

The BFV in the DATE

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“Be careful not to fight with one enemy for too long, for you might teach him all your tricks of war.”

— Napoleon Bonaparte

The U.S. Army continues to train for a position of dominance as a conventional land force after nearly two decades of unconventional conflict. To this end, it has begun to rotate armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) through combat training centers (CTCs) to face near-peer armored and hybrid threats in a decisive action training environment (DATE). The requirement to understand the capabilities and limitations of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) in these formations becomes increasingly imperative.¹

The 1-18th Infantry Combined Arms Battalion (CAB) participated in Allied Spirit VIII, an exercise that tested the interoperability of a multinational NATO headquarters, at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany from 15 January to 5 February 2018. Our company — Attack Company, 1-18th IN — was task organized with a light infantry platoon, a motorized platoon of four high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), and a mechanized infantry platoon with M2A3 BFVs. As a hybrid infantry company, we conducted an area defense, a movement to contact, a hasty attack on an urban area, as well as offensive operations as part of a larger unit. This article summarizes certain lessons

An M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle assigned to Attack Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, traverses muddy terrain after successfully completing crew qualifications at the Novo Selo Training Area, Bulgaria, on 20 March 2018.

Photo by SSG Matthew Keeler

learned for other combined arms units as they deploy to Europe in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

Movement and Maneuver

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, describes steps 4-6 of engagement area development (EA DEV) as fluid.² However, commanders recognize certain inflexible components of EA DEV — notably, that obstacles without direct fire overwatch are ineffective. Platoon leaders have noted in previous operations that obstacles are either emplaced under direct fire or they are not emplaced at all.³ One of the steps of EA DEV — “Plan and Integrate Obstacles” — proves to be a challenge at JMRC because of the speed of the fight and the need to cover multiple engagement areas. At times, the fight would develop so rapidly at JMRC that combat vehicles were unable to remain in one position for more than one hour. Therefore, vehicles used what little time they did have to occupy hasty fighting positions overwatching high speed avenues of approach instead of first emplacing an obstacle. Our motorized platoon could move quickly to a chokepoint on a road, emplace C-wire, and move quickly back to a covered position. Our experience confirms that the only thing that will slow down an enemy mechanized column is an obstacle that the enemy must negotiate. Only when the enemy is temporarily halted will the step of integrating fires prove effective. Enemy scouts identified any avenues of



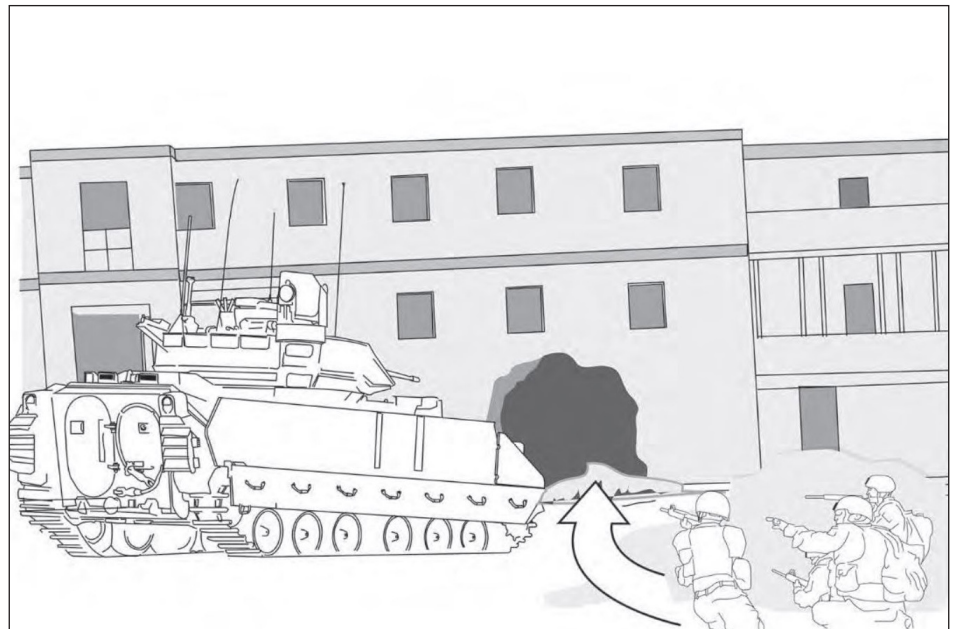
approach that were not blocked, and they attacked with a speed that made calling for fire ineffective.

