

Who You Gonna Call?

DECIPHERING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RESERVE, QUICK REACTION, STRIKING, AND TACTICAL COMBAT FORCES

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Unlike in the 1984 film, when faced with a problem of enormous dimensions and severe ramifications, the worldly Army unit commander cannot follow the admonitions of Dr. Raymond Stantz and Dr. Peter Venkman and answer: “Ghostbusters!” Instead, today’s Army commanders have several options to whom to place that all important 911 call. From the quick reaction force (QRF), across the spectrum including the rapid response force (RRF) or, in some references, the ready reaction force (RRF), the tactical combat force (TCF), and the reserve, to the vaunted “striking force,” organizations are standing by to strive mightily to “save the supported commander’s bacon,” so to speak. Unfortunately, knowing whom to call in what situation and where that organization might be is all too often clouded in mysterious volumes of forgotten doctrine. It is not addressed in the Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) and Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) ménage of “Doctrine 2015.”

For example, the greenest young captain commanding for the first time knows that his battalion commander told him the reserve will come running with Infantry possibly

supported by tanks, engineers, and artillery, to wreak havoc, kill the bad guys, and restore order to the young captain’s troubled land. Yet, how does the battalion commander (or any other commander) know how to organize, position, and employ this ad hoc organization whose purpose is to save us from destruction or exploit our success?

Many of the majors we teach at the Command and General Staff Officer’s Course are confused as to the type and purpose of the units to use, especially in conventional operations based on several years of experience conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. We hear it in classroom discussions and read it on student written requirements.

The question of knowing whom to call prompted a check with ADRP 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, and on page 1-32, the definition of reserve is: “reserve — (Army) That portion of a body of troops which is withheld from action at the beginning of an engagement, in order to be available for a decisive movement. (ADRP 3-90, *Offense and Defense*).” Further searches find the definition of “striking force” on page 1-34 to be “striking force – A dedicated counterattack force in a mobile defense constituted with the bulk of available combat power. (ADRP 3-90) See also, mobile defense.”

Not found anywhere mentioned in ADRP 1-02 are the



organizations of QRF (or any other type of reaction or response force) such as a TCF. However, a casual glance at division, corps, and joint task force (JTF) operation orders will reveal that QRFs and TCFs are receiving missions and specific tactical tasks.

According to ADRP 3-90, "A reserve is that portion of a body of troops which is withheld from action at the beginning of an engagement, in order to be available for a decisive movement." The reserve is initially not a committed force and thus does not normally have a full suite of combat multipliers available to it until its commitment. It is normally the echelon's main effort once committed.

The commander constitutes a reserve regardless of which element of operations currently dominates. The commander bases the desired size of the reserve on the level of uncertainty and risk in the current tactical situation. The location occupied by the echelon reserve depends on the most likely mission for the reserve upon commitment, or on survivability considerations. The commander can assign the reserve a wide variety of tasks to perform upon commitment, and it must be prepared to perform other missions. The primary tasks for a reserve are to:

- Retain the initiative;
 - Take advantage of unexpected success ("exploitation");
- and
- Counter tactical reverses that threaten the integrity of the friendly force's operations.

A commander should always retain a reserve, reconstituting one whenever possible upon the commitment of the original reserve. Unlike the "striking force," the reserve's size is contingent on risk and forces available.

So, how does the young leader know the difference between the reserve and the striking force? Farther along in ADRP 3-90, the very clear guidance concerning the striking force delineates that: "The mobile defense is a defensive task that concentrates on the destruction or defeat of the enemy through a decisive attack by a striking force. The mobile defense focuses on defeating or destroying the enemy by allowing enemy forces to advance to a point where they are exposed to a decisive counterattack by the striking force. The striking force is a dedicated counterattack force in a mobile defense constituted with the bulk of available combat power. A fixing force supplements the striking force. The commander uses the fixing force to hold attacking enemy forces in position, to help channel attacking enemy forces into ambush areas, and to retain areas from which to launch the striking force."

Additionally, ADRP 3-90 states: "A mobile defense requires an area of operations with considerable depth. The commander must be able to shape the battlefield, causing an enemy force to overextend its lines of communication (LOCs), expose its flanks, and dissipate its combat power. Likewise, the commander must be able to move friendly forces around and behind the enemy force targeted to be cut off and destroyed. Divisions and larger formations normally execute mobile defenses. However, brigade combat teams (BCTs) and maneuver battalions may participate in a mobile

defense as part of the fixing force or the striking force."

From this guidance, echelons below division do not conduct mobile defenses, but lower echelons may be part of a mobile defense. So, the question arises, in what manner does a reserve differ from a striking force at division or higher?

