

Considerations on Engagement Area Development — *Light Infantry Vs a Mounted Opponent*

CPT ROBERT BARGER

“Currahee” is the well-known motto of the 506th Infantry Regiment, a Cherokee word best translated as “stands alone.” It was fitting then that Baker Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, alone was tasked to serve as the opposing force (OPFOR) during a cycle of Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) Battle Group Latvia’s combined arms field exercise in August 2023. While Baker Company faced apparently insurmountable odds, we successfully planned and executed a company defense against what was essentially a mechanized brigade (-). In our preparations and execution of the defense, we gained a greater understanding of defending against a mechanized threat and walked away with sustains, improves, and a few poignant lessons that improved our chances of winning during Silver Arrow, our next training exercise with the battle group.

For this exercise, EFP Battle Group Latvia (our enemy) consisted of a multinational force with main battle tanks, infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), and artillery pieces. It employed snipers, Ravens, and a platoon of armored personnel carriers (APCs) equipped with a 105mm main gun in its reconnaissance and had other dedicated unmanned aerial system (UAS) assets attached to each maneuver company and its fires cell. Its overall order of battle was three mechanized/motorized infantry company teams, one pure tank company, three batteries of heavy artillery, and organic engineer, air defense, and sustainment nodes.



Soldiers in 1st Platoon, Baker Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), receive a brief on their platoon defense scheme of maneuver prior to rehearsing its execution. (Photo by SSG Oscar Gollaz)

Prior to the start of the exercise, it was made clear that adjudication of battlefield effects would not be a priority for the observer/controller (O/C) teams on the ground. The training objectives of the battle group required simultaneous maneuver, command and control, and echelons of brigade-level systems and drills that necessitated a phased approach to the training event. Baker Company's role in the exercise was to operate independently of the operations cell and force the battle group to exercise each of its warfighting functions for the first time against a "living and breathing" enemy. Our defensive preparations themselves, and not the fight itself, thus became our priority.

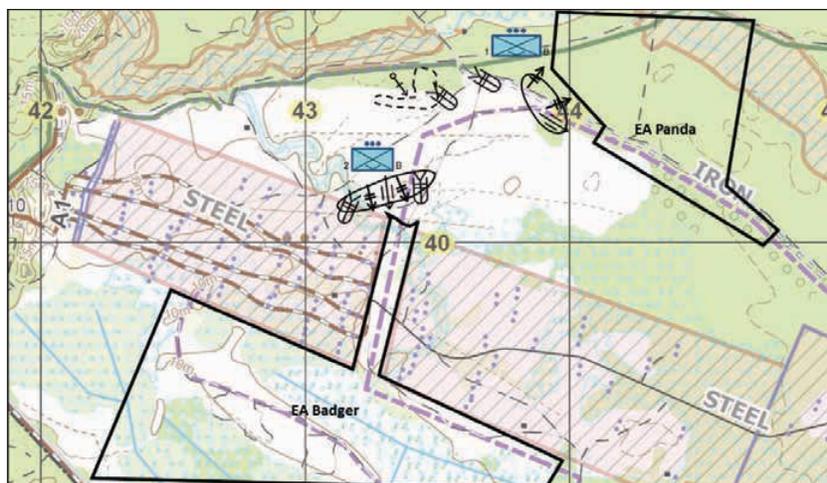
Historically, light infantry has a mixed record when defending against a mechanized opponent. The fundamental dilemma we face is that of a mismatch in firepower and mobility, but this does not necessarily imply a predetermined outcome. During the Korean War, Task Force Smith — a light infantry battalion(+) — was overrun by advancing North Korean armor that penetrated their linear defenses and quickly destroyed supporting artillery in their rear. We would not repeat this mistake, and in each engagement of the iterative exercise, we experimented with methods and triggers that would trade space for time in our defensive operations. Baker Company remained a light infantry formation and lacked the ability to quickly move across open ground. In all our defensive preparations, we made use of the available terrain to destroy our opponent piecemeal at inopportune moments. We planned to maximize the available terrain to use concealment and dispersion to our advantage before our enemy could mass on the bulk of our force.

