

Maneuver Leaders' Role in Observation Planning

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Fire-support officers (FSOs) at all echelons struggle to get observers into position to observe planned targets. This assessment is based on observations at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, CA.

This problem results in planned targets that are tied to fire-support tasks not being serviced or maneuver delayed by fires. Unlike the effort maneuver commanders make finding a useable assault-by-fire or support-by-fire (SBF) position, they put less thought into the observers' location and his or her ability to observe and adjust fires. They think either the FSO will figure it out or the actual observer will move to a better location. The contributing factors are commanders and FSOs not planning the location of observation posts (OPs) to service targets, not understanding the capabilities and limitations of fire-support teams (FIST) and forward observers (FO), and commanders not selecting an appropriate FIST control option.



Figure 1. Soldiers of Company B, 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry, observe fires for an attack under live-fire conditions during a decisive-action rotation at NTC. (Photo by SSG Joseph Gonzalez)

Inadequate fires planning¹ starts soon after receipt of a mission, since FSOs often do not articulate directed brigade combat team (BCT) or battalion fire-support responsibilities during mission analysis. In addition, they also fail to describe how those fire-support tasks support the higher headquarters' concept of operation. Both enable clarity of nesting plans at echelon. Unfortunately, this shortcoming limits the commander's (and staff's) understanding of the higher headquarters' scheme of fires, including the observer plan.

The observer plan is further impaired by FSOs who don't incorporate the observer into the scheme of maneuver during course of action (CoA) development prior to CoA analysis. The FSO's time is typically consumed by placing

targets on a map with little thought to who, how or when the observer will be in place to observe targets and triggers.

Maneuver battalion and brigade S-3s and executive officers do not require the FSO to attend the wargame armed with this information. They just want to see the fire-support overlay with targets on it. This typically results in the FSO drawing OPs on the operational graphics during or after CoA analysis – and sometimes not at all. No thought is applied to how the observer is going to get there, how long it will take, the effects of limited visibility on optics and other critical factors. The result is positioning and timing of the occupation of OPs that is not synchronized with the maneuver plan. The overall consequence is that fires are not synchronized to facilitate maneuver.

Fire-support capabilities, limits

Currently there are no qualification standards for FIST and FO elements located in a formation that is conducting movement and maneuver. With this understanding, FIST and FO employment is best used when an OP is located on elevated terrain to observe targets within the range of the capability of the fire-support system. Battalion and company commanders/S-3s must understand these factors or they will likely fail to service the targets assigned to them by the brigade.



Figure 2. A FIST assigned to Battery A, 4th Battalion, 1st Field Artillery Regiment, observes a smoke mission providing obscuration of breach site during a decisive-action rotation at NTC. FIST and FO employment is best used when an OP is located on elevated terrain. (Photo by SSG Joseph Gonzalez)

During the military decision-making process, commanders/S-3s should require their FSO to brief the capabilities and limitations of all mounted and dismounted OPs. The combat power of fire support they should brief reflects capabilities and limitations of mounted vs. dismounted OPs, range capabilities of the Fire-Support Sensor System (FS3)/Long-Range Acquisition System (LRAS), Lightweight Laser Designator Rangefinder (LLDR)/Vector or map, compass and binoculars. They also need to understand the effect of day vs. night and periods of limited visibility on all those systems. FSOs need to understand and communicate these capabilities and limitations to maneuver leaders so they understand the purpose behind planning and occupying OPs.

When fire supporters consolidated into field-artillery (FA) battalions, the most significant reason was to ensure they receive the best training possible in their primary duties. FA battalion commanders are responsible for ensuring that maneuver battalion commanders receive highly trained fire-support elements back as they transition to collective training for company level and above. However, FISTs are trained on very specific tasks that are not always integrated into maneuver training.

