

Applied Combined-Arms Maneuver at Company Level

by 1LT James T. Casey

As a tank-platoon leader and executive officer in 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), I've had the opportunity to observe first-hand how 20 separate brigade combat teams (BCT) (not including my own) operate in the decisive-action (DA) training environment. During these 20 National Training Center (NTC) rotations, I think I've seen a representative sampling of the Army and the current state of its implemented doctrine. Make no mistake, each BCT has strengths and weaknesses, and they're all formidable units. What I see, however, leads me to think that, as maneuver leaders, we are failing to properly implement combined-arms maneuver (CAM), especially at the company-grade-officer level.

Most officers seem to believe that maneuver warfare is just a term used to describe the process of "maneuvering" around a battlefield to seize key terrain and destroy more of the enemy's combat power than he destroys of yours.¹ An extension of this belief is that whoever has the highest favorable kill ratio wins the battle and therefore defeats his opponent. "Destroy" and "defeat," however, are only nominally similar. Ordering a unit to destroy another implies you're willfully choosing attrition as opposed to using maneuver to defeat your enemy.

To avoid confusion and emphasize my point, the Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, **Operational Terms and Military Symbols**, definition of *destroy* is "a tactical mission task that physically renders an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted" and *defeat* is "a tactical mission task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or *the will to fight*."² In fact, he who relies upon attrition to defeat his enemy has only an elementary understanding of maneuver warfare. If the U.S. Army, or any element thereof, decides attrition is the primary means of defeating a near-peer threat in a DA environment, we'll squander away our inherent advantages and needlessly risk lives and defeat. Therefore, deciding to "destroy" your enemy instead of applying true maneuver doctrine is akin to setting two expert heavyweight boxers in a ring and letting them whale on each other for 12 rounds; your pick may win, but he may not.

Creating unsolvable problem

CAM is the process of seizing the initiative by creating an unsolvable problem set for the enemy based on an analysis of both friendly and enemy strengths and vulnerabilities. By identifying your own strengths, you can plan how to leverage these against your opponent's identified vulnerabilities. By identifying your own vulnerabilities, you can consciously determine how best to minimize exposure of these to your enemy while avoiding the enemy's strengths or advantages.

Leveraging your own strengths against an enemy's perceived critical vulnerability is central to planning your own course of action (CoA). Your evaluation of friendly and enemy strengths and vulnerabilities leads to selection of the decisive point of the operation. This is how you plan to leverage a defeat mechanism to exploit the enemy's vulnerabilities and thereby seize the initiative.³ This starkly contrasts with the attrition-warfare approach to combat, which relies on overwhelming firepower and massing combat power in an attempt to destroy your enemy. In a near-peer conflict, both combatants will possess comparable capability to kill and destroy one another, therefore attrition does not give either side a tactical advantage.

I think one of the most important parts of planning an operation, but somehow one of the least emphasized, is the situation paragraph of an operations order. It's easily the least sexy, so generally it receives little attention, especially in the era of the pervasive concept of the operation. The friendly and enemy situations, however, are critical to creating a common operating picture (COP) at all echelons. Given that maneuver leaders in the Army have similar training, they make similar decisions if the necessary information is accessible. If the task and purpose happen to change suddenly, they'll still be making informed decisions in the context of a bigger picture.

If the intelligence officer doesn't offer a detailed capability analysis by weapon and vehicle type, vis-à-vis enemy formation types in the operational environment (OE), then company-grade leaders should prepare their own. By tailoring the four-step intelligence preparation of the battlefield process to what a company is likely to encounter, the company plan will gain valuable insight and result in a better-prepared fighting force.

I think the best way to analyze this at any level is by warfighting function (Wff). A company's most important areas are:

- **Fires Wff** – weapon systems' range, optics (i.e., thermal/low-light capabilities), munitions and the level of armor they're likely able to penetrate;
- **Maneuver Wff** – vehicle types and their level of mobility across your OE;
- **Protection Wff** – ability to withstand your weapon systems and the ability to carry infantry;
- **Mission-command Wff** – the combat effectiveness of a unit if its commanding officer or other key leader becomes a casualty and how the enemy orders' process affects decision-making and adaptation while in contact.

