

# Maneuver Leaders' Role in Observation Planning

## *King of Battle Reclaiming the Throne... Not Without the Queen*

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As observed by observer-coach-trainers (OCTs) during decisive action rotations at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, fire support officers (FSOs) at all echelons struggle to get observers in position to observe planned targets from brigade combat team (BCT) down to company level. This results in planned targets that are tied to fire support tasks not being serviced or having maneuver delayed by fires. Unlike the effort maneuver commanders take finding a useable attack-by-fire (ABF)/support-by-fire (SBF) position, they put less thought into observers' locations and their ability to observe and adjust fires. They think either the FSO will figure it out or the actual observers will move to a location that they can observe from. This unhinges the war game as they can't really figure out where they will observe from or how long it will take to actually get to the location. Thus, units may either get late fires that fail to achieve the effect for the duration needed or don't get fires at all. The contributing factors include:

- \* Commanders and FSOs do not plan the location of observation posts (OPs) to service targets;

- \* Commanders and FSOs do not understand the capabilities and limitations of fire support teams (FISTs) and forward observers (FOs); and

- \* Commanders do not select a FIST control option.

*A fire support team assigned to A Battery, 4th Battalion, 1st Field Artillery, observes a smoke mission providing obscuration of a breach site during a decisive action rotation at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA.*

Photos by SSG Joseph Gonzalez

Inadequate fires planning begins during mission analysis due to FSOs insufficiently articulating directed brigade/battalion fire support responsibilities and describing how those fire support tasks support the higher headquarters' concept of operation one and two levels up. Both enable clarity of nesting plans at echelon. This shortcoming limits the commander's and staff's understanding of the higher headquarters' scheme of fires, to include the observer plan.

The observer plan is further impaired by FSOs not developing 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 on who, how, or when the observer will be in place to observe targets and triggers. Maneuver battalion and brigade S3s and executive officers (XOs) 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/after COA analysis or sometimes not at all. No thought is applied to how the observer is going to get there, how long it will take, effects of limited visibility on optics, and other critical factors. The result is that locations, positioning, and the timing of occupation of OPs are not synchronized with the maneuver plan, and the overall consequence is that fires are not synchronized to facilitate maneuver.

### Fire Support Capabilities and Limitations

When fire supporters consolidated into field artillery (FA) battalions, the most significant reason was to ensure they receive the best training possible. FA battalion commanders ensure that maneuver battalion commanders receive highly trained fire support elements (FSEs) back as they transition to company and above collective training. However, FSEs are trained on very specific tasks that are not always integrated into maneuver training. A training gap that has become clearly evident at NTC is that commanders fail to integrate fire supporters' occupation of OPs into maneuver training at home station. This becomes very apparent during the brigade live fire at NTC. Observers are more timely and accurate when they are stationary in an elevated position. During the offense, one of two scenarios occurs:

1. The FSO moves behind the company/battalion commander and is unable to observe the trigger or the target while moving (due to the commander's position and the order or implied requirement that the FSO moves with the commander).
2. The FSO maneuvers to the OP. However, due to the fact that the timing of the movement of the observer to the OP was not planned or synchronized with the maneuver plan, it takes much longer than the commander visualized in his mind. This results in either executing the plan without fires or having maneuver elements remain stationary for a longer period of time where they are subject to enemy fires, which desynchronizes the brigade plan.

This could be attributed to live-fire exercises at home station where the field artillery and mortar impact areas are routinely offset from the platoon, company, or battalion maneuver live-fire areas. This requires the observer to occupy an OP that was nowhere near where they are training. Many times observers move straight to their OPs as maneuver is setting up the range and then remain there for the duration of live-fire training without requiring OP occupation to be synchronized. The FSOs do not maneuver with the company or battalion due to the location of the OP and designated impact areas.

Another scenario that occurs is having the FSO move with the maneuver unit 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 job.

Many maneuver commanders possess limited knowledge of fire support systems and equipment. They work with FOs

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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 half of a tank or infantry company's M1s or M2s were non-mission capable (NMC), a commander would be highly concerned and most likely would have to make a decision to reallocate combat power or adjust subordinate units' missions. If every one of the stand-alone computer units (SCUs) or fire support sensor systems (FS3s) in their Bradley FIST (BFIST) are NMC, commanders typically do not realize they have lost digital fires capability with their observers and the impacts that has on timely and accurate 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 leaders waiting on fire supporters to get observers in position to observe targets that are essential to the battalion/brigade scheme of maneuver. Doctrine for fire support planning at BCT and below is currently covered in Army Techniques 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 doesn't cover observation planning at battalion level. It only provides information on occupying an OP, known as SLOCTOP (security, location, communication, targets, observation, position improvement). Commanders should rely on their FISTs 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 fire support vehicle (FSV) and a dismounted OP consists of at least two FOs. Commanders must assume the risk of those Soldiers occupying dominant terrain independently to gain tactical advantage over the enemy in support of Soldiers conducting maneuver.