A training gap evident at NTC is that commanders fail to integrate fire supporters' occupation of OPs into maneuver training at home station. It becomes especially apparent during the brigade live-fire at NTC. Observers are more timely and accurate when they are in an elevated position and stationary. During the offense, one of two scenarios occurs:

- The FSO, due to the order or implied requirement that the FSO remain with the commander, moves behind the company or battalion commander and is unable to observe or communicate the trigger or the target while moving due to the positioning of the commander.
- The FSO maneuvers to the OP, but because the timing of the movement to the OP was not planned or synchronized with the maneuver plan, it takes much longer than the commander visualized. This results in executing the plan without fires or else the maneuver elements remain stationary for a long time and are subject to enemy fires, and it desynchronizes the brigade plan.

This could be attributed to live-fire exercises at home station where FA and mortar-impact areas are routinely offset from the platoon, company or battalion maneuver live-fire area. This requires the observer to occupy an OP that is nowhere near where they are training. Many times observers move straight to their OP as maneuver is setting up the range and remain there for the duration of live-fire training without requiring OP occupation to be synchronized. FSOs do not maneuver with the company or battalion due to the location of the OP and designated impact areas. The other scenario has the FSO move with the maneuver element and call the tactical trigger, but the OP observing the offset impact area makes all the fire-support adjustments.

Training this way prevents us from having a clear understanding of how long it will take FSOs and observers to occupy positions where they can effectively do their jobs and maintain communications that facilitate responsive fires.

Unfortunately, many maneuver commanders possess limited knowledge of fire-support systems and equipment. They work with FSOs from the time they are platoon leaders and have FSOs at every echelon of command. Due to the presence of these experts, they typically do not take the time to fully understand fire-support capabilities and limitations. If a tank or infantry company has seven of 14 M1 tanks or M2 Bradleys non-mission-capable (NMC), a commander would be highly concerned and most likely make a decision to reallocate combat power or adjust a subordinate unit's missions. On the other hand, if every one of the stand-alone computer units or FS3 in their Bradley fire-support team (BFIST) are NMC, typically commanders do not realize they lost digital-fires capability with their observers. Nor do they typically realize the impact that has on timely and accurate fires.

Commander's guidance

Maneuver commanders know they owe their staff and subordinates a description of their visualization of the battle. If they intend to fight an unfair fight weighted with responsive fires, they need to focus some energy on the fires warfighting function (WFF). Specific to the FSO, commanders should clearly identify the decisive point of the operation. They should then be able to expect the FSO to develop a plan to mass fires at that time and location, including detailed observation planning.

Commanders should demand that their FSO backbrief them on this plan, explaining how fires enable success at the decisive point. They should direct the FSO to report back with a pre-battle conditions check on the fires WFF prior to the line of departure. This should include:

- The fires combat power;
- A running estimate of FIST capabilities (including digital-communications status);
- Confirmation that current fire-support coordinating measures have been pushed out to every subordinate;
- Confirmation that primary communications have been checked with every sensor and shooter in the fires technical rehearsal (ideally from the OP where they will call the targets if conditions allow);
- Which targets were rehearsed; and
- If any of the triggers were refined based on the rehearsal's outcome.

If something isn't right, the FSO must understand that he or she owes the commander the information to make a risk decision about whether to fight degraded, change the plan or take more time to fix problems. One simple

check is for commanders to ask how long a particular target took to process during the fires rehearsal (averages for recent combat-training-center rotations are about 11 minutes); if the FSO briefs something significantly different, the commander may need to investigate further to ensure the rehearsal was adequate to ensure responsive fires.

Observation planning

Many FSOs do not create a detailed observation plan that shows primary and alternate observer locations to support battalion and brigade targets and triggers. This results in maneuver waiting on fire supporters to get observers in position to observe targets that are essential to the battalion/brigade scheme of maneuver.