Once this is accomplished for both friendly (organic and attached company assets, adjacent organic battalion assets and available brigade assets) and enemy forces, you finish by viewing these capabilities in the context of the enemy's likely objective and desired endstate. From here, it's a relatively simple task of assessing the enemy's likely CoA. Where and how will the enemy employ tanks and infantry? Will their success require engineers? Where, when and for what endstate will they employ their close-combat attack (CCA)/close air support/indirect fire (IDF)?

Having accomplished this, you should now have a broad understanding of what your opponent's scheme of maneuver will be; specifics and timeline aren't necessary as long as you understand the likely sequence of events that will unfold. Armed with this knowledge of the enemy's capabilities, it's easier to determine how to exploit their vulnerabilities through the use of a decisive point (DP) that leverages a defeat mechanism.

Destroy or defeat?

I mentioned earlier that "destroying" your enemy is not necessarily the best way to "defeat" him. Defeat mechanisms are defined in ADRP 3-0, **Unified Land Operations**, as "the method through which friendly forces accomplish their mission against enemy opposition." While this is a fairly broad and inclusive definition, it essentially lists four methods for neutralizing an adversary: destroy, dislocate, disintegrate and isolate. In short, the latter three are ways to defeat your enemy without having to destroy every vehicle or dismounted soldier. Selecting which to use to create your DP depends on your company's tactical task. We'll cover an example of how to select a defeat mechanism momentarily.

Going back to the boxing analogy, we'll replace one of our champion boxers with a Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) fighter. The boxer, comfortable on his feet, means to beat his opponent by keeping him at arm's length and punching him. As long as the boxer is on his feet with enough space to build full momentum in his swing, he has an inherent advantage. The BJJ fighter mitigates the boxer's advantage by bringing the fight to the ground. This is an example of the "dislocate" mechanism; by moving the boxer from his comfort zone, he breaks the boxer's decision-cycle paradigm. The boxer, who trains on his feet, can't adequately fight back once he leaves the condition in which he planned to fight. The BJJ fighter's DP is to close the distance to the boxer, bring the fight to the ground and gain a dominant position. Once on the ground, the BJJ fighter has the advantage; his technique practices grappling on the ground to control his opponent and control the tempo to force the boxer into an unfamiliar defensive posture. He has seized the initiative, and now the boxer has to react.

Selecting the DP is a crucial part of the commander's plan because the DP helps create a COP for subordinates; however, I don't think commanders understand how to choose or name a DP. The most common DP I hear during opords is something like "the DP of our operation is the destruction of two tank platoons. This is decisive because it will mean that we have more combat power than the enemy." The problem is this isn't a DP of an operation, it's a key task, or maybe an objective to be met; it's a measure of success. A DP is something that will substantially tip the scales in your favor; it's something that, if you accomplish it, should guarantee that you defeat your enemy.

Accomplishing the DP allows you to seize the initiative during an engagement, makes your enemy react to your tempo and (ideally) uses your strengths to attack or create a critical vulnerability in the enemy, thereby creating a defeat mechanism in your engagement. The achievement of the DP, whereby you catch or push your adversary off-balance and exploit the situation, while minimizing your own vulnerability, is the essence of maneuver warfare.

The DP is the same for all subordinate units. If a company identifies and names a DP, all platoons in that company have the same DP. In this way, all tank commanders and squad leaders know that no matter what their task is

during the mission, it supports the DP for the company. This is why it's so important to conduct a thorough threat/friendly capability analysis.

The COP is vital information for every leader in the formation because when the battle starts to unfold and the enemy doesn't act in the way you initially thought he might, subordinate leaders can take initiative while still supporting the company's DP. And, when leaders become incapacitated, radios stop working or the enemy is not cooperating, the COP and a DP can guide rapid decision-making to seize and retain the initiative at all levels of leadership.