ADRP 3-90 states: "The defending force conducts operations throughout the depth of the enemy's formation in time and space to destroy the enemy's key units and assets, particularly their artillery and reserves, or disrupt their timely introduction into battle at the point of engagement. This allows the defending force to regain the initiative. It conducts spoiling attacks to disrupt enemy's troop concentrations and attack preparations. The defending force counterattacks enemy successes rapidly with its reserve, the forces at hand, or a striking force before the enemy can exploit success. It conducts electronic warfare to assist this process."

Are the reserve and the striking force really two different animals? According to our doctrine, they are separate and distinct, but they are frequently confused due to some similarities in their commitment.

The biggest difference is that a striking force is a committed force once it has been designated in the operation order (OPORD) or operation plan (OPLAN). A reserve is not "committed" until it is employed. This has ramifications for the assignment of supporting forces and fires. For example, because a striking force is "committed," it is automatically included in the scheme of maneuver and assigned attached or supporting forces. Fires that cannot be employed elsewhere until properly relieved can also be assigned. Because a reserve is not committed until its employment is ordered, it does not have assignment of fires or priorities of support. Generally, it will not have additional supporting forces assigned until actual commitment. While a reserve can plan for possible commitments based on most likely and most dangerous enemy courses of actions (MLECOA/MDECOA), it may actually never be employed. The reserve is a contingency force, not part of the primary scheme of maneuver.

Here is where we then find a conundrum: Since "striking forces" are part of a mobile defense and the lowest level a mobile defense is constituted is the division/joint task force (JTF), how does a BCT or battalion execute a scheme of maneuver with a dedicated force designed to counterattack the enemy in the main battle area (MBA)? Doctrinally, the answer must be the use of a reserve. So, at the BCT and below, any counterattack force is a reserve, not striking force. However, this means that the designated reserve's coordination with other supporting elements becomes more complex since other supporting elements are not attached or supporting until the commitment of the reserve. This requires a great deal of flexibility with the units involved.

One of the forces that has fallen out of the "lingo" of our Army in the past 12 years is TCF. The reason is that in a low-intensity, unconventional conflict, the purpose of the TCF is negated (i.e.; fighting "Level III" threats). Unlike Vietnam, and potentially what might have occurred in Europe, the

counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have not consisted of Level III threats in the areas constituting the base support areas. The threats are not a conventional, mobile force, but a smaller, unconventional force.

The origins of the TCF go back to the development of AirLand Battle (ALB) doctrine. The developers of ALB doctrine studied the operations on the Eastern Front between the German and Soviet forces in World War II as well as the battles in Golan Heights in 1973. The U.S. doctrine developers realized that we faced many of the same problems then facing the Warsaw Pact that the Germans previously faced with the Soviets and the Israelis later faced with the Syrians. Additionally, modern Soviet doctrine depended upon deep penetrations of NATO defenses by *desant* or mobile armored columns — operational mobile groups (OMGs) or mobile groups (MGs). These conventional forces were too powerful for NATO sustainment forces and territorial defense units in the rear areas to handle. Rear area threats became classified according to the size and threat — Levels I through III. The need arose for designated conventional forces to fight Level III threats which have significant capabilities not possessed by rear-area NATO forces. The TCF became the solution since it requires the use of “movement and maneuver” (formerly combat arms) units armed and equipped to fight a like conventional force.

Soviet deep attacks were of significant concern to the German Wehrmacht and later to NATO. The intent of the Soviet deep attacks was to hit the “soft” rear areas and disrupt the logistics, support, and command/control for the MBA forces, or more importantly, destroy the U.S. tactical nuclear delivery units during the Cold War era. The Wehrmacht’s solution to the Soviet rear-area threats required detailing forces to specifically deal with Soviet breakthrough forces and thus taking combat power from the front lines. Additionally, as the war progressed, the Germans realized the “front” could be anywhere, and they began training

service and support troops to defend themselves against what we now classify as Level I and II threats. A number of innovative solutions were tried, but the biggest effect was the realization that Soviet forces, once in the rear areas, generally could be isolated and destroyed. This countered the psychological effects of the “enemy in the rear.” As a result of their WWII experiences, the modern Soviet/Russian response has been to make the mobile groups’ combat and sustainment support power more robust.

Rear area Level I threats do not require mobile forces to fight them. However, Level II threats may require larger, more capable responses. A mobile force with appropriate fire support designated, usually by the area commander, deals with Level II threats in the rear area. The Level II-oriented forces are called “response forces.”

Because of the nature of the threat and conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, a relatively new organization has been designated and codified. Since stability and COIN operations tend to be relatively static and offensive/defensive actions are generally of limited nature and scope, a force not related to offensive and defensive operations has been designated as the “quick reaction force.”

Like the reserve, the QRF is an uncommitted force designed to handle emergency responses for forces operating in the assigned area of operations. “Quick” designates not only the speed of response but the speed of movement to the point required. The QRF must be highly mobile and able to respond in enough time to prevent the enemy from decisively defeating or destroying the unit that the QRF is assisting. A QRF is a response force but not a “response force” in the sense of Level I or II threats considered in conventional operations.

