

Section Gunnery and ABCT Lethality

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“Close combat, man to man, is plainly to be regarded as the real basis of combat.”

— **Carl von Clausewitz**

The U.S. Army continues to prepare for large-scale combat operations (LSCO) through tough, realistic training against a near-peer threat.¹ The bulk of America’s conventional striking power — its armored brigade combat teams (ABCTs) — may struggle to maintain qualified and lethal sections due to both high personnel changeover and the deliberate neglect of section gunnery. While Human Resources Command (HRC) and Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA) control the former, brigade commanders have control over the latter. Choosing to neglect section gunnery generates three distinct problems:

- Section leaders never receive feedback and development on a live-fire exercise that bears more importance than any other like exercise;
- Battalion commanders reluctantly separate platoons into sections which reduces flexibility in planning; and
- Company commanders and platoon leaders do not have any validation or confidence in their sections’ operational autonomy before separating them for survivability on a dispersed 21st century battlefield.

While brigade and battalion commanders might see platoon Table VI as an opportunity to train both platoons and sections, the truth is this approach does not accomplish the best training or preparation for LSCO.²

The Army places special trust and high expectations in its infantry staff sergeants — mid-career NCOs responsible for training the foundation of the decisive force. What matters for promotion to sergeant first class, however, is



A Bradley Fighting Vehicle assigned to A Company, 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, advances to the first berm during a crew gunnery at Fort Stewart, GA, on 25 September 2019. (Photo by SPC Jordyn Worshek)

rated time as a rifle squad leader, not as a section leader.³ Infantry NCOs assigned to an ABCT must rotate through the rifle squads to accumulate rated time, but the lethality of a rifle squad pales in comparison to that of a Bradley section. Understandably, this priority of rated time creates a desire in NCOs to serve in the rifle squad leader role that is mandatory for promotion. In addition to this discrepancy in rated time between a section and a squad, the rifle squad leader is sure to get multiple repetitions in a squad live-fire exercise (LFX), while a section leader will not be rated as objectively during platoon LFX because this is the platoon's evaluation with the platoon leader and platoon sergeant responsible for the results. More often than not, platoon leaders and sergeants maneuver their sections, with the section leader resigned simply to the role of track commander during platoon Table VI. Comparatively, a squad LFX gives a squad leader the chance to formulate a plan, brief it, execute it, and receive feedback for development, all while incorporating enablers, under stress, and with live rounds — truly an important exercise for leader development. Section leaders do not get the same opportunity because they are never offered the ownership of a section LFX. Section gunnery and NCO development go hand in hand. Field grade leaders who fail to schedule this event deny a portion of their formation invaluable training. Unfortunately, many ABCTs choose this route.⁴

Leader development is even more vital as formations on the battlefield of the future are expected to perform while geographically dispersed. GEN Mark Milley, who served as the 39th Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), described the future battlefield as requiring never-before-seen levels of unit dispersion. "Soldiers... must split into small units and stay either on the move or under cover," warned the CSA.⁵ Mechanized rifle platoons will break up into sections to increase survivability on a modern battlefield; however, sections never train or operate independently in current unit training plans. Occasionally, a commander detaches a section from its platoon during Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations, but without the deliberate planning and use of live rounds, section leaders do not benefit from this simulated training, as valuable as it is. The Army knows it will fight dispersed, so it is a commander's responsibility to train those echelons and leaders with live rounds and incorporate that into our peacetime training calendars. Section Table VI qualification allows the battalion commander the flexibility to operate as either sections or platoons.⁶ Sections will be the smallest unit we see in a mechanized formation on the future battlefield, and preparation begins now to dominate in close combat.

Section gunnery, so often missing in ABCT training calendars, provides an important mechanism to make these formations lethal. By planning, resourcing, and executing section gunnery, commanders provide their formations with more seasoned and capable NCOs who take their evaluation and performance more seriously. Successful completion of section Table VI provides battalion commanders with qualified sections that can both operate independently and survive on the future battlefield. Training at this echelon makes ABCTs more lethal and fulfills the promise of leader development that we as an Army focus on. It requires more time and effort, but the increased lethality and leader competence ensures mechanized formations — at any echelon — can fight and win tomorrow's wars.

Notes

¹ LTG Michel D. Lundy, "Meeting the Challenge of Large-Scale Combat Operations Today and Tomorrow," *Military Review*, September-October 2018.

² Training Circular (TC) 3-20.0, *Integrated Weapons Training Strategy (IWTS)*, June 2019.

³ Infantry (CMF 11) Career Progression Plan, Office, Chief of Infantry, Fort Benning, GA.

⁴ Through various interviews the author has had with peers who have served in the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division, and 3rd Infantry Division.

⁵ Sydney J. Freedburg Jr., "Miserable, Disobedient, and Victorious: GEN Milley's Future U.S. Soldier," *Breaking Defense*, 5 October 2016, accessed from <https://breakingdefense.com/2016/10/miserable-disobedient-victorious-gen-milleys-future-us-soldier/>.

⁶ Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) Handbook 18-36, *Commander's Guide to Gunnery*, September 2018.

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