DP key

Planning the DP of an operation involves creating an unsolvable problem for your adversary. I'll illustrate with an example. Figure 1 shows the CoA sketch of a previous engagement at NTC. A company-team-plus (CO/TM (+)) has established a hasty defense on a hill, overlooking a high-speed avenue of approach, which is your battalion's planned axis of advance. Your company's task and purpose is to seize the John Wayne Foothills to prevent massing of fires against your battalion's decisive operation. Knowing the enemy's main defense is four to seven kilometers south of the John Wayne Foothills, we can guess the enemy's task is probably to disrupt your battalion's advance south along the avenue of approach to prevent massing of combat power against their own decisive operation.

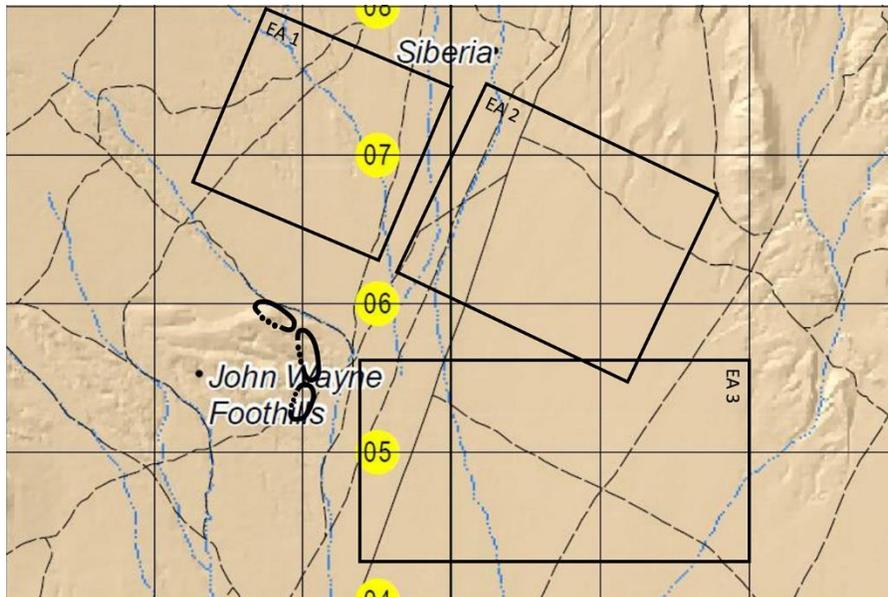


Figure 1. CoA sketch of an NTC engagement.

We can make a few more assumptions at this point as well:

- A CO/TM (+) will have one to two mechanized-infantry platoons and one to two tank platoons;
- Its desired endstate is to disrupt forces traveling along Route Budweiser; and
- The CO/TM will probably be arrayed in a linear battle position (BP) on the east side of the John Wayne Foothills oriented east toward the avenue of approach.

The obvious place to arrange BPs is on the east side of the hill with a main engagement area (EA) centered on the high-speed avenue of approach. It also makes sense to have an EA north of the hill to turn units back toward the road and main EA. Looking at the template EAs, we assume a platoon or platoon-minus will cover EA 3, with the rest of the CO/TM covering EAs 1 and 2. Thus, the enemy is strongest against any force to the east. The combined-arms composition of this company also means the inherent vulnerabilities of a tank platoon are covered by the adjacent infantry – and vice versa. Attempting to destroy the enemy by attacking from open terrain would be costly.

The inherent strength of any prepared defense is the prepared fighting positions, coordinated direct-fire-control measures, planned implementation of all weapon systems and IDF, and the psychological security a defender

enjoys as the one occupying a favorable relative position. If the attacker fails to undermine these advantages, then he will be forced to fight on the enemy's terms. The attacker can choose to force the defender to dislocate from his positions and abandon his carefully selected EAs to undermine the defender's advantage. While the defender is adapting to his new situation, his unit will have to react to your tempo; he has to adapt to the circumstances you thrust upon him. Now, you have the opportunity to force your own advantage and seize the initiative.