An enduring challenge for mechanized platoon leaders is integrating their dismounted Infantrymen in the defense. We found it extremely effective to place anti-armor teams along high-speed avenues of approach with clear displacement and engagement criteria. After destroying an enemy lead vehicle along a canalized approach, the team then broke contact through severely restricted terrain back to a link-up point to remount. Restrictive fire lines (RFLs) tied into terrain such as ridgelines ensured our dismounted elements were protected from friendly direct fire.

While using BFVs to cover an engagement area, the primary consideration of direct fire weapon emplacement should go to the platoon's most capable weapon — the TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) missile. TRADOC Capabilities Manager-Armored Brigade Combat Team (TCM-ABCT) has many useful suggestions for conducting TOW training and employment. However, while the testing/incorporating of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) is of immense use in preparation for a training rotation, it is no substitute for solid familiarization and proficiency with the TOW.⁴ A good rule of thumb is if you would take a knee while dismounted, put the TOW up.

The greatest capability the BFV offers to the infantry is its 25mm cannon to support the rifle squads as a mobile, stabilized, direct fire platform.⁵ Platoon leaders determine if their Infantrymen should be dismounted before, on, or beyond the objective. If an enemy anti-armor threat is detected or templated, dismounting before the probable line of contact (PLC) is recommended. Platoon leaders can identify their own PLCs for their platoons if the company does not provide one because they should always be thinking about the transition from movement to maneuver. An enemy situation template (SITTEMP) provided by the S2 is always expected and needs to be provided to maneuver units so they can better plan for that transition. Named areas of interest (NAIs) and targeted areas of interest (TAIs) should be treated as if the enemy is already there and in a prepared defense.

Because of the auditory signature of armored vehicles, it is critical to use the dismounted infantry to get eyes on an NAI before the BFVs move within direct fire range. During our final offensive, we were within audio contact of an NAI that had been cleared by friendly air only a couple hours beforehand, but in the meantime the enemy was able to establish a textbook L-shaped ambush. If reconnaissance confirms there is light infantry on the objective, bounding the BFVs forward to the objective and dismounting the rifle squads within sprinting distance of the objective is often successful; this permits them



ATP 3-21.8, Infantry Platoon and Squad

Bradley Fighting Vehicle 25mm Infantry Support

to quickly secure a foothold while the BFVs provide both cover for the rifle squads and immediate suppression of the enemy. A useful technique is to dismount the rifle squads in the last covered and concealed (LCC) position while the BFVs act as moving cover, which allows the BFVs to suppress or destroy the enemy and cover the infantry that is moving directly behind the vehicle. This also permits the rifle squads to orient themselves to the objective prior to arrival, and the tempo of an attack is not lost while lowering and raising the ramp. Under the close cover of firing BFVs, the rifle squads can maneuver much closer to the objective, and the shock effect of an approaching armored vehicle does wonders to convince the enemy to quit.

The environment in which commanders employ the BFV significantly alters which techniques are advisable. When in an urban environment, the BFV should be thought of like a tank. It serves as an armored mobile firing platform and must be pulled forward with dismounted infantry to mitigate risks against anti-armor fires. During a hasty attack on a village, our BFVs postured on the edge of the village, which allowed us to maximize the use of the main gun while the infantry was covered from the enemy moving down the streets. In a rural environment, BFVs can escort the dismounted infantry forward until they encounter restricted terrain. When the enemy was dug into a wood line, our BFVs would neutralize the enemy anti-tank threat and lead the friendly infantry forward to clear any remaining enemy dismounted soldiers to great effect.