Adazi Training Area is only a few kilometers wide at its narrowest point and does not have the area to support a continuous three-day training exercise for a mechanized force. Given these restrictions, the battle group planned to conduct a movement to contact throughout the entire training area from south to north on the first day with an emphasis on platoon maneuver. For this, we provided six sections with an anti-tank (AT) system and machine-gun team to defend various river crossings throughout the training area until the battle group was consolidated in the far north. On the second day, companies were tasked to seize two river crossings and a road junction. These positions were preplanned by the battle group to ensure a meeting engagement. The final deliberate attack — our main training objective — would occur with Baker established in a company defense in the north.

Due to notional losses from the previous two days of fighting (my 3rd Platoon was assigned a separate, scripted role in support of a combined arms breach 4 kilometers south of our company battle positions), Baker Company was reduced to two platoons, a 60mm mortar section, and a 28-Soldier engineer platoon that brought heavy equipment and three M113 APCs to the fight. It was with this force that we would plan and execute our company defense.

In preparation for the final company defense, my first task was to evaluate the terrain from the attacker's perspective. Range restrictions for mechanized vehicles created an unpassable notional minefield running northwest to southeast across the majority of the northern portion of the training area. Given the mobility and size of the enemy force, I believed that they were canalized into two potential avenues of approach to the south and east. After determining this, we then analyzed the terrain in support of our scheme of maneuver to set our engagement areas. Both avenues of approach converged into an "L" 500 meters north of the end of the southern lane through the minefield and provided tree cover to the north. The rolling terrain provided some defilade at this intersection, and we first planned our final subsequent battle positions and mortar firing point (MFP) at this location. By planning our final positions first, our scheme of maneuver became clearer to everyone involved in the initial reconnaissance.

Acknowledging the speed advantage of our opponent, we next planned to use what terrain we had available to screen our movements from our primary battle positions back to the MFP/command post (CP). The open area to the south had a northeast-southwest ridgeline that allowed observation over the minefield to a road 1,700 meters to the south. This ridgeline did not have significant overhead cover, but the height advantage and its unrestricted fields of fire were deemed necessary to echelon our organic weapons within our engagement area. Additionally, this ridge provided cover and concealment for anyone moving to their subsequent positions from direct fire weapons and observers anywhere in the engagement area.



Map 1 — Baker Company's Disposition at the Completion of Engagement Area Development

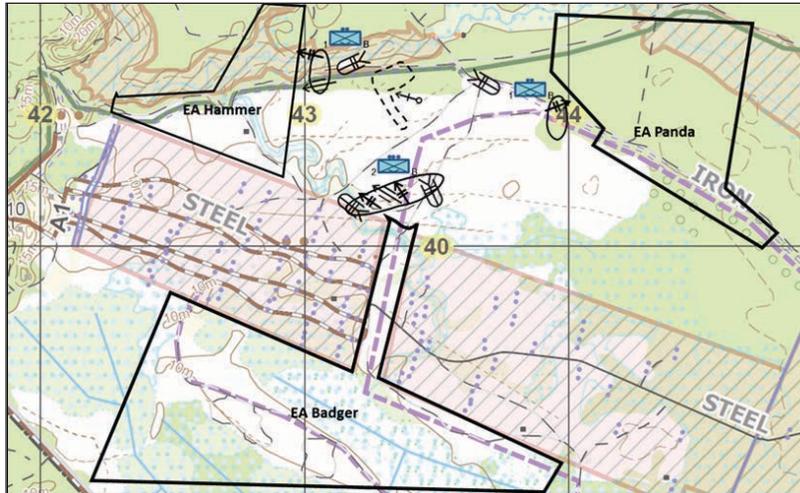
I placed one platoon along this 250-meter ridgeline with an engagement area focused on the southern minefield lane where the enemy would be most canalized. I positioned another platoon in the woods to the north, oriented northeast into the woods and east along the road, to prevent dismounts from enveloping our position while providing AT teams and observation on the eastern avenue of approach.

