Company Mortars at JRTC

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Recent observations of company-level employment of mortars and indirect fire assets at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, LA, have shown that company commanders and platoon leaders fail to deliberately integrate mortars into their plans. Observer-coach-trainers (OCTs) noted that company commanders training at JRTC often failed to integrate indirect fires into their troop leading procedures from the beginning of planning, which resulted in an inability to mass fires on the defense, a loss of tempo on the offense, as well as overexposure of their indirect fire assets to enemy forces.

When employed effectively, a company's organic 60mm mortar squad provides timely and accurate fires capable of disrupting or suppressing an enemy. When not utilized in a tactically sound manner, a mortar system becomes yet another direct fire weapon system that adds little to the achievement of the mission. On many occasions, indirect fires become an afterthought to troop leading procedures; instead of being integrated into a plan from the beginning, the maneuver plan is crafted first and only then are any kind of fires laid on targets.

In order to achieve success at JRTC and beyond, it is necessary to not only understand the capabilities of the weapon systems organic to an infantry company but also know how to best employ these systems and ensure their survival. The primary role of mortars, according to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.90, *Tactical Employment of Mortars*, is to provide a maneuver commander with immediately available, responsive, and both lethal and nonlethal indirect fires. This article is intended to address common failures of integrating mortars in an operation's planning process.

Integrate Indirect Fires into the Plan from the Beginning

In a defense, mortars are used to support defensive operations and to suppress or destroy enemy-supporting weapons, disrupt enemy troop concentrations, destroy an enemy conducting close dismounted assaults, and to regain the initiative, according to ATP 3-21.90. A well-thought-out engagement area that incorporates obstacles and direct fire weapon systems is less effective if it does not also integrate

Indirect fire Infantrymen conduct a direct alignment fire mission during qualification tables at Fort Bragg, NC, in preparation for a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation.

Photos courtesy of author

indirect fires as well as provide multiple dilemmas to the enemy. OCTs at JRTC have observed this failure on numerous occasions across a wide variety of rotational training units (RTUs). On one such defensive occasion, a company commander, who had directed the emplacement of each of his company positions, cut off his organic 60mm mortars due to the proximity of his obstacle belt to friendly firing positions. Due to this decision, he was unable to bring his own indirect assets into the fight as his obstacle was within the risk estimate distance of an anti-tank weapon position. Integrating indirect fires into the plan from the beginning would have solved this issue and prevented the company from having an ineffective defense that ultimately resulted in the entire company being overrun.

A 60mm mortar base plate digs into the ground due to poor soil conditions.

Synchronizing indirect fires with obstacles and direct fire weapon systems is crucial to gaining fire superiority over a near-peer threat as seen at JRTC. By incorporating both direct fire and indirect fire systems as well as a well-thought-out obstacle, you can present an enemy with multiple problems simultaneously that will result in a loss of tempo for their attack. While a 60mm mortar is incapable of destroying enemy armored formations, it can be very effective at disrupting dismounts as they attempt to lead their vehicles around a well-planned obstacle.

Successful employment has also been observed at JRTC, such as a company commander employing his 60mm mortars for a predetermined final protective fire (FPF) to protect a planned withdrawal. His company had been tasked to destroy enemy engineer assets prior to the main battalion defense and then withdraw to preserve combat power. After accomplishing his task, he called for fire using his 60mm mortars on the enemy dismounts that were moving towards his position. These fires dissuaded the enemy from pursuing his company and he successfully withdrew. The planned FPF achieved its intended purpose and allowed his company to preserve combat power in accordance with his battalion's defense plan.

In the offense, company mortars can be used to set the conditions for the assault and provide suppression for maneuvering forces. Company-level mortars are especially useful in providing close supporting fires for the assault. In theory, every assault should incorporate planned fires on an objective, with multiple firing points as needed to support maneuvering forces. In practice at JRTC, this is not what OCTs observed; companies assaulted objectives without planned indirect support, using their mortars in handheld mode to attack targets of opportunity. This reliance on handheld fires ultimately stems from not incorporating the indirect fires into the plan from the beginning. According to OCTs, some of the best examples of indirect fire employment in the offense were from the British troops training at JRTC alongside American forces. In every single assault, they had preplanned targets before, on, and after each objective as well as echelonment of fires, allowing continuous suppression of the objective while they maneuvered in the assault. This level of planning is what is supposed to be done on the offensive yet oftentimes is overlooked or minimized in favor of direct fire engagements.

