Cobra Comments: Engagement-Area Development during Security Operations

by CPT Christopher M. Salerno

Cavalry troops often execute security operations poorly during National Training Center (NTC) rotations due to failure to plan and execute engagement-area (EA) development. Troops operate across a large area of operations, and commanders need to efficiently apply their combat power. Security operations are complicated; EA development provides the necessary framework for efficiently approaching these missions.

In this article I will describe a scenario where a troop commander fails to use EA development. The troop will struggle with its assigned security operation to the brigade's detriment. I will then show how, by using EA development, the same commander can approach the mission in an organized manner, with leaders understanding their responsibilities.

Troop commanders and scout-platoon leaders should study Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-20.97, ***Cavalry Troop***, and ATP 3-20.96, ***Cavalry Squadron***. These publications both explain how EA development fits into security operations.

First scenario

The brigade commander tasks the squadron to guard to provide the brigade with the reaction time and maneuver space necessary to seize urban terrain. The squadron staff hastily executes the military-decision-making process and comes up with a plan. The squadron commander pulls the troop commanders to the mobile command group (MCG) and briefs the plan.

The squadron commander tasks the three troop commanders to screen and the tank-company commander to attack to destroy, on order, along one of three potential avenues of approach. The squadron commander issues the reconnaissance and security (R&S) guidance. He focuses on the displacement criteria for the three cavalry troops, which also serves as the tank-company's call-forward criteria.

The squadron commander tasks Troop B to screen Phase Line (PL) Dillon oriented on Named Areas of Interest (NAIs) 101 and 102. The troop commander quickly updates his graphics with the boundaries and NAIs. Then he moves back to his Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) and maneuvers to the troop command post (CP).

The troop commander, short on time, pulls in his platoon leaders and issues a quick verbal order based on his notes. He orders them to begin movement to PL Dillon. The troop commander looks at the mapboard and decides to simply cut his area of operations in half and give one half to each platoon. He calls the platoon leaders on the troop net and tells them their respective boundaries and tasks them to screen.

The troop arrives at PL Dillon, and the platoon leaders execute the plan. The BFV commanders stop at the best terrain they can find. The dismounts disembark their respective BFVs and move tactically to the spot the platoon leader identifies on the map. The platoon leaders report "set" to the troop commander.

The troop fire-support officer (FSO) gets on the radio and requests grids to all locations so she can establish no-fire areas. The troop commander reports to the squadron commander that he is set.

The troop anxiously awaits the enemy's arrival. The 1st Platoon's dismounted scouts identify dust trails in the vicinity of the pass complex. The dismount team leader struggles to reach his platoon leader on the radio. After a few minutes, he successfully sends a report to the platoon leader. The platoon leader reports this to the troop commander.

The enemy advances toward Troop B and is well within the 7,200-meter range of the troop's mortar section. The troop commander prompts the platoon leader to call for fire (CFF). The platoon leader radios to the dismount team leader and asks for a grid. The dismount team leader eventually gets an accurate grid and reports the grid to the platoon leader. The enemy continues advancing using terrain to his advantage.

The platoon leader successfully sends a CFF to the FSO. She processes the mission, clears ground and sends it to the mortars. The enemy is now within 3,750 meters, direct-fire range of the troop's 13 tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missiles.

Figure 1. Infantry Soldiers from A and B companies, 1-163rd Combined-Arms Battalion, assault through the city with coverage from BFVs during the taking of Razish, an urban training environment at NTC, Fort Irwin, CA. The Montana Army National Guard's 1-163rd is one of three combined-arms battalions in 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team. *(National Guard photo by CPT Gregory Walsh, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)*

Neither platoon leader nor the troop commander issues a fire command as they wait for the mortar rounds to land. Eventually a senior scout asks if he can engage the enemy; the platoon leader asks the commander. The commander gives permission, and individual vehicle commanders begin to open fire. The platoon leaders do not report an accurate count of the enemy's composition to the troop CP. The squadron staff does not yet know the size of the enemy in Troop B's sector. Company D is unaware of the situation. Individual vehicle commanders engage and report. Leaders clog the platoon and troop nets with incomplete reports in non-standard formats.

Consequently the enemy quickly overwhelms Troop B and destroys most of its combat power. The troop CP reports the contact but fails to paint an accurate picture to the squadron. The squadron is not in position to bring more assets into the fight. The troop meets the displacement criteria, but due to a lack of accurate reporting, fails to understand that they have. They continue to fight as the enemy maneuvers past the screen toward the brigade's main body at Razish.