With our engagement areas and direct fire weapons placed, our attached engineer platoon worked to emplace two AT obstacles within observation of our battle positions while also digging fighting positions for both platoons. Due to the nature of the exercise, our final battle position was in the section of the training area that had been occupied hours earlier. Thus, we were more limited in our time available to employ the engineer platoon than I had initially anticipated. Fuel constraints also limited our use of the D7 Dozer to constructing 300 meters of AT ditch, and the previous night's preparations for our 3rd Platoon's defense deadlined one of our two excavators.

For heavy equipment employment, I initially prioritized protection on the exposed high ground for my 2nd Platoon, but once we started digging in, I found that this was not the most efficient use of the equipment. We quickly realized that Soldiers could dig in much faster in open ground without hacking through innumerable roots and rocks and that the heavy equipment was slow to move between points. With an intentionally dispersed platoon battle position planned for 2nd Platoon and relatively slow progress from the platoon in the wood line after two hours of preparations, I moved the dig assets to the tree line with 1st Platoon to assist in preparing their positions.

An additional benefit to moving the heavy equipment was that it would be virtually impossible to detect by UAS under the concealment of the trees. With the engineer platoon and Baker Soldiers all gainfully employed preparing tactical and protective obstacles, improving their defensive positions, and maintaining security, I then directed a smaller-scale rehearsal to validate a common understanding of our engagement criteria, disengagement criteria, and the triggers that would promote a controlled movement to our subsequent positions.

In previous days' iterations, we found that a full-dress rehearsal with a mounted "enemy" served as the most effective method to identify gaps in our engagement areas, recognize shortcomings in information dissemination, and evaluate the concealment of our battle positions. Simply walking along an avenue of approach produces a different viewpoint than having a gunner in a turret on an 1151. For our company defense, however, the Delta Company platoon we previously used was unavailable. The rehearsal we executed instead focused on a synchronized initiation of our fires plan and our disengagement triggers and movements. On both days, our deliberate full-dress rehearsals provided opportunities to refine our plan and validate what would work on that day's specific terrain.



Map 2 — Baker Company's Disposition Oriented Towards EA Hammer

During our rehearsal, our Soldier Borne Sensor (SBS) operator observed dust clouds along the major east/west main supply route that runs through the training area. Upon a recheck of the map, the boundary allowed one lane's worth of passage to our northwest. I had failed to identify this enemy avenue of approach, and the entire battle group was poised to attack us from that direction. Given the pace of employment, we knew we had about one hour to prepare for an attack from this direction, and we quickly gathered at the CP to formulate a plan.

Already in a good position to observe the enemy's movement towards our flank within their primary engagement area, 2nd Platoon Soldiers began improving their primary positions for an attack from the west. The defilade which would have screened their movement from primary to subsequent positions against an enemy attack from the south stayed functionally the same against an enemy attack from the northwest and still provided the same advantage. To maintain security along the eastern avenue of approach, I directed 1st Platoon to split after a quick mounted reconnaissance showed a single tracked vehicle lane adjacent the national forest and tank range. The two 1st Platoon squads then quickly improved preexisting positions that were scattered throughout the woods, and we notified 2nd Platoon of their positions. We planned to kill the enemy's lead tracked vehicle in the lane with a carefully positioned Javelin and then bound back to allow both platoons to mass their fires onto the concentration of enemy personnel and vehicles that followed.

Much like the previous three days of execution, the actual fight left a little to be desired. Our 2nd Platoon claimed multiple Javelin kills on a convoy of PT91 tanks and multiple Italian IFVs before it broke contact down the defile to subsequent positions. Our 1st Platoon forced the Italian infantry company to dismount at the identified chokepoint in an attempt to flank from the north, but 1st Platoon initiated contact and successfully bounded back to subsequent positions. This allowed 2nd Platoon to mass its fires on the dismounts and IFVs as 1st Platoon Soldiers broke contact into their prepared positions. The fight ended with the entire company meeting our disengagement criteria to move to at least one subsequent position. Despite the frustrations of not witnessing the effects of our efforts, Baker Company Soldiers were clearly proud of our execution of a company defense.