Rifle squads should always take a 24-hour bag with them when they dismount unless it is on the objective, in direct contact, or entering and clearing an urban area. For planning purposes, the platoon leader designates multiple potential link-up sites in both the offense and the defense. Link-up sites are useful in the defense if an enemy column passes the dismounted infantry and the BFVs break contact to another position or move to another location to respond to a threat.

In the transition from the defense to the offense, observation posts (OPs) that are more than one kilometer away or patrols operating outside of direct fire support from their platforms do not always have the time or capability to link up and mount up before moving out. During troop leading procedures (TLPs), link-up operations are planned by phase. Recently, an opposing force (OPFOR) platoon leader at JMRC wrote that his unit was unable to respond to a blue force (BLUFOR) mechanized attack in time because his dismounts took too long to get ready.⁶ This ends up being a primary concern for platoon leaders who might be afraid to “let go” of their rifle squads’ leash. However, with proper planning, the platoon can have its BFVs move quickly enough to repel or block an enemy attack while the rifle squads move to a link-up site in the meantime. Both Training Circular 3-21.76, *The Ranger Handbook*, and ATP 3-21.8 cover the considerations for conducting the link up.

Fires

New Infantry platoon leaders have a great opportunity to attend functional schooling such as the Bradley Leaders Course (BLC) while stationed at Fort Benning, GA. BLC graduates are likely familiar with using the Blue Force Tracker (BFT) to call for fire; however, section leaders and even the platoon sergeant might not know how available this capability is. The gunner can lase a target and get a 10-digit grid which the Bradley commander can see on the commander’s tactical display (CTD). In addition to learning turret functions, such as calling for fire and the importance of the commander’s independent viewer in identifying threats, BLC students will go through a dedicated week of gunner skills training with expert small group instruction to fulfill the Army’s educational line of effort of decreasing on-the-job training and preparing leaders before they assume their next duties.⁷ TCM-ABCT recommends all incoming platoon sergeants attempt to attend BLC before reporting to their units.⁸

Protection

One of the difficulties mechanized units encounter is employing their vehicles for protection against a near-peer threat in a DATE. Vehicle spacing during convoy movements and actions at the halt still reflect global war on terrorism standard operating procedures (SOPs). The BFV can engage targets at much greater distances than what we are used to in theaters such as Iraq and Afghanistan. It allows greater spacing between vehicles while in a convoy, with at least 100 meters between vehicles and up to 200 meters between elements in a company formation. When stopped for a short halt, vehicles should occupy a herringbone formation. When in the long halt, it is more important for vehicles to find overhead concealment from enemy aircraft or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) rather than sticking to a strict formation. Leaders repeatedly failing to pay attention to proper vehicle spacing and protection in ABCTs as well as Stryker BCTs is a trend that occurs often at our CTCs, as evidenced in after action reviews from the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA.⁹

In the case of anti-air, the company commander should assign a BFV as a primary air defense platform rather than the

.50 caliber machine gun on its modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). The number of high speed avenues of approach at JMRC will usually require rotating units to spread themselves thin in the defense with sometimes only two vehicles covering a likely road or intersection. The OPFOR masses its combat power in the attack, so every single BFV needs to be prepared to fire on an enemy column, but our experience proved that enemy aircraft attack simultaneously with armored columns. This required our 25mm guns to be focused on a massed column instead of addressing the aircraft. While some BFV gunners can claim confirmed kills on enemy helicopters, spending valuable 25mm ammunition in an attempt to shoot down an enemy aircraft that is attacking simultaneously with enemy mechanized columns is not a good use of ammunition unless priority of targets is planned beforehand.

Dominance over the air is no longer a guarantee. Currently, the CAB does not have organic anti-air assets, and it will likely remain that way until we integrate maneuver short-range air defense (SHORAD) in the future.¹⁰ Although there were friendly NATO units with Stinger missile capability, linking up and coordinating with non-English speaking allies proved difficult during the fight. Stryker units usually assign a Soldier from the squad riding in the vehicle as an air guard, but mechanized infantry platoons do not have a similar explicit responsibility. Leaders preparing for a CTC rotation are advised to develop a plan for watching enemy air and to rehearse methods of engaging an air threat, should one arrive. It is useful to assign section leaders as primary air guards, as they should already be out of the commander’s hatch but wouldn’t be occupied with round counts, navigation, or radios. Before CTC rotations, time spent in virtual crew qualifications, such as the Conduct-of-Fire Trainer or the Bradley Advanced Training System that feature engaging enemy rotary wing aircraft, will prove very useful in the DATE.

