

From the Screen

The Screen In-Depth

by 1LT Caleb B. Welch

One of the first things I had to do as a new platoon leader was participate in a tactical-decision exercise that my squadron commander was facilitating to prepare platoon leaders for an upcoming Joint Readiness Training Center rotation. I was fresh out of the Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course (ABOLC) and the Scout Leader's Course (SLC) at Fort Benning, GA, and I was looking forward to applying what I had learned.

My troop commander brought in all the platoon leaders and briefed an operations order, all of which made sense until he briefed the locations of each platoon arrayed in a troop screen. My troop commander explained that he wanted my platoon to "screen in-depth" along a certain route, but his graphics indicated he wanted us arrayed in what I would have described as a good ol' fashioned stationary screen.

At SLC I was taught that a screen in-depth was a very specific way to conduct a screen. Therefore I was under the impression that setting up a screen in-depth meant emplacing observation points (OPs) to conduct a platoon or troop internal reconnaissance handover (RHO) and pass targets into an engagement area to be destroyed.

I was honestly a little confused after the brief, so I approached my commander and asked him to clarify how he wanted me to orient my platoon in the screen. He clearly thought his new platoon leader was very dumb as he tried in vain to explain the orientation of a screen to the stupidest person he had ever met.

Despite being confident that my instructors at SLC had taught me the doctrinally correct way to establish a screen in-depth, I quickly realized the definition I learned was not shared by all cavalry officers. Cavalry leaders can generally agree that a screen in-depth has something to do with positioning OPs at varying distances between the frontline trace and rear boundary of the platoon, but they rarely articulate their definition in similar language.

To make matters worse, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.98, *Scout Platoon*, does not have a clear definition for a screen in-depth. The result is that cavalry leaders often use the term "screen in-depth" so liberally that the term no longer has any meaning. For example, if every screen is a screen in-depth, then isn't a screen in-depth just a regular screen?

Thankfully my troop commander was a good sport about the whole misunderstanding and didn't lose his patience with me. Eventually I opened up *Scout Platoon* in his office, and I discovered that doctrine provided no clear guidance one way or another. Both of us were able to see each other's understanding of what constituted a screen in-depth reflected in the language of ATP 3-20.98.

The previous vignette illustrates the lack of unity among cavalry leaders on the definition of a screen in-depth and shows that a lack of specificity ultimately leads to confusion. My goal is to provide a summary of platoon- and troop-level doctrine for the term "screen in-depth," highlight discrepancies and inadequacies in its definition, and discuss possible alternatives that would clarify its meaning.

What doctrine says

To its credit, ATP 3-20.98 dedicates an entire paragraph to discussing depth, and its importance when planning and conducting security operations. Unfortunately, it also fails to clarify the difference between incorporating depth into a screen and planning a screen in-depth. Ultimately depth is meant to be a characteristic incorporated into all screens.

According to *Scout Platoon*, "Scout platoons plan screens in-depth. Depth prevents the threat from easily identifying and penetrating the screen, prevents gaps from occurring when [OPs] displace, allows platoons to gain and maintain enemy contact, and facilitates the destruction of enemy reconnaissance elements without compromising tasks" (Paragraph 4-23). Incorporating depth into a screen prevents the enemy from easily pinpointing the location of friendly screens, protects screens from enemy indirect fires and allows OPs to displace

without compromising the integrity of the screen. As a result, depth should be incorporated as a planning consideration into all screens.

Scout Platoon Paragraphs 4-30 and 4-31 under subhead “Depth” provide an excellent discussion of the importance of depth and potential techniques for platoon leaders to achieve depth in their screens. “Scout platoon leaders assign section boundaries that allow multiple [OPs] to establish a screen and create depth within a screen [Figure 1]. Whenever possible, [OPs] should be within supporting distance of each other to enhance security through mutual support and to enable RHO between observation posts.”

