Fires Under Resolute Support

Integrating Indirect Fires in a Non-Combat Mission

CPT Steve Thomas

As coalition forces have transitioned from combat operations under Operation Enduring Freedom to a strictly advisory role in Operation Resolute Support, the need for lethal fires has diminished significantly. The amount of combat patrols conducting kinetic missions necessitates far fewer fire missions, and our limited combat power simply does not demand the volume of indirect fire once commonplace in Afghanistan.

Although fairly limited in scope, accurate indirect fires remain vital to overall security. Integrating fires, even in this non-combat mission, is essential to our overall security and force protection. Task Force War's primary mission is to provide security to both Operating Base (OB) Fenty and the Police Advisory Team while simultaneously providing critical life support functions on the base. LTC Jason Curl, commander of the 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Infantry Division, is also the ground force commander responsible for security in the surrounding ground defense area (GDA), an area surrounding OB Fenty in which he is tasked with securing and defending the base.

Task Force War also provides security for the advisory team, transporting and securing the advisors in different locations throughout Nangarhar Province. Historically, the primary threat to Jalalabad Army Airfield has been indirect fire consisting of both 107 and 122mm rockets. Throughout the past two years, OB Fenty has been targeted by more than 70 rocket attacks. In nearly every instance, hostile forces positioned rocket systems on timers, launching volleys of rockets towards the airfield in an attempt to destroy coalition infrastructure and personnel. Even now, one of our top concerns is the indirect fire threat from multiple hostile forces throughout Nangarhar.

In the winter months, Jalalabad and the surrounding areas experience low cloud ceilings and frequent storms that constrain the use of airborne assets. Unfavorable weather consistently affects our operations, forcing last minute changes utilized numerous nonstandard observer platforms in place of the standard 13F fire supporter. Attack aviation, unmanned aircraft, and static high-resolution cameras provide the ability to safely observe rounds without requiring observers to be physically present and still provide accurate fires. All assets are limited by the elements, but if weather is favorable, they provide an array of options that do not necessitate boots on the ground.

Employment

The primary means to maintain proficiency and conduct preplanned fire missions is through observed fire training (OFT), a deliberate process that requires approval through our higher headquarters at Train, Advise, and Assist Command-East (TAAC-E). All targets are mensurated through the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) and are outside of the minimum safe distance for the 155mm projectile. We plan and resource these missions just as we would a patrol, providing task and purpose to the mission in order to produce measures of effectiveness that align with our commander's overall targeting guidance. While fires are not principally used for counterfire, OFTs instill confidence in the local population that we are protecting in the area, impact hostile forces, and maintain crew proficiency on the gun line as they conduct drills and rehearsals in preparation for routine fire missions.

Our unit, at multiple levels, takes great precaution in planning fires; therefore, no fire missions – precision or otherwise – are authorized within the minimum safe distance. Throughout Nangarhar, hostile forces also emphasize collateral concerns, issuing guidance to avoid populated areas in order to minimize their negative effect on the civilian population. Historic points of origin are often in rural and uninhabited areas because ultimately the enemy's information operations campaign is just as important as ours. Indirect fires from OB Fenty directly impact their ability to stage and launch, complicating their decision-making process.

Precision munitions provide a more accurate first round, enabling accurate target engagement with fewer munitions. Critical to operations under Resolute Support, Excalibur and Precision Guidance Kit (PGK) provide reliable options that achieve effects on target with a significantly lower probability of collateral damage. Additionally, the increased range of the M982 Excalibur extends our overall reach to 37.5 kilometers, well beyond the GDA boundary.

TAAC-E employs a unique disposition that enables two bases — Tactical Base (TB) Gamberi and OB Fenty — to conduct fire missions with a shared fire direction center. The hot gun and Soldiers reside at OB Fenty providing 24-hour coverage, yet we maintain the ability to insert a section into TB Gamberi at any time and quickly establish firing capability.

Similar to an artillery raid, the section occupies an already verified position, establishes a hasty fire direction center, establishes communications with higher headquarters, and is capable of providing lethal fires in support of TB Gamberi. This competency affords both ground force commanders the ability to employ fires in support of preplanned missions and in extremis provide the ability to conduct defensive fires. This arrangement sends a strong message to hostile forces within each GDA that there is a weapon capable of incredible firepower in position and ready to fire. Such a unique ability also possesses significant limitations. Routine maintenance such as the fire control alignment test (FCAT), borescope, pullover gauge readings, and regular preventive maintenance checks are required by a force that is not consistently at the gun position. Additionally, all fire direction and communications equipment must be brought with the section for every fire mission.

