

Combined Arms in Urban Operations: *Failure and Success in One Infantry Company*

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The world is increasingly trending towards urbanization. In North America, South America, and Europe, between 75-82 percent of the population lives in urban areas; the United Nations predicts that 68 percent of the world's total population will live in urban environments by 2050.¹ Nearly every major conflict in the past 80 years proves the enduring strategic importance of urban areas, from battles such as Aachen and Stalingrad in the Second World War to battles over Raqqa and Mosul in the past several years. As our military continues to transition from conducting counterinsurgency to focusing on large-scale combat operations, we face a new set of challenges inherent in urban operations. In its report on urban warfare, the U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group states its number one tactical lesson learned: "Combined arms warfare is essential in urban operations, with armor supporting infantry, infantry supporting armor."² It is imperative that infantry companies understand the advantages of true combined arms fighting and work to achieve combined arms synchronization in urban combat; this article presents vignettes from a rifle company's actions at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, CA.

The complexity of urban combat is well-documented. Fighting in cities stresses units with "high military casualty rates and the need to guard continuously virtually every building taken from enemy forces."³ Units must deal with "the challenge of communications, the vulnerability of... armor to individual weapons, and the lack of tactical mobility ordinarily available to dismounted infantry."⁴ Urban terrain is naturally advantageous to the defender, and with U.S. national force-projection capabilities, Army forces will normally find themselves as the attacker during urban operations. Mounted infantry companies have unique characteristics that enable them to fight more effectively in urban areas when compared with dismounted infantry companies.



Soldiers from the 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division leave the fictional city of Ujen, Atropia, during training at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, on 8 September 2019. (Photo by SGT Ryan Barwick)

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-90.1, *Armor and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*, describes the capabilities of mechanized infantry formations: They “take advantage of the Infantry unit’s ability to operate in severely restricted terrain, such as urban areas, forests, and mountains, combined with the mobility and firepower inherent in armor units.”⁵ ATP 3-21.11, *SBCT (Stryker Brigade Combat Team) Infantry Rifle Company*, similarly describes a Stryker infantry company’s capabilities: It can “place Infantry squads into an urban area that can maneuver, communicate, and interact in close contact with the local population, and search... suppress or destroy significant fortified emplacements with the use of .50 cal, MK-19s, or the MGS (mobile gun system)... The vehicles themselves provide protection with their armor and can engage enemy safely and accurately with the use of the remote weapon station.”⁶ Doctrine delineates the advantages inherent in mounted infantry companies utilizing combined arms in urban operations, but it does not provide details on specific tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

Armored brigade combat team (ABCT) and SBCT infantry companies often struggle to fully utilize the capabilities of both their dismounted and vehicular elements and thus fail to fight effectively using combined arms. At NTC, infantry companies trend towards two edges of a spectrum: They either rarely use their dismounts and focus on the vehicular fight, or they focus almost entirely on the dismount fight to the exclusion of their vehicles. Specifically, infantry companies at NTC struggle with integrating their mounted platforms into the urban fight; often, they utilize only unsupported dismounts to clear complex urban objectives or inadequately plan for effective vehicle integration.

During a recent NTC rotation, a mounted rifle company demonstrated varying levels of success in urban operations. The company’s combat power comprised 13 combat platforms, six rifle squads, and three weapons squads. Its training strategy had focused heavily on dismounted operations. Company leaders admitted they had neglected vehicular training, mostly relegating vehicle involvement in training exercises to transport and limited support by fire during squad and platoon live-fire exercises (LFXs). Their early tactical plans for NTC reflected this training focus and consisted of long dismounted movements often under cover of darkness with the vehicles remaining at the dismount point until the mission was complete. When approaching their first urban objective, they planned to conduct a covert dismounted breach through a wire obstacle surrounding the city, followed by a dismounted clearance of the objective. There was no deliberate plan to integrate vehicles, and the company left them at the dismount point four kilometers away. During the clearance operation, they sustained heavy casualties after seizing the foothold and additional casualties when they encountered an enemy strongpoint that they could not effectively suppress or destroy. The company was able to take a tactical pause, reorganize, and bring its vehicles forward to complete its mission but had 39 wounded in action (WIA), 37 of whom died of wounds (DOW) as compared to 15 enemy killed.