QRFs operate everywhere in the assigned area of operations of units conducting stability or COIN operations. Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, states that a response

Figure 1 — Tactical and Operational Contingency Force Matrix

TYPE FORCE	COMMITTED	UNCOMMITTED	SIZE	OBJ - ENEMY MANEUVER FORCES	OBJ - LVL 1-3 FORCES	OFFENSE/ DEFENSE	COIN/ STABILITY OPERATIONS	PRIORITY OF FIRES SUPPORT
RESERVE		X ²	Depends on Risk and ECOA	X		X / X	X	X
TCF	X		Depends on Risk and ECOA		X Lvl III	X / X		
QRF		X	Depends on Risk				X	
STRIKING FORCE	X		Bulk of Def Maneuver Force	X		O / X		X
REACTION FORCE		X	Depends on Risk and ECOA		X Lvl I and II	X / X Lvl I and II		
RESPONSE FORCE		X	Depends on Risk and ECOA		X Lvl II	X / X Lvl II		

force is “a mobile force with appropriate fire support designated, usually by the area commander, to deal with Level II threats in the rear area.” QRFs are therefore designated in stability and COIN situations but not usually in conventional situations. The level of threat is not pertinent to QRFs since such “level” threats are not normally designated in stability or COIN operations by doctrine.¹ This may, however, change in emerging doctrine that addresses “hybrid” forces with both unconventional and conventional capabilities.

Figure 1 sorts the types of forces, their commitment for planning, size of forces used, the type of enemy faced, and the type of operation in which the forces are employed. It is an attempt to classify types of forces used and planning considerations affecting their employment.

In Closing

What kind of force to designate and whom to call can be confusing if the units involved do not understand the doctrine along with the second and third order effects. The support requirements, the size and composition of the elements involved, and the receipt of priorities of fires and support to the units involved are especially important to unit planners and commanders.

Doctors Stantz and Venkman might rest assured that whatever force they need to use, after familiarizing themselves with the current doctrine, they will pick the correct one.

Notes

¹ Stability and COIN operations generally fall under the auspices of “irregular war” which, by definition, is the conduct of operations against irregular combat forces. These forces are likely to be those that would constitute Level I or II forces in a conventional scenario. With advent of “hybrid” threats, e.g.; non-state, terrorists with conventional capabilities, the consideration for the use of the threat levels might be considered appropriate.

² Reserve forces are designated and given priorities for planning and commitment. However, until they are ordered into action, they are “uncommitted.” Once they have been ordered into action, they become committed forces and another reserve should be constituted.

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HHC/BDE ... SEPARATE COMPANY?

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Since our Army began transforming to brigade combat teams (BCTs), brigades have created different business rules for their headquarters and headquarters company (HHC/BDE). The question has never been about whether or not the Soldiers in this company require leadership, resourcing, and supervision; rather, the question is which organization should provide these things for the company?

Some believe that this company should remain as a completely separate subordinate organization in the BCT. On the other end of the spectrum, some would argue that the company should be attached to the brigade special troops battalion (BSTB) with the BSTB assuming complete ownership as they do for their other companies. The compromise is that an operations order or memorandum of agreement (MOA) outlines what the BSTB is responsible for and what authorities over the company they do not have. As the Army undergoes another transformation from BSTBs to brigade engineer battalions (BEBs), the question of how to exercise mission command with respect to the brigade HHC remains relevant. This article will make the case for the course of action in which the company is attached to the BEB, and that battalion should assume 100 percent responsibility for the organization. Why? Because this increases the BCT's ability to accomplish its mission, and that is what we are all trying to achieve.

HHC/BDE requires supervision like every other company in the Army. There are numerous tasks that Soldiers must complete each week. Some of these are directed, such as annual information assurance training. Some of the tasks are created at battalion level based on the experience of the commander and staff. For example, a few months into our deployment we made everyone update their DD Form 93, *Record of Emergency Data*. The opponents of attachment to the BEB say that this is what the company commander and first sergeant (1SG) are for — partially true, but all companies need things to be reinforced or prioritized, and a company commander and 1SG do not have the same depth of experience as a battalion commander and command sergeant major. Figure 1 shows numerous things that the BEB can ensure that the Soldiers of HHC/BDE accomplish. Many of these things require mature proof-reading, guidance, and input to the content — all things that a battalion commander and a battalion staff can provide.

The company has resourcing requirements just like the other 29-37 companies in the brigade. Soldiers in HHC/BDE are required to qualify on their weapons, complete driver's training to receive a valid military driver's license, do annual drown-proofing, train on Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, attend numerous schools, and many other things. Resourcing the ammo, ranges, pool, vehicles, field rations, training areas, etc., is the responsibility of a battalion staff, and the BEB can do this