Company D understands there is a fight but does not realize that Troop B has been destroyed and bypassed. Company D is now out of position and cannot support or reinforce.

Teaching point

The troop commander needs to provide the brigade reaction time and maneuver space. Therefore troop commanders should incorporate EA development into their planning process. Commanders rarely have enough time but must use every moment by training subordinate leaders.

EA development provides a systematic approach to the problem. A troop commander who uses EA development approaches the preceding scenario in a more organized manner.

Step 1. **I** – Identify likely enemy avenues of approach.
Step 2. **I** – Identify most likely enemy course of action.
Step 3. **D** – Determine where to kill the enemy.

Step 4. **P** – Plan for and integrate obstacles.
Step 5. **E** – Emplace direct-fire weapon systems.
Step 6. **P** – Plan and integrate fires.
Step 7. **R** – Rehearse the execution of operations within the engagement area.

Figure 2. Steps for successfully using EA development during security operations.

Second scenario

The squadron commander issues the same plan and guidance to all the commanders. The Troop B commander and his FSO stop and talk to the S-2 at the MCG. The troop commander and the S-2 discuss the enemy's likely avenue of approach, the enemy's most likely course of action and the enemy's most dangerous course of action. After the conversation, the troop commander understands the enemy's scheme of maneuver better, which frames how he develops his own scheme of maneuver.

The commander determines he will kill the enemy as they come through the pass complex by massing his troop's weapons systems. With that intent in mind, the FSO builds a fires plan that supports her commander's intent. She runs the plan by the squadron FSO at the MCG. The squadron FSO helps the troop FSO refine the plan and starts working with his team to ensure they can support the requested artillery targets. Finally, the troop FSO coordinates with the squadron FSO for a Raven small unmanned aerial system (SUAS) restricted operating zone (ROZ) in the vicinity of the pass complex.

The commander contacts the platoon leaders, the mortar section sergeant, the first sergeant and the executive officer over frequency-modulation radio and tells them to meet him at the CP. He issues the updated graphics. The graphics clearly show where the commander wants to kill the enemy. He establishes phase lines for each weapon system, and he uses the quadrant system with target reference points (TRPs) to orient his fires. He identifies initial spots for the dismount Javelin teams where they can effectively identify the enemy's movement. He places tentative platoon fighting positions offset from the Javelin teams but briefs the platoon leaders to refine the positions as the troop reaches PL Dillon.

Figure 3. A scout identifies his sector of fire as part of a troop screen. *(Copyrighted photo by MSG Luis Coriano, Cobra 12A; used by permission)*

The commander issues clear, complete and concise R&S guidance. He reminds the platoon leaders that it is important to exercise initiative within that guidance. The platoon leaders understand that it is imperative they rapidly report and quickly develop the situation.

The FSO and the mortar section sergeant brief the fires plan. They make sure the platoon leaders understand who is responsible for which pre-planned targets, with clearly identified primary and alternate observers. The FSO makes sure everyone understands the trigger for the final protective fires. The FSO also briefs the plan for using Ravens to identify the enemy before they maneuver through the pass complex. Spot reports from the Raven will trigger a pre-planned artillery mission.

The commander issues guidance in regard to obstacles. He acknowledges that the troop has no engineer support but identifies a wadi the enemy may use to maneuver out of direct-fire range – he tasks one platoon to consolidate concertina wire and place a disruptive obstacle in the wadi. The troop first sergeant understands the scheme of maneuver and issues quick guidance on maintenance recovery points and casualty collection points. Finally, the commander issues a timeline covering actions at the screen and a rehearsal schedule.

The troop arrives at PL Dillon and develops the EA. Individual BFV commanders refine their positions using advantageous micro terrain. The troop emplaces concertina wire, establishes the observation posts and emplaces the weapons systems. The platoon leaders send out teams to emplace pickets with infrared chemlights at the TRP locations. They confirm everyone can see their respective TRPs.

The leadership looks at the friendly line from the enemy perspective and adjusts positions as needed. Vehicle commanders identify alternate positions and ensure they can still identify the TRPs. Simultaneously, the executive officer reconnoiters and marks the passage lane in case Company D maneuvers to reinforce the Troop B screen line. He quickly builds the passage lane using the standard from the squadron's tactical standing operating procedure (SOP).

The commander now directs rehearsals, which involve the entire troop. They rehearse contact reports and immediate CFF missions. They rehearse target hand-over between dismounts and BFVs. They rehearse reloading drills, occupying alternate positions, casualty evacuations and vehicle evacuation. The team is confident. They know when they are supposed to open with each weapon system. They understand the commander's intent and their role within that intent.