The problem this enemy has is that with relatively limited resources, it has to defend its own position while simultaneously covering EAs 1 and 2. The enemy most likely won't be able to defend against a turning movement⁴ from the northwest. So, your DP is to dislocate the defending enemy CO/TM by rapidly seizing the northwest part of the hill while simultaneously fixing BPs on the east side of the hill. Your DP negates the use of his prepared BPs and prevents the enemy from reorienting to effectively counter your turning movement. By fixing his primary BPs and simultaneously threatening to flank him from the west, you've handed the enemy commander an unsolvable problem if you execute your mission rapidly (i.e., faster than he can anticipate what you're attempting and adapt). Like the BJJ fighter bringing the boxer to the ground, you've removed the defending commander's strength. His only options are to stay in place and become enveloped, or displace and risk getting destroyed while withdrawing.

Leverage friendly strengths

Maneuver warfare is about leveraging friendly strengths against an enemy's vulnerability, creating a defeat mechanism. As in the previous example, you can achieve this by exploiting weak aspects of their disposition to dislocate them. Another way to accomplish this is by leveraging enablers and combined arms. Armor and infantry units have unique strengths and weaknesses; when operating together, they can protect each other's vulnerabilities while also exploiting the disadvantages of an enemy unit's composition, as shown in the next example.

Figure 2 shows a platoon defense of a canalized avenue of approach based on another engagement at NTC. Each vehicle has a turret-down BP. Your CO/TM is conducting a movement-to-contact (MTC). The hills on the east and south canalize your formation toward the road. Your inherent strength is your ability to employ dismounts, armor, aviation and IDF. Your vulnerability is a lack of knowledge about the terrain and the knowledge that you're moving into an unknown enemy situation.

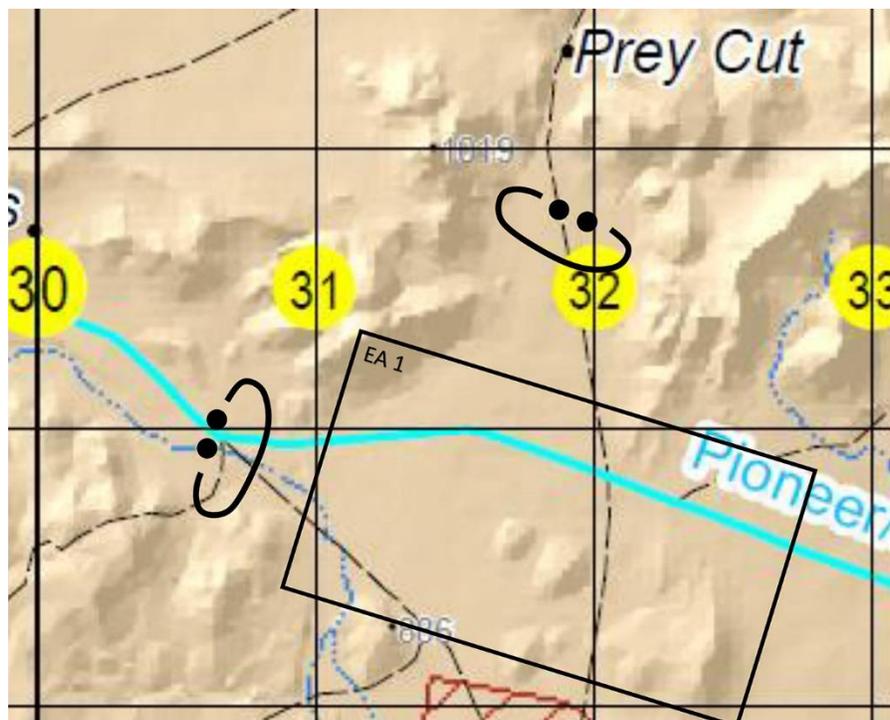


Figure 2. Platoon defense of canalized avenue of approach at NTC.

The enemy armor platoon's strength is his L-shaped anti-vehicle ambush using prepared positions. He is highly vulnerable, however, when infantry and enablers, such as CCA or IDF, are leveraged in conjunction with a mechanized threat from the road. Granted, you don't necessarily know the enemy's composition lacks integrated infantry or air-defense assets during this MTC scenario; this is all the more reason to leverage your infantry and enablers in conjunction with your armored vehicles during your planning.