The six-step technique for observation planning is a forcing function for subordinate units to analyze the target and OP planned by battalion/brigade and submit refinements (see box on next page). Company commanders often plan under constrained timelines and focus on what battalion tasks them to do. When the S3 includes the requirement to emplace an OP in order to observe battalion targets in the "Tasks to Subordinate Units," the commander is now required to follow the order or submit a refinement. This also puts it as a consideration briefed in operation orders (OPORDs), backbriefs, and the battalion combined arms rehearsal (CAR). They submit refinements to

## Observation Planning 6-Step Technique

The six-step observation planning technique **retains flexibility** at the lowest level to position observers. Using **top-down planning, bottom-up refinement** to position observers optimizes and synchronizes observer positioning across the BCT. **Detecting and assessing the effects of fires is critical.** The six-step technique provides a methodical approach to produce **refined, executable, integrated, and synchronized observation plans.** This observation planning technique also provides the observer and commander with data necessary to rapidly adapt that plan during execution if a planned OP is determined to be unsuitable after using a line of sight and risk estimate diagram.

- Step 1:** Determine the desired effects of fires
- Step 2:** Determine the target observation suitability
- Step 3:** Develop the observation course of action
- Step 4:** Task observers and OPs in top-down observer plan
- Step 5:** Refine and rehearse the observation plan
- Step 6:** Monitor and adjust observer plan execution

### Tasks to Subordinate Units

(Example BCT Tasking Task Force to Occupy an OP)

TF SILVER LION  
NLT 130530AUG2016 establish observation of AE0030 from OP 301 and 302 in order to refine targets and neutralize EN BPs. OPs may displace once AE0030 is fired or effective EN fires are received.

targets, triggers, and OP locations so that it is 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 FISTs to support scheme of maneuver. They should consider risk estimate distances (REDS)/minimum safe distances (MSDs) of munitions planned for the target, line of sight analysis, and capabilities available. They should also plan the OP locations considering whether it is a mounted OP with Fire Support Sensor System (FS3)/Long-Range Advanced Scout Surveillance System (LRAS) or dismounted OP with Lightweight Laser Designator Rangefinder (LLDR)/vector or map, compass, and M22 binoculars. The FSOs need to be familiar with the capability of these systems and the experience of the FOs or FISTs that are utilizing 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.

*“The commander is the most important participant in the MDMP (military decision-making process). More than simply decision makers in the process, commanders use their experience, knowledge, and judgment to guide staff planning efforts.”*

#### — Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (ATTP) 5-0.1, Commander and Staff Officer Guide, para 4-8.

Many maneuver commanders provide mediocre guidance for fire support. This limits an 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.

ATTP 5-0.1 table 4-1 lists suggestions commanders should consider issuing as part of their commander's guidance. It includes guidance for observer planning, which is rarely issued.

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

- Daylight vs. limited visibility movement and occupation
- Mounted vs dismounted movement and occupation
- Not later than (NLT) times 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
- Tactical risk the commander is willing to assume with the observer plan (compromise, time, equipment, redundancy, etc.)

### Control Options

Another significant concept of doctrine that is not routinely discussed is the FIST control option referenced in ATP 3-09.30. Most fire supporters know about centralized versus decentralized control options for calling for fire directly or through an intermediary to a surface-to-surface weapon system. However, the ATP also provides options on 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 option has its own benefits and drawbacks.

The first control option is the consolidated fire support platoon, which centralizes the platoon for planning and employment of FISTs and FOs to streamline taskings from the battalion commander. The FISTs can still be available to their company commanders during troop leading procedures (TLPs), but the battalion FSO plans their OPs and targets with the focus on battalion scheme of maneuver. This utilizes the fire support platoon in a way similar to the way BCTs used combat observation lasing teams (COLTs). Delegated by the battalion commander, this option allows for the FSO 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 will allow for 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 the enemy

battle positions in support of the breach force's advance to the breach site. Again, this is not detailed at the company level. The battalion commander can centralize the decision on how to employ FISTs and FOs to ensure that his 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 advance of the breach force.

The second control option is to have 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 the concept of mission command, where we rely 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. As an 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 commanders' decisive points. Also, a battalion objective consisting of an urban center is a time when utilizing this control option assists in the isolation force having an observation plan focused outside the urban center and the fixing force having an observation plan inside the urban center.

The third control option is squad FO. This is the least preferred method, but it offers to place an FO in every squad-size element. This is not recommended because when you split up the FO team, it can diminish their ability to conduct dual independent checks.

The examples given are not rules but considerations that maneuver commanders and FSOs at echelon should discuss from BCT down to company level. Fire support control options that are recommended should be tied to each COA while going through COA analysis.

A recommendation is for BCT FSOs to host a brigade fire support leadership professional development session with focused discussion on observation planning and fire support team control options. Attendees would be brigade and battalion commanders, XOs, S3s, FSOs, and company commanders and FSOs. Battalion FSOs can do the same thing for a maneuver battalion, but so much can be learned from developing shared understanding among the leaders across a BCT. It is up to the fire supporters to advise their maneuver commanders in the options available, providing different ways to approach operations.

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*Soldiers assigned to B Company, 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, observe fires for an attack under live-fire conditions during a decisive action rotation at NTC.*