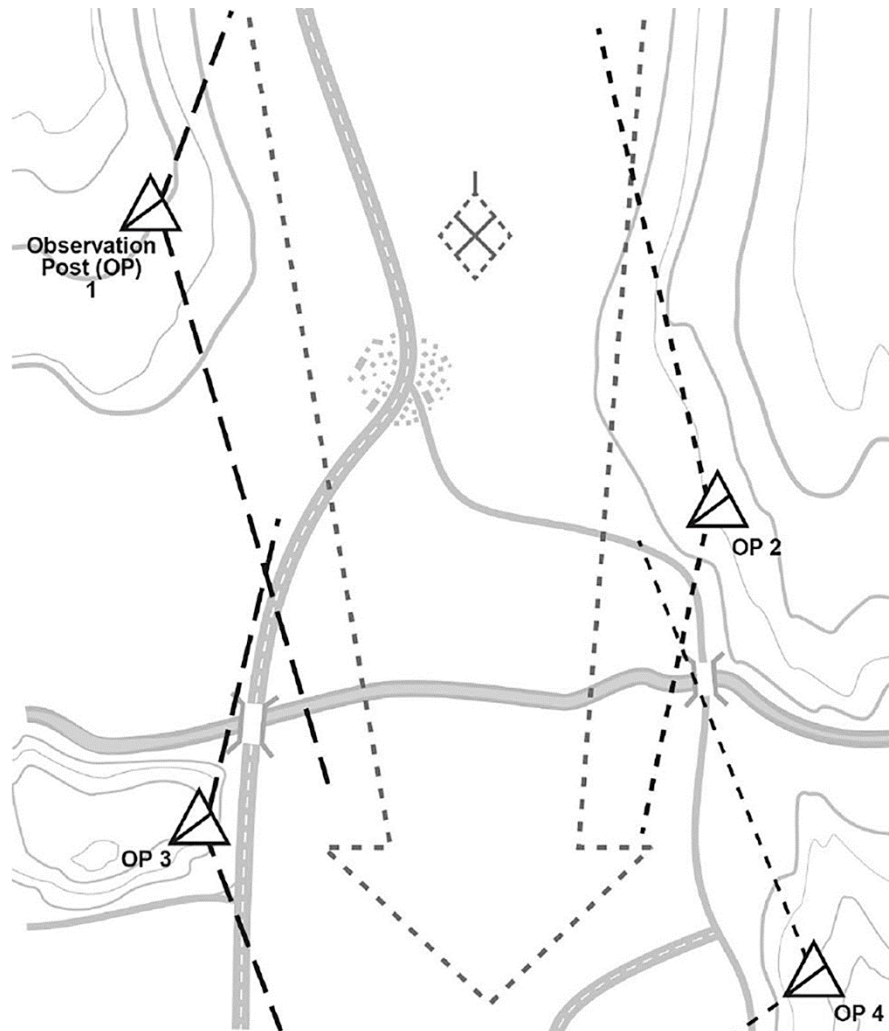


Figure 1. In-depth positioning of OPs. (Adapted from Figure 4-3, ATP 3-20.98, Scout Platoon)

While this information is helpful, it ultimately fails to describe in concrete terms how to establish a screen in-depth. The definition is supported by graphics, which generally seem to cause more confusion than clarity.

The most obvious issue with Figure 4-3 in ATP 3-20.98 is that leaders have a hard time imagining implementing this technique into their screen because of the lack of graphic-control measures. If Figure 4-3 shows the enemy moving into an engagement area, the OPs passing the target are in danger of committing fratricide. The risks associated with setting up a screen in this way are too high to be considered a useful technique and a more concrete, less theoretical example would be helpful.

The biggest shortcoming with **Scout Platoon's** definition of a screen in-depth is that it fails to differentiate the difference between incorporating depth into a screen and establishing a screen in-depth. The reader is left with a

vague idea of the importance of incorporating depth into the screen but no real concrete idea of the variety of techniques that can be used to achieve depth within a screen.

Proposed definition

Undoubtedly one of the strengths of **Scout Platoon**, and ultimately any successful Army doctrine, is its flexibility. Some cavalry leaders may argue that differentiating between depth as a characteristic of all screens and a screen in-depth as a technique will ultimately reduce this flexibility and potentially restrict cavalry leaders from applying creative solutions to the unique challenges presented by mission variables: mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, time and civil considerations.

In reality, providing a clear definition for a screen in-depth will provide another tool for scout-platoon leaders to consider when planning security missions. A clear definition of a screen in-depth will facilitate creative problem-solving and provide another example for leaders to consider when facing the unique challenges presented by the operational environment.

Scout-platoon leaders would benefit from a potential definition for a screen in-depth such as the following: “A screen in-depth is a technique used by scout-platoon leaders that allows one element of the screen to pass enemy contact to another element without engaging or displacing by conducting a platoon internal RHO. A screen in-depth is normally achieved by arraying OPs parallel to the enemy’s expected avenue of approach. This technique allows the scout platoon to set up engagement areas with a greater chance of achieving flank shots and facilitates passing targets through the assigned element’s area of operations.”

Most of the first sentence is taken directly from **Scout Platoon**, Paragraph 4-30. Most of the raw material needed to define a screen in-depth can be found in the pages of this publication; it is a matter of separating the explanations of the importance of depth from the descriptions of screens in-depth.

More graphics will undoubtedly aid readers as they attempt to picture the concept of a screen in-depth as it would appear on an operations overlay. It is important that two sets of graphics are used to distinguish a screen in-depth from a stationary screen with depth incorporated. Figure 2 clearly illustrates that a screen in-depth is oriented parallel to the enemy’s most likely avenue of approach, with the potential for OPs to pass a target into an engagement area near OPs 1 and 2.