Current doctrine for fire-support planning is covered in Army Technical Publication (ATP) 3-09.30, *Techniques of Observed Fire*, and ATP 3-09.42, *Fire Support for the Brigade Combat Team*. ATP 3-09.30 has nothing about observation planning at battalion level – it only provides information about the procedure for occupying an OP. Commanders should rely on their FIST and FOs to occupy OPs on dominant terrain that can overwatch a wide area. Security posture is determined by the commander, but a mounted OP consists of at least one BFIST or Stryker Fire-Support Vehicle, and a dismounted OP consists of at least two FOs. Commanders must assume the risk of those Soldiers occupying dominant terrain independently to gain a tactical advantage over the enemy.

[The six-step technique for observation planning](#) (Figure 3) is a forcing function for subordinate units to analyze the target and OP planned by the battalion/brigade and submit refinements. Company commanders often plan under constrained timelines and focus on what battalion tasks them to do. When the S-3 includes in its [tasks to subordinate units](#) (Figure 4) the requirement to emplace an OP to observe battalion targets, the commander is now required to follow the order or submit a refinement. This also makes it a consideration briefed in operations orders and backbriefs and at the battalion combined-arms rehearsal. They can then submit refinements to targets, triggers and OP locations so that they are incorporated in battalion and company schemes of maneuver.

FSOs at all echelons should plan OPs that can service each planned target they determine as essential to facilitating fire-support tasks to support the scheme of maneuver. They should consider risk-estimate distances or minimum safe distances of munitions planned for the target, line-of-sight analysis and capabilities available. They should plan each OP location, considering whether it is a mounted OP with FS3/LRAS or a dismounted OP with LLDR/Vector or map, compass and M22 binoculars. FSOs need to be familiar with the capability of these systems and the experience of the specific FOs who will use them. When a planned target does not have a feasible location to set an OP, they need to be honest brokers with their maneuver commanders and notify them of the constraints in observing targets.

“Commanders are the most important participants in the operations process,” according to Army Doctrinal Publication 5-0, *The Operations Process*. “While staffs perform essential functions that amplify the effectiveness of operations, commanders drive the operations process through understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading and assessing operations.”

Many maneuver commanders provide mediocre guidance for fire support. This limits the FSO’s ability to develop a scheme of fires and included observer plan. It also reduces the staff’s ability to synchronize fire-support guidance with the maneuver plan.

If commanders provide a similar level of guidance that they provide for the movement and maneuver WfF, observers will be more successful and fires will be more responsive. Commanders should consider issuing guidance for the observer plan by addressing the following areas:

- Daylight vs. limited visibility movement and occupation;
- Mounted vs. dismounted movement and occupation;
- Not-later-than time for establishment of OPs;
- Prioritization for special equipment such as digital-fires capability and optics observing critical targets or triggers;
- Additional assets the commander is willing to commit to serve as observers such as squads, snipers or scouts;
- Requirements for observation redundancy of triggers and targets;
- FIST control options; and

- The tactical risk the commander is willing to assume with the observer plan (compromise, time, equipment, redundancy, etc.).

FIST control option

Another significant concept in doctrine, not routinely discussed, is the FIST control option referenced in Army Technical Publication (ATP) 3-09.30. When asked about control options, most fire supporters know about centralized vs. decentralized control options to call for fire directly or through an intermediary to a surface-to-surface weapon system. However, the ATP also provides options how to employ the fire-support platoon for planning and execution. The three control options are fire-support platoon, company/troop FIST and squad FO. Each have their own benefits and drawbacks.

The first control option is the consolidated fire-support platoon, which centralizes the fire-support platoon for planning and employment of FISTs and FOs to streamline [tasking from the battalion commander](#) (Figure 5). The FISTs can still be available to their company commanders during troop-leading procedures, but the battalion FSO plans their OPs and targets with the focus on the battalion scheme of maneuver. This uses the fire-support platoon in a way similar to how BCTs use combat observation and lasing teams. It allows the FSO, as delegated by the battalion commander, to control the platoon and have it focus on massing fires at the battalion commander's decisive point.