Select Appropriate Mortar-Firing Positions

As a company commander, you are ultimately responsible for the tactical employment of your mortar section, the use of supporting indirect fire, and local security for the mortar section. Too often indirect fire Infantrymen are told to establish a mortar firing position (MFP) in the middle of a large helicopter landing zone (HLZ) or other open area due to a lack of understanding of the specific need for type of mask clearance and overhead clearance to fire. OCTs have seen many company and even battalion MFPs that needlessly exposed mortars to risk or were simply unsuitable for supporting their element with indirect fires. The most important factor for MFP selection is mission accomplishment. It is rather hard to accomplish the mission when enemy aerial reconnaissance spots the MFP in the middle of a clearing and calls in its own indirect fire missions on friendly forces.

When selecting a site for your mortars to occupy, look for positions in defilade from the objective. This will provide the mortar squad with mask from direct fires from enemy positions and provide protection from field guns and low-angle howitzer fire. The squad leader will check overhead clearance and mask clearance before emplacing the guns and can clear obstructions if necessary. Once a protected MFP has been

established, effort must be taken in order to improve survival. This is accomplished through the construction of a ground-mounted, dug-in mortar position. Construction of this mortar pit is undertaken in three stages, and if dug by hand can result in an exhausted mortar crew. If time and resources allow, allocate engineer dig assets to the construction of a mortar firing pit. A mortar crew firing from defilade in a protected mortar pit can continue supporting the maneuver forces even when receiving direct and indirect fires from the enemy. If no engineer assets are available to assist in digging a mortar pit, consider assigning personnel as METT-TC (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations) dictate to help dig in the mortar firing point to prevent exhaustion of your indirect fire team.

In addition to defilade, consideration must be made to distance and routes that have been selected to the objective. Prior to movement, establish mortars in a location that provides one-half to two-thirds maximum range forward of the line of departure and move them forward as needed. With proper planning, a company mortar team can support the company through all phases of an operation. Mortar squad leaders should be able to assist in appropriate site selection and ranges for their ammunition.

The optimal method of employing fires at JRTC and beyond is through preplanned fires from a protected MFP. Resorting to direct alignment or direct lay should only be done when one does not have the opportunity to establish a proper MFP as conducting either of these types of missions places your indirect fire assets at much greater risk. If your indirect fire Infantrymen can see the enemy, the enemy can see your mortars and will likely employ whatever means it has available to suppress or destroy your indirect fire capabilities. When absolutely necessary, choose direct alignment over direct lay to minimize exposure of friendly forces. Neither of these methods should be relied on as a first resort, however. The use of preplanned targets both increases the effectiveness of your indirect fires as well as keeps the Soldiers in your command safe to continue the fight.

Educate Your Lieutenants and NCOs

The level of formal education on indirect fire systems gained from institutional instruction at the Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course (IBOLC) and Maneuver Captains Career Course (MCCC) is lacking in the hands-on department, which results in leaders who do not have the experience and knowledge to actually employ these systems effectively. There is a wide differential in knowledge obtained from sitting through a PowerPoint presentation as opposed to observing firsthand the processes and effects of an indirect weapon system. One way to achieve this is through the use of walk-and-shoot ranges, allowing subordinates to grow accustomed to calling for fire and observing the effects of a real fire mission. As a company commander, you can ensure that the junior officers within your formation are better familiarized with mortar systems and employment. Send your platoon leaders to a mortar range during the mortar tables to observe the process of a call for fire under live-fire conditions. Platoon leaders who understand the employment of mortars will be able to assist in integrating mortars in company plans and will result in fewer burdens placed on you as a company commander.

Conclusion

Success at JRTC and beyond means knowing and effectively employing your company's organic and available assets. Integrating indirect fires into the plan from the beginning of an operation results in synchronized and effective fires. Identifying suitable firing points results in increased survivability for company mortars, while proper training and education in garrison allows for full utilization of company assets. Ultimately, the successful implementation of mortars relies on integrating them into your plan from the beginning rather than being purely reactionary with your systems.

Indirect fire Infantrymen teach junior leaders about the 60mm mortar system.

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