Lessons Learned

During engagement area development, we prioritized rehearsals from every battle position. I found this vital to getting displacement under a time constraint and achieving concealment. Dug-in infantry must know their next position given the limited time we have to displace, but the standoff and firepower advantage of mechanized infantry makes defenders' initiation a priority. Aided by rampant UAS observation and armed with 120mm main guns, 25 and 30mm cannons, and AT/anti-personnel guided missiles, this

mechanized force had the potential to make quick work of our positions from a distance. Concealment of our positions, and the validation of this concealment from multiple angles, is a significant priority.

While conducting troop leading procedures, I failed to identify an enemy avenue of approach and created a most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) where it previously did not exist. Our focus on the identified axes with substantial obstacle emplacement and improvement of our advantageous positions turned an unforeseen MDCOA into the most likely course of action (MLCOA). The tanks and IFVs of our adversaries are highly capable machines that can move through seemingly impassible terrain, if given the opportunity to do so.

When employing engineer assets to construct fighting positions on a constrained timeline, their dig rate may exceed the rate of concealment by a significant margin. The amount of spoil produced by excavators required a concerted effort to camouflage, especially when considering our enemy's liberal use of UAS. With our task organization requiring Soldiers to place tactical and protective wire obstacles and provide security, we were quickly outworked by the engineers. Moving them into the woods provided some reprieve due to the overhead cover. Rampant use of UAS-observed fires made concealment a top priority. Stay in the woods!

During the execution of our defense, Baker's quick adjustment to our alternate battle positions served as a major sustain. Our rehearsals did not allow the direct placement of individuals into the subsequent positions that they ultimately occupied, but the exercise itself allowed direct-line leaders to focus on the "where" and not the "how" once it came time to execute. Liberal usage of our SBS Hornet permitted us to detect the movement of the large armored formation well in advance of auditory cues, which gave leaders time to quickly develop a plan using our existing battle positions. This time allowed us to create a plan that made sense, did not compromise security, and prevented fratricide.

Armed with an understanding of the enemy's general order of battle after the previous two days of the exercise, our battle positions were still lacking in protection — specifically against the indirect fire assets they had at their disposal. During engagement area development, it was difficult to dig positions that sufficiently protected against three batteries of 155s. Their dismounted reconnaissance, use of UAS, and probing force all identified our 2nd Platoon's primary battle positions to devastating effect on the final defense. Dispersion at the platoon level made control of each subordinate element more difficult. Given the lack of overhead cover, it increased survivability but did not reduce the threat of UAS observation. In hindsight, I would have placed a single observation post on the ridge and requested a boundary extension to push the entire company into the national forest.



Soldiers in 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, conduct operations during an exercise in Adazi, Latvia, on 23 September 2023. (Photo by CPT H. Howey)

The pace of displacement from primary to subsequent fighting positions versus the pace of mechanized infantry requires shorter, deliberate, and rehearsed movements to subsequent battle positions. Previously advantageous positions prioritizing fields of fire quickly lose their value when mechanized infantry begins their assault. Transitions to subsequent battle positions must effectively shrink subsequent engagement areas with the use of a reverse slope to maintain survivability. Our 2nd Platoon began the fight from less-concealed positions and was objectively worse off at the onset of the fight, due to the enemy's prolific use of UAS and indirect fire. Upon the EFP's commencement of their assault, however, the advantages of the reverse slope allowed the platoon to slow the assault much more effectively than 1st Platoon, whose concealed primary battle positions were more effective on first contact but slowly overrun by advancing dismounted infantry with the support of their IFVs.

Despite standing alone against tremendous odds, Baker Company achieved success in an excellent repetition at conducting a defense at the squad, platoon, and company levels. Our lessons learned will remain a part of our institutional memory and will guide our actions at the next major training exercise, Silver Arrow. We gained a greater understanding of an organization that looks far different from a typical OPFOR opponent and are more prepared to execute defensive operations at the company level against a numerically superior and mounted adversary.

CPT Robert Barger currently commands Baker Company, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment (Red Currahee), 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, KY. He previously served as commander of Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 58th Infantry Regiment (One Station Unit Training) at Fort Moore, GA, and as a rifle, tank, and mortar platoon leader in 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment at Fort Riley, KS. He graduated in 2015 from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, with a Bachelor of Science in history.