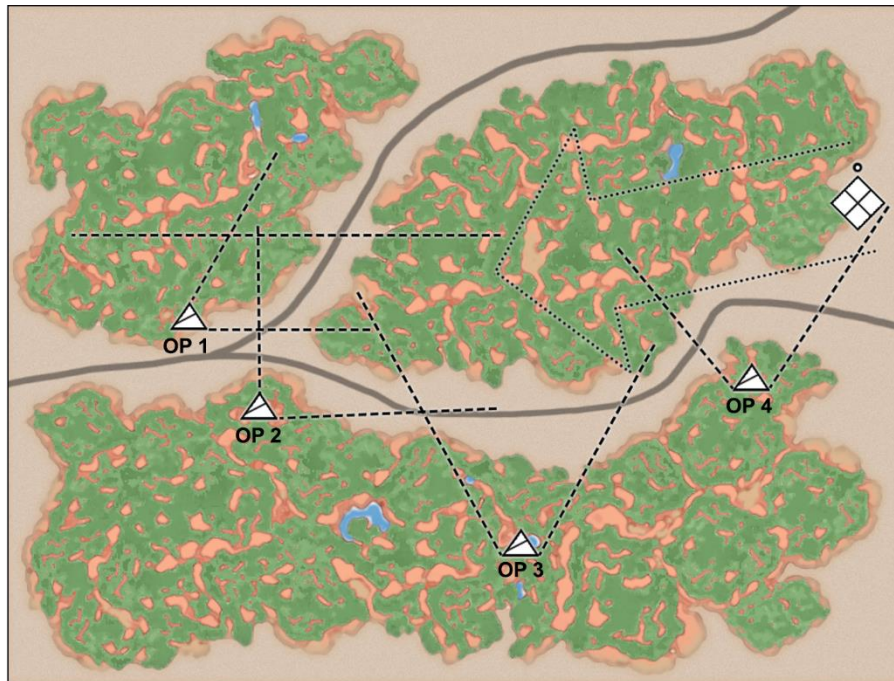


Figure 2. Alternate graphics to depict in-depth positioning of OPs. (Based on maps created by the author)

Figure 3 is equally important in that it demonstrates 1) the necessity of incorporating depth to best use the terrain available and avoid compromising OP locations; and 2) passing targets into an engagement area is often impractical and unnecessary when arrayed in a stationary screen.

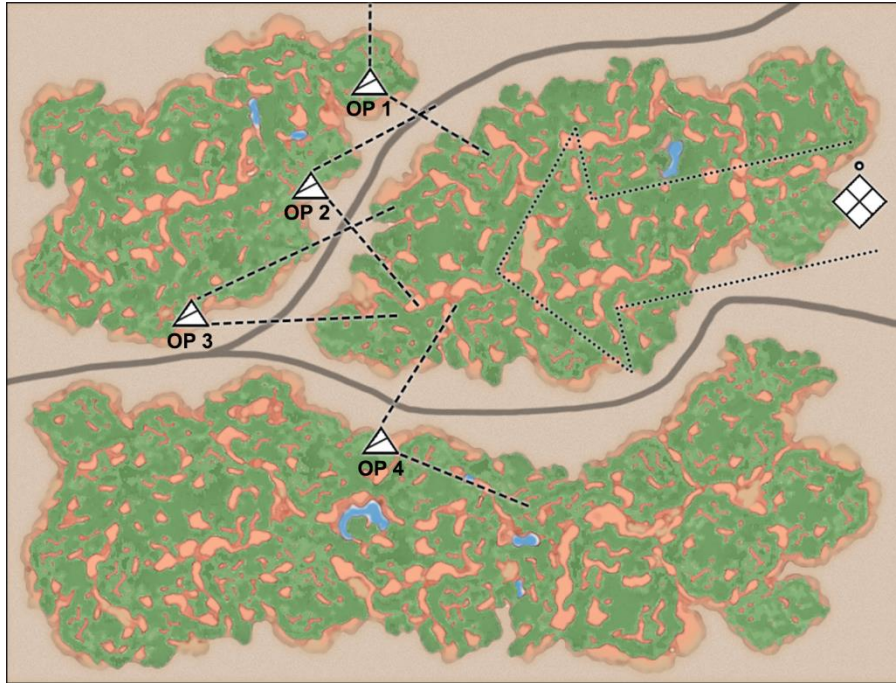


Figure 3. Alternate graphics to depict a stationary screen with depth. (Based on maps created by the author)

Conclusion

By providing a clear definition of a screen in-depth and graphics that illustrate its unique capabilities, cavalry leaders can provide platoon-level leadership another tool to assist in planning and executing security operations. The unique mission of cavalry organizations requires flexible and clear doctrine that can be used as a framework to guide leaders as they plan missions.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABOLC – Armor Basic Officer Leader's Course

ATP – Army techniques publication

OP – observation post

RHO – reconnaissance handover

SLC – Scout Leader's Course