Figure 4. SPC Bailey Wilson, Company C, 2-116th Combined-Arms Battalion, watches over a convoy moving through the valley below at NTC. The 2-116th is one of three combined-arms battalions in 116th Cavalry Brigade Combat Team. *(National Guard photo by CPT Gregory Walsh, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)*

The commander continues to rehearse as he activates the ROZ and launches the Raven. The Raven conducts an aerial reconnaissance of the pass complex. The operator identifies the enemy maneuvering into the pass complex. The troop CP relays the visual contact on the troop and squadron radio nets. The troop FSO reports to the squadron FSO, and the artillery is ready. The Raven SUAS moves away handing the reconnaissance to the dismount teams as artillery begins to hit the enemy.

The enemy continues to push forward and begins to emerge from the pass complex. The lead enemy element arrives at PL Mortar at the edge of the EA. The dismount team leaders report the contact on the platoon net. The platoon leaders CFF using pre-planned 120 mortar targets. With guns already laid, the mortars are ready to fire. The FSO sends the mission, and the mortars fire. The mortar section immediately orients its guns on the second target. The enemy continues to advance as artillery and mortars destroy their optics, slow their movements and inflict casualties.

The enemy (as expected) uses the terrain to mask its movement, but the wadi system it preferred is blocked with concertina wire. The dismount team leaders hand the visual contact over to the BFVs. The BFVs understand their engagement criteria and wait until the enemy passes PL TOW. The platoon leaders issue fire commands, and the platoon launches a massed volley of TOW missiles against the enemy, with each platoon destroying four vehicles per fire command. The troop fights as it rehearsed, properly reloading its TOWs after the second engagement and occupying alternate battle positions.

The platoon leaders send the troop CP a count of vehicles by type. The troop CP reports this information to the squadron. The squadron alerts Company D that is prepared to attack to destroy. Company D maneuvers to PL Dillon. The Troop B executive officer coordinates directly with the Company D commander and ensures they approach the passage point. Troop B continues to fight.

The enemy continues to maneuver deeper into the EA and passes PL Bushmaster, at which time the BFVs open fire with their 25mm guns. The enemy is in disarray as it continues to take casualties from persistent indirect fire from artillery and mortars, combined with direct fire from the BFVs. The enemy commander maneuvers his tanks forward in an attempt to overwhelm and penetrate the friendly forces. The dismount team leaders see the tanks maneuvering, and they engage the enemy with their Javelins. They destroy two tanks, report the contact and displace back to their respective BFVs.

Company D approaches PL Dillon and conducts near linkup with the Troop B executive officer. The Troop B executive officer relays the most current situation update. Company D begins to pass through Troop B's line in accordance with SOP. The Troop B commander lifts his fire as Company D reaches the battle handover line. The Company D commander successfully continues the counterattack into the enemy, destroying the remaining combat platforms and devastating the vulnerable sustainment assets trailing the enemy's attack.

The Troop B commander consolidates his forces and reaches out to squadron for further guidance. The brigade successfully seizes Razish, and the enemy is unable to influence friendly operations with spoiling attacks or counterattacks into the flank of the combined-arms battalions. The result was that Troop B successfully provided the brigade with the reaction time and maneuver space to succeed in the decisive operation.

Takeaway

Troop commanders can successfully execute security operations, but they should not abandon doctrinal defensive tenants such as EA development. EA development allows commanders to approach their mission deliberately and systematically. A troop commander cannot gain success by haphazardly fighting his/her way through a security operation.

On the other hand, a commander who takes a few extra minutes to deliberately approach the problem and issues clear, complete and concise guidance with corresponding graphics will achieve his/her commander's intent. During security operations, EA development provides the systematic approach necessary to enable the squadron and brigade to win. Troops that shortcut the process or skip it entirely will struggle throughout an NTC rotation and face destruction in large-scale combat operations.

Figure 5. A scout team assigned to a Stryker scan their assigned sector during security operations. *(Copyrighted photo by MSG Luis Coriano, Cobra 12A; used by permission)*

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ATP – Army techniques publication
BFV – Bradley Fighting Vehicle
CFF – call for fire
CP – command post
EA – engagement area
FSO – fire-support officer
MCG – mobile command group
NAI – named area of interest
NTC – National Training Center
PL – phase line
R&S – reconnaissance and security
ROZ – restricted operating zone
SOP – standing operating procedure
SUAS – small unmanned aerial system
TOW – tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (missile)
TRP – target-reference point