Preparation

Prior to the deployment, we conducted numerous live-fire training exercises, enhancing our overall ability to integrate joint fires. Through squadron live-fire exercises, a brigade air assault, and the joint forced entry at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, La., leaders and Soldiers were equipped for the mission sets required in Resolute Support.

In May 2014, to prepare for JRTC Rotation 14-09 and the upcoming deployment, 3-320th FA invited LTC Scott Collins and the PGM (precision-guided munitions) Fires Team from Fort Sill, Okla., to Fort Campbell. His team conducted initial precision fires training which integrated fire supporters, fire direction and howitzer personnel, and battalion leadership.

The training provided a general overview of the capabilities of precision munitions and gave practical guidance on how to employ precision munitions as an observer, FDC, gun line, and as a higher headquarters. The introductory course set the stage for additional hands-on training at Fort Polk, whereby the platoon fired 17 M795 with PGK throughout the rotation.

Throughout JRTC and our time in theater, we fired 22 rounds with an overall circular area of less than 36 meters. Overall, TCM Fires at Fort Sill reports an average success rate of 85 percent. Of the 22 rounds fired, only one failed to function, resulting in a reliability rating of 95 percent. Most of the firing section from Cobra Battery, 3-320 FA participated in the precision fires training at JRTC. Eighteen out of 22

Soldiers conducted the training and received initial instruction and practical application of the PGK and Excalibur.

Once on ground, SFC Erik Olson, the section's platoon sergeant, and SSG Benjamin Gonzales, the fire direction NCO, conducted refresher training to solidify proficiency. The in patrols and advising missions. Inclement weather restricts patrols, limiting the overall projection of combat power. In light of these challenging environmental conditions, we have been able to retain a full complement of indirect fire capabilities from 60, 81, and 120mm mortars to M777A2 155mm howitzers. The howitzer platoon — consisting of artillerymen from the 3rd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment — provides 24-hour coverage for both preplanned missions and counterfire operations. Artillery fires provide an all-weather capability to the task force commander, enabling him to quickly respond to an indirect fire attack and project combat power when unmanned and rotary wing assets are grounded.

In order to minimize unnecessary troops on the ground and limit exposure when conducting disruption operations, we have squadron fires cell conducted numerous rehearsals, ensuring fire direction procedures to regain expertise in the employment of precision munitions.

Implementation

Within the confines of Resolute Support, the overall purpose of fires in this dynamic environment is to augment force protection, extending our operational reach to areas unable to be influenced by a more consistent presence on the ground.

One of our greatest fears in establishing a firing point on a base that has not housed an artillery platform in several years is the effect on the local populace. After all, the M777A2 is a violently loud 155mm cannon. OB Fenty is situated on the outskirts of Jalalabad, directly adjacent to numerous houses.

Firing such a weapon could undoubtedly disrupt and annoy the neighboring community; however, this is not the case. Simply stated, since we began regularly firing the howitzer in support of defensive operations, rocket attacks in the area have decreased dramatically. Local maliks readily admit their dissatisfaction with the loud noises in the middle of the night but praise the results. They are more confident that we are able to provide indirect fire deterrence and have commended LTC Curl that he has provided such a capability in support of Jalalabad Army Airfield .

Being at an airfield, airspace synchronization plays a significant role during each fire mission. To avoid any synchronization conflicts, the howitzer is positioned away from the flight line and the gun target line is directed away from the airfield and oriented towards our primary threat. Prior to firing, we establish a restricted operations zone (ROZ) that limits aircraft along the gun target line. Through these simple parameters, we are capable of firing without significant airspace clearance headaches. Consistent communication with the airspace control tower and the local aviation unit alleviates most issues, enabling simple airspace clearance for any fire mission in what would otherwise be a difficult problem set.

With our restricted ability to project combat, indirect fires allow us to impact areas across the battlefield. Although considered a training mission, precision indirect fires enable us to accurately fire fewer rounds with minimal circular error, significantly decreasing the likelihood of collateral damage while simultaneously enhancing force protection. Coupled with focused intelligence collection, artillery fires prove an invaluable resource that enhances our presence throughout the GDA, providing both lethal and nonlethal capabilities throughout TAAC-E.

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Artillerymen from the 3rd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) conduct M777 Howitzer training with precision-guided munitions March 19, 2015, at Operational Base Fenty, Afghanistan. (Photo by CPT Charlie Emmons)