This company’s challenges in its first urban objective were not due to its proficiency at executing squad-level battle drills; the squads and platoons were among the best trained in dismounted operations that we have seen.



Soldiers assigned to the 3rd Cavalry Regiment move their position forward during Decisive Action Rotation 20-02 at the National Training Center on 31 October 2019.(Photo by SPC Brooke Davis)

	Friendly WIA	Friendly DOW	Enemy KIA from Dismounts	Enemy KIA from Vehicles	Total Enemy KIA
Without Vehicle Support in City	39	37	15	0	15
With Vehicle Support in City	32	6	12	13	25

Comparison of Friendly and Enemy BDA

Its struggles primarily rested on the inability to defeat strongpoint positions and to conduct effective medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) or casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) from its casualty collection point (CCP). Both of these shortcomings could have been addressed by having a deliberate plan to integrate the company's vehicles. Company leaders realized this and conducted more extensive planning that incorporated their vehicles for the next urban objective. Once they seized a foothold and eliminated any anti-tank weapons from the initial area, the vehicles would move up and support one-to-two blocks behind the lead infantry squads. The squads would then clear forward and eliminate anti-tank threats while the vehicles were available to support the advancing infantry with heavy firepower.

In execution, the company's plan to secure the second urban objective was far more successful. The company called forward its vehicles multiple times to destroy enemy whom Soldiers could not effectively engage with their small arms. In comparison to their first objective, the company suffered 32 WIA, of whom only six DOW, while killing 25 enemy fighters. Vehicle-mounted heavy weapons accounted for half the enemy killed, and no vehicles were destroyed by anti-tank weapons once the company had secured a foothold. The deliberate plan to integrate the vehicles, and their utilization in accordance with that plan, enabled the company to destroy enemy strongpoints and rapidly evacuate casualties back to the next level of care. The figure above shows the comparison at a glance.

Leaders often cite the risk of losing vehicles as a reason for not bringing them forward to urban objectives, but the risk to dismounted squads operating without their vehicles is rarely considered. As we can see from the previous vignettes, the risk to dismounted squads, both during initial contact and in terms of survivability after Soldiers are wounded, is much higher when unsupported by their vehicles. The dismounted and vehicular elements of the company should remain within supporting range and distance during all phases of the operation, thereby maximizing the advantages of each and mitigating the risks to each element individually.

The specific tactical plans of each urban objective described above do not necessarily provide the correct or incorrect answer for any given tactical scenario; rather, the two vignettes together highlight the increased risk associated with failing to conduct combined arms operations at the company level and demonstrate how one company was able to achieve success after applying lessons learned from its mistakes. It is important to remember to integrate both elements of a mounted infantry company in the tactical plan when conducting urban operations. Dismounted infantry can eliminate anti-tank weapons, prevent near ambushes, and effectively clear buildings and city blocks. These tasks secure terrain, provide security for vehicles, and help maintain momentum. The vehicles can provide overwatch with superior range and optics; engage and destroy hard targets; act as a survivable support-by-fire element; and provide rapid CASEVAC and MEDEVAC. These tasks enable the infantry to continue to advance while ensuring momentum is not lost when they encounter enemy strongpoints. It is imperative commanders understand the full capabilities provided by each element of the combined arms team and utilize the full advantages of both to close with and destroy the enemy.

Notes

¹ United Nations World Urbanization Prospects 2018, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 16 May 2018, accessed from <https://population.un.org/wup/>.

² "Modern Urban Operations: Lessons Learned from Urban Operations from 1980 to the Present," U.S. Army Asymmetric Warfare Group, November 2016.

³ Dr. Margarita Konaev and MAJ John Spencer, “The Era of Urban Warfare is Already Here,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 21 March 2018.

⁴ Robert F. Hahn II and Bonnie Jezior, “Urban Warfare and the Urban Warfighter of 2025,” *Parameters*, Summer 1999.

⁵ Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-90.1, *Armor and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*, January 2016, 1-5.

⁶ ATP 3-21.11, *SBCT Infantry Company*, February 2016, 2-23.

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Soldiers assigned to Alpha Company, 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, bound towards an objective during Decisive Action Rotation 20-05 at the National Training Center on 18 March 2020. (Photo by SPC Brooke Davis)