This option is advantageous when an operation lacks detail in battalion and company schemes of maneuver. For instance, in the defense, when a battalion has two companies occupying battle positions set to fire into the same engagement area, less detail is required with the company scheme of maneuver. This control option allows the fire-support platoon to provide redundant observation from different OPs to service battalion or BCT targets.

Another scenario is when the battalion is the shaping operation for a BCT combined-arms breach. The battalion is tasked to occupy SBF positions to provide suppression on enemy battle positions in support of the breach force advance to the breach site. Again, this is not detailed at the company level. The battalion commander can centralize the employment of FISTs and FOs to ensure the battalion suppresses and obscures at the BCT commander's decisive point. The battalion staff can feasibly plan the OPs and specify in-position-ready-to-observe times that facilitate observation of suppression and obscuration fires in support of the breach force.

The second control option is company/troop FISTs decentralized to companies for planning and execution. This is the default and most often used control option because it is inherent in mission command that relies on decentralized execution by subordinate leaders. This control option is ideal for operations that require detailed integration of fires in the company scheme of maneuver. For example, in offensive operations with multiple company objectives, fires need to be synchronized with company schemes of maneuver to ensure fires are massed at the company commander's decisive points. Also, when an urban center is the battalion objective, using this control option helps the isolation force develop an observation plan focused outside the urban center and the fixing force to have an observation plan inside the urban center.

The third control option is squad FOs. This is the least preferred method but locates an FO in every squad-sized element. This option is not recommended because it splits up the FO team and diminishes its ability to conduct dual independent checks. It also requires a higher degree of training for individual FOs than most units are able to achieve.

The preceding examples are not a rule but are considerations that maneuver commanders and FSOs at echelon should discuss from BCT down to company. Recommended fire-support control options should be tied to each CoA during the CoA analysis.

A recommendation is for BCT FSOs to host a brigade fire-support leader professional development class with focused discussion on observation planning and FIST control options. Attendees would be brigade and battalion commanders, executive officers, S-3s and FSOs, plus company commanders and company-level FSOs. The battalion FSOs can do the same thing for a maneuver battalion. A lot can be gained by developing shared understanding among leaders across a BCT. It is up to the fire supporters to advise their maneuver commanders on the options available, providing different ways to approach operations. (For training materials to facilitate this discussion, contact the authors: jack.d.crabtree2.mil@mail.mil, jonathan.a.shine.mil@mail.mil or george.l.cass.mil@mail.mil.)



Figure 6. A FIST assigned to Company B, 3rd Battalion, 41st Infantry, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, observes suppression and obscuration targets for a brigade combined-arms breach. Targets were observed from an SBF during decisive-action Rotation 17-02 at NTC. (Photo by SSG Joseph Gonzalez)

GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander during World War II, once said, “The speed, accuracy and devastating power of American artillery won confidence and admiration from the troops it supported and inspired fear and respect in their enemy.” Fire supporters can win that confidence within their formations today by ensuring they develop shared understanding with commanders about the capabilities and limitations of the fire-support system and by using doctrine as a tool to plan and execute in a manner that provides speed, accuracy and devastating effects.

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Notes

¹ Fire-support planning is accomplished using targeting and the running estimate. Fire-support planning includes 1) developing integrated fire plans (target lists, fire-support execution/fire-support task matrix, scheme of fires and overlays); and 2) determining FO control options that support the commander's scheme of maneuver. (From ATP 3-09.30)

Acronym Quick-Scan

ATP – Army technical publication

BCT – brigade combat team

BFIST – Bradley fire-support team

CoA – course of action

FA – field artillery

FIST – fire-support team

FO – forward observer

FOB – forward operating base

FSO – fire-support officer

FS3 – Fire-Support Sensor System

LRAS – Long-Range Acquisition System

LLDR – Lightweight Laser Designator Rangefinder

NMC – non-mission-capable

NTC – National Training Center

OP – observation post

SBF – support by fire

WFF – warfighting function