on 12KB, which can be attributed to the intense artillery prep. Burning vehicles littered the area along with several DPICM fields. My M113 ran over a

bomblet, cracking a track shoe which broke at the next turn. Throwing track in a minefield is not fun; fixing it there was even less fun.

CHANGE OF MISSION

Initial casualty estimates had the division combat ineffective at this point, thus the CORPS reserve mission. But Task Force 5-16's ^{three} 3 casualties were indicative of the success of the division and late on 25 February, it went from CORPS reserve to being ordered to move 100 miles N-NE to assume a blocking position against withdrawing Iraqi units.

To set the stage for the division move, the task forces were positioned at the northern portion of PL New Jersey (Fig IV). It was a 15km movement north for Team Bravo, and my commander decided to send out a quartering party to secure the area prior to the rest of the team arriving (this is normally only done when setting up a defense, not on the attack). As the executive officer, this was my responsibility, and I departed at 1700 hours with a tank and two Bradleys in trail.

By this time, the sun had set, the cloud cover lowered, and a light rain began to fall. About five kilometers into the movement, we encountered a unit's trains element who were not suppose to be there, and we had to bypass them. As we moved east, the satellite coverage for the Global Position System (GPS) went into a "down" window, turning my #2900 Magellan into a paperweight. It was dark, rainy, with visibility at 200 meters

so I jumped off my APC to use a compass to get us back on course.

I continued what I thought was another 500 meters (it was really about 1500 meters) and headed north. We trudged along what seemed a crawl, looking in mist to avoid Iraqi forces. At one point, we passed a berm that revealed a tank shape I think was an abandoned T-62. He had us dead to rights, and we moved passed him hoping he was abandoned. About nine kilometers from the new staging area, the GPS regained satellite coverage, and I discovered how lost I really had been.

We continued north for what seemed an eternity. The tank in my group ran over a bomblet with its right track and the already tense gunner yelled over the radio "They're shooting at us, they're shooting at us", and swung the turret to the right. What he saw was many tanks swinging their turrets towards us. I prayed it was TF 2-34 moving into position (and not retreating Iraqis) and yelled over the radio "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!". I don't know what kept him from firing, but I knew if he let a round fly, many tanks would return fire. That few seconds was the loneliest, scariest time in the entire 100 hour war. I thought I was going to die in the desert, in the middle of nowhere, without the enemy in sight.

We pulled into the new staging area at 2135 hours to find the rest of team Bravo already there. The only redeeming ^{event find} factor ^{only} word happened when we pulled up to the lead vehicle in Bravo's column, removing some doubt from the soldiers' eyes that this lieutenant was lost!

At 2330, we refueled the tank platoon (the support platoon had positioned the LRP adjacent to a minefield, which made for another exciting trip in the rain) and at 0530, we moved north. We encountered rain and two sand storms in the next 100 miles of Iraq, but no Iraqis. We had penetrated the first defensive belt and were now in unoccupied territory. We stopped around 1600 hours and set up a blocking position to the northeast to stop retreating Republican Guards units.

BATTLE OF NORFOLK

At 1715, while in the midst of refuelling, a net call came over the radio: relieve the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) who were in a heated battle with a retreating Republican Guard Division. At 1800, the battalion moved out, five Bradleys abreast, to link up with the 2nd ACR. As the 40 km shortened between the 2nd ACR and the Devil Ranger Battalion, word came down to pick up the pace; the 2nd ACR was running out of fuel, but not targets. On a dark, overcast night, it sped faster and faster across enemy territory, doubling the normal daylight movement speed for a mechanized task force. When it reached the battle hand off point, the column was moving 38 km per hour. The tank heavy and tank pure battalions of the brigade led the attack while Task Force 5-16 followed behind to clean up any by-passed elements and dismounts (Fig VI). Vehicles exploded in all directions as the brigade pressed onward through the cornered Guard Division. Throughout the night, Iraqi tanks, BMPs, and

trucks were picked off by an enemy they could not see, nor kill when found. An American Bradley was hit when TF 1-34 and 2-34 drifted apart, but the scout screen did not. ^{> unclear, restate} The 1-34 Armor scout platoon leader's vehicle was initially hit by a RPG, then a M1 main gun round. When the sun rose, the task force we had reached OBJ NORFOLK, and "Fright Night" was history.

We continued north east on the 27th, heading for Basra. At 0732 on the 28th of February, 1991, word came down: At 0800 hours, a cease fire was in effect. We had won.

SECURE THE PEACE TALKS

A new mission came down for the 5th Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment. It was OPCON to 2nd Brigade and would move north to a little town called Safwan and secure the area for the peace talks. It was very tense for a few hours because a Republican Guard Division commander did not want to give up the area, but Colonel Moreno gave him an ultimatum: be out in 90 minutes or be decimated like the rest of the Iraqi Army. ^{Wagel} They complied, and it became our piece of land without a shot fired.

The 4th Battalion, 37th Armor, cleared the airfield to be used for the peace talks, while platoons from Bravo and Charlie companies cleared the large hill overlooking the site (Fig VII). I was in charge of this operation and, except for a few hiding, hungry troops, found the electronic collection station on top of the hill to have been visited by the United States Air Force. There were a lot of large holes and debris.

REDEPLOYMENT

The Battalion spent 8-10 days in Safwan, then moved back to the Iraq-Kuwait border for 10 days. It moved due west back into Iraq to take up XVIII Airborne CORPS positions so it could return to the states. In late March, the division moved back into Saudi Arabia and began redeployment on 1 May 1991. I landed at Forbes Field in Topeka, Kansas, on 2 Mar^P 1991.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Never consolidate on the objective. During the initial breach, TF 5-16 consolidated very close to the trenches it had just cleared. If the Iraqis had any artillery capability, they could have hit us very easily.
2. Reconnaissance of the LRP area is critical. Setting up a release point in a clear area is necessary, but the routes in must also be clear. Just because the LRP wasn't in the minefield doesn't mean someone wouldn't come from the direction it covered.
3. Intelligence and photography were critical to the synchronization of the brigade attack. Figure IV shows the task force plan and the GPS locations during the battle. The trenches were templated ~~exactly~~ correctly, allowing us to initiate the breach at the best point of the defense; the end of the trenchline.
4. Rehearsals are critical when synchronizing a close, fast moving attack. We practiced at platoon, then team, then task force, and finally twice at brigade. Everyone knew their job and

had practiced it at least once. The people executing it (lieutenants and sergeants) had rehearsed it at least six times.

5. Rehearse the worst case scenario. Even though the rehearsals showed the tank plows would work exceptionally well, three-man teams continued to practice clearing the trenches by getting in them and using M-16s and hand grenades.

6. Let you people do their jobs. The task force emphasized a decentralized command philosophy that allowed junior leaders and support leaders to do their preparing without someone watching over their shoulder 24 hours a day. Daily meetings kept information flowing and difficult tasks were accomplished efficiently and correctly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G. G. C.', with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the bottom of the signature.