Sustainment

The ground tactical plan should be disseminated to every section leader, but it is equally important that every crew member understands the battalion maintenance plan. This includes locations of the unit maintenance collection point (UMCP), field trains command post (FTCP), and the combat trains command post (CTCP). Often a track can move by itself or in a section to the UMCP if the tactical situation permits, making it increasingly important that Bradley commanders are able to self-recover and navigate back to that location. Track maintenance deserves equal attention to the security plan and must be included in the priorities of work so that every crew knows how and when to conduct it. During Allied Spirit VIII, our battalion maintained every combat platform throughout the rotation due to the strict enforcement of the maintenance plan. Our battalion also managed to get an M2A3 idler rod flown in from Poland within 24 hours because operators conducted preventive maintenance checks and services (PMCS) to standard.

Depending on the number of casualties a unit takes, combined with the low survivability of the M113 compared



Photo by PFC Shelton Smith

A Soldier with the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment pulls security after dismounting a Bradley Fighting Vehicle during platoon live-fire qualifications on 18 December 2017 at the Novo Selo Training Area in Mokren, Bulgaria.

to that of a BFV, a company commander or platoon leader may consider using a BFV as an alternate company casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) vehicle. In an attack, fire superiority is established by the support-by-fire (SBF) element which inevitably shifts or ceases fire on the objective. One of our BFVs from the SBF element transported more casualties and acted as an escort to the first sergeant's M113, which increased battlefield survivability for both the M113 and the wounded in action. Assign that vehicle the task beforehand, as you would assign primary aid and litter to a fire team in an infantry squad. Every Soldier must know that the litter will not fit inside the back of a BFV due to the length of the equipment.

The BFV is a sophisticated fighting platform that produces incredible battlefield effects when employed correctly. Active and well-documented participation by ABCTs at JMRC provide ongoing, current, and practiced knowledge of the Bradley and its application in the Army's foundational mission to fight and win our nation's wars. Current educational resources to help maintain lethal proficiencies on this platform are listed below.

Educational Resources

* **Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL)** — <https://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/call>

Army leaders can sign up with CALL for their newsletters which provide handbooks, after action reviews, and lessons captured from observer-controller-trainers at the training centers.

* **Milsuite** — <https://www.milsuite.mil/>

TCM ABCT offers a vast repository of insights into common

issues facing units conducting live gunnery, armor/infantry integration challenges, employment considerations, and tactical SOPs. Milsuite requires CAC access.

* **Infantry Magazine** — www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine

Past issues contain comments and trends over the years that remain consistent in a brief and accessible format.

* **Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, Infantry Platoon and Squad** — https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/atp3_21x8.pdf

Notes

- ¹ U.S. Army Infantry School, "State of the Infantry," 12 September 2017.
- ² Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, April 2016.
- ³ Jerome J. Burns, "Lessons on the BIFV," *Infantry Magazine*, January-February 1990.
- ⁴ Derek D. McCrea, "TCM-ABCT Identifies Gaps in Bradley Training," *Infantry Magazine*, July-September 2013.
- ⁵ ATP 3-21.8.
- ⁶ Jason R. Lally, "A Platoon Leader's Reflection on Readiness," *Infantry Magazine*, October-December 2017.
- ⁷ Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, Army Leadership, Army Leader Development Strategy, August 2012.
- ⁸ McCrea, "TCM-ABCT Identifies Gaps in Bradley Training."
- ⁹ Michael S. Farmer and Brian J. Harthorn, "Infantry Attacks at NTC: Part II," *Infantry Magazine*, April-June 2017.
- ¹⁰ "State of the Infantry."

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