By studying your map in this scenario, you recognize that your formation will be necessarily canalized in this area. Canalization is a natural vulnerability for you, just as it is a strength for your adversary. If he is defending in this area, his likely DP is to canalize your formation and isolate any units in his EA. By isolating a formation on or near the road, he is limiting your ability to mass effects by restricting your maneuver space and options.

With this in mind, your DP is to disintegrate your enemy's defense by simultaneously maintaining pressure on him from the area near the road while your infantry establishes an anti-tank attack-by-fire position on the hill. If you were to do either independently, he could react appropriately; against infantry and CCA, he moves away from the hill, elevates his weapon systems and suppresses; against tanks, he fires comfortably from his defilade positions. However, if he is threatened by both, he can't adequately react to either because whichever threat he focuses on first, the other combat arm will ensure his destruction. His only option that potentially allows survival is to withdraw under pressure, which also risks his annihilation.

Similarly, IDF will either force him to move out of the impact area or button-up in his defilade BPs. This would allow you to destroy him as he withdraws or maneuver on his position if he stays in his covered positions to avoid IDF. In either scenario, you are able to exploit his response and seize the initiative.

It's important to draw a distinction here. Successful implementation of the appropriate DP can often result in the partial or wholesale destruction of your enemy, at least at the company level. This isn't the point of maneuver warfare, however. The goal is to defeat your enemy by leveraging your strengths against his critical vulnerability. When he recognizes his difficult position, the enemy soldiers may suspect their leaders are incompetent, they may panic and lose discipline; in short, it may cause them to lose the will to fight. Even if it doesn't, by creating a critical vulnerability in the enemy, you can seize the initiative and fight from a relative advantage.

I don't mean to suggest that destroying your enemy in some situations is irrelevant or unnecessary; rather, this should be a byproduct of successfully leveraging a critical strength against a critical vulnerability to create a complex or unsolvable problem to defeat your opponent.

Currently inadequate

As it currently operates, I don't think the U.S. Army practices maneuver warfare adequately, despite what may be believed. True maneuver warfare is the process of seizing the initiative by creating an unsolvable problem based on an analysis of friendly and enemy strengths and vulnerabilities.

The DP of an operation is using a defeat mechanism to successfully leverage your own strengths against an enemy's critical vulnerability. This will interrupt his decision cycle by creating an unsolvable problem set, which will either paralyze his decision-making process or pressure him to make poor tactical decisions in the heat of the moment. This will position you to follow through and decisively defeat your opponent.

Ideally, your successful implementation of these maneuver principles will enable you to defeat your enemy without the need to destroy him in a battle of attrition, where success is highly dependent on the relative size of the two formations and their respective reinforcements.

Takeaway

Like in our boxing metaphor, two near-peer foes are too evenly matched to accurately predict the winner when they both intend to use attrition as a defeat mechanism. When you replace one of these boxers with a BJJ fighter who leverages his own strength against an opponent's critical vulnerability (maneuver against attrition strategy), the BJJ fighter is better suited to seize the initiative and win the engagement.

Army leaders need to progress beyond viewing maneuver warfare as moving around the battlefield to assume positions that enable superior kill-death ratios. Maneuver warfare involves preventing an even contest. Why should a fight be a gamble between two evenly matched opponents?

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Notes

¹ Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1991.

² Emphasis is the author's.

³ ADRP 1-02, *Operational Terms and Military Symbols*, defines the DP as "A geographic place, specific key event, critical factor or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success."

⁴ Turning movement (ADRP 1-02): Form of maneuver in which the attacking force seeks to avoid the enemy's principle defensive positions by seizing objectives behind the enemy's current positions, thereby causing the enemy force to move out of their current positions or divert major forces to meet the threat.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored cavalry regiment

ADRP – Army doctrinal reference publication

BCT – brigade combat team

BJJ – Brazilian jiu-jitsu

BP – battle position

CAM – combined-arms maneuver

CCA – close-combat attack

CoA – course of action

COP – common operating picture

CO/TM (+) – "shorthand" for company/team-plus

DA – decisive action

DP – decisive point

EA – engagement area

IDF – indirect fire

MTC – movement-to-contact

NTC – National Training Center

OE – operational environment

WfF – warfighting function