

# Consolidating Mortars:

## *A Task-Organization Strategy for Utilizing Mortars in LSCO*

1LT DAVID MCCORMICK

What happens when a call for fire goes unanswered? In future conflicts against a near-peer threat, artillery assets and attack aviation will likely not be as readily available at the battalion level as they were in previous counter-insurgency and counter-terror operations. Facing a near-peer threat, we expect attack aviation to “maneuver independently from ground maneuver forces to attack to destroy, defeat, disrupt, divert, or delay enemy capabilities before they can be brought to bear effectively against friendly forces.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we expect our nation’s competitors to match or exceed our capabilities in the form of “sustained long-range precision fires, integrated air defense systems... and operations against a peer threat will be much more demanding in terms of operational tempo and lethality.”<sup>2</sup> This means, in the fight against near-peer threats, rifle battalions will rely heavily on the only fires assets organic to their formations: mortars.

Mortars are a contradiction. Indirect fire Infantrymen, colloquially known as mortarmen, operate across both the maneuver and fires warfighting functions. Mortarmen are tasked to provide accurate and lethal fires while still patrolling and rucking with heavy packs like their Infantryman counterparts. An effective strategy to emplace and utilize mortars across the battlefield is to consolidate company mortar sections under the battalion mortar platoon. The 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), tested this strategy during National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 22-03. During the rotation, 5-20 IN’s mortar platoon provided fire support during multiple movements to contact, an attack on an urban area, and an area defense in conditions meant to replicate large-scale combat operations (LSCO) against a near-peer threat.

At the onset of the force-on-force battle period, our battalion commander task organized the mortar platoon to include eight Stryker Mortar Carrier Vehicles (MCVs), eight mortar squads outfitted with eight RMS6L 120mm systems, three 81mm systems, and four 60mm systems. This task organization doubles the size of the mortar



**Soldiers in 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment launch mortars during NTC Rotation 22-03.  
(Photos courtesy of author)**



**Soldiers in 5-20 IN launch mortars during NTC Rotation 22-03.**

platoon organization as prescribed in Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.21, *SBCT Infantry Battalion*, which organizes a mortar platoon into four MCVs and four mortar squads outfitted with four 120mm and four 81mm systems. This ability to flex combat power around is unique to Stryker mortar elements as armored mortar platoons are only issued 120mm systems and light mortar sections solely carry 60mm systems. Under our new task organization, battalion mortars' key leadership included the mortar platoon leader, platoon sergeant, three Infantry Mortar Leader Course (IMLC)-qualified section leaders, and the battalion mortar fire direction center (FDC). The only mortar element in the battalion not consolidated with the battalion mortar platoon was one section with three mortar squads carrying two 60mm systems and one 81mm system led by one IMLC-qualified section leader. This section was augmented with the 81mm system in order to provide more firepower to the rifle company that was out of fire-support range from our position. The decision to consolidate all MCVs and squads at the battalion level directly contributed to the battalion's overall mission success by improving control, fire mission response time, our ability to mass fires, and survivability of the platoon.

From the start of operations, consolidation of all mortar assets posed a multitude of risks. The biggest risk we faced was that our physical signature had doubled in size, creating a large target for enemy counterfire. This risk was mitigated by operating as mutually supporting mortar platoons. The platoon sergeant-led element consisted of four MCVs, four mortar squads, our FDC chief, and one section leader. The platoon leader-led element consisted of four MCVs, four mortar squads, and two section leaders. We maneuvered utilizing bounding overwatch to emplace one element before moving the next element to a coexisting location that was separated by a terrain feature or a minimum of 100-200 meters. To further mitigate the risk of counterfire and increase our survivability, we operated in a manner similar to a position area for artillery (PAA).<sup>3</sup> This entailed maneuvering and operating within an approximate kilometer square instead of staying emplaced at fixed mortar-firing points. Combined, these strategies enabled us to ensure that one element could emplace, fire, displace, and conduct a survivability move while another element was still able to process and execute fire missions.

Another issue we faced was how to maximize the additional firepower through our FDC. Our approach was to assign pre-planned priority targets to one element of four 120mm guns while the other element focused solely on dynamic targeting. This decreased our fire mission response time by several minutes, as we had more guns to assign targets to and prevented the need to shift guns off one target to fire another. Currently, the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) of a mortar platoon and section in a SBCT does not allow all systems to be run simultaneously. Of the three mortar systems organic to an SBCT, the 120mm provides a blast radius of 60 meters, which is almost double that of an 81mm round and three times as much as the blast radius of a 60mm round. A way to maximize the amount of firepower and mass additional fires is to have company mortar sections man their MCVs with the 120mm system and cross-train other Infantrymen in their company on handheld and direct lay use of the 60mm mortar. This leads to more firepower massed onto the objective while still providing echelonment of fires.

Consolidating mortars at the battalion level deviates from the current task organization of a Stryker mortar platoon and comes with unique risks and advantages. When mitigated, our platoon found that fighting consolidated was an effective strategy at NTC and provides an additional way to employ mortars across the battlefield. We recommend consolidating mortars to improve the control, fire mission response time, and effects of mortars during battalion-level operations. While fighting consolidated will not fit every situation, the ability for battalion mortar platoons and company mortar sections to adapt is critical as we prepare for future conflict.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-04, *Army Aviation*, April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> FM 3-0, *Operations*, October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-09.50, *The Field Artillery Cannon Battery*, May 2016, Chapter 3.

**1LT David McCormick** currently serves as the mortar platoon leader in 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 1-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA. He previously served as a rifle platoon leader with A Company, 5-20 IN. He is a graduate of Ranger and Airborne Schools, and he earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Colorado.