



ECHO COMPANY: The Fifth Player

The current employment of the J-series mechanized infantry battalion is limited by the absence of a clear doctrine for employing its new fifth player — the antiarmor company (Company E) — more commonly known as Echo Company. Many infantrymen therefore do not fully understand how to use their antiarmor assets.

As commander of a consolidated antiarmor company in the 25th Infantry Division (Mechanized) — and a “veteran” of two trips to the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin — I found out a great deal about the combat capabilities of that company.

What I offer here is not proposed doctrine. It is rather an attempt to share my perspective on the subject, a perspective gained from experience.

The Division 86 antiarmor company differs greatly from the combat support company’s antitank platoon. Essentially, the platoon headquarters has been replaced by

the combat support company headquarters, and the antitank sections have been organized into three platoons, each with a platoon leader and a platoon sergeant. Each platoon has four ITVs and one M113. In addition, each rifle company in an M113-equipped battalion has an ITV section (two ITVs). (Companies that have the Bradley Fighting Vehicle do not have an ITV section. Thus, the BFV battalion has only 12 ITVs compared to 23 for M113-equipped battalions.)

In many of the battalions still equipped with M113s, the rifle company antitank sections are attached to Echo Company, giving it a total of 20 M901 Improved TOW Vehicles (ITVs). Therefore, two of its platoons have six ITVs each and one M113, while its other platoon has eight ITVs and one M113.

Echo Company, according to TT 71-2, The Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force, can be employed in

various ways: It can be employed "pure" to provide centrally controlled heavy antiarmor fires; its antitank platoons can be attached to company teams when the factors of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops available, and time) so dictate; or it can be task-organized with mechanized infantry and armor platoons to form a fifth company team for the battalion's operations.

In accomplishing these missions, Echo Company has certain abilities — and certain limitations.

Brigade Task Organization

The allocation of ITV assets begins at the brigade level. In addition to determining how his battalions will be organized for combat, the brigade commander performs a METT-T analysis to determine the distribution of his ITV assets. This is particularly crucial for those brigades in which battalion TOW assets have been consolidated in Echo Company.

Simply categorizing tanks and ITVs as "tank killing systems," then dividing the number of each accordingly, is an unrealistic appraisal of the capabilities and limitations of these two systems. The ITV's advantages over a tank are its accuracy, its killing power, and its range of nearly four kilometers. Its limitations are less armor protection, slower cross-country speed, a relatively slow rate of fire, and an inability to fire on the move.

An armor-heavy brigade with two tank battalions and one M113-equipped mechanized infantry battalion has a total of 116 tanks and 20 ITVs. (The brigade also has three additional ITVs in each battalion, which are part of the scout platoons. As these assets will almost always remain organic to their respective battalions, and as their missions are substantially different from the mechanized infantry and armor roles, these scout ITVs are not included in the battalion totals.) On the other hand, an infantry-heavy brigade of two mechanized infantry battalions and one tank battalion has 58 tanks and 40 ITVs.

The brigade commander determines how many (if any) ITVs will be allocated to the tank-heavy task forces. This number is dictated by the organization of the task forces (the projected mix of tank and mechanized infantry companies) and by the mission (the task force mission and terrain that is most appropriate for the ITV).

ITV sections should not be cross-attached, as this would nullify the advantage of multi-section employment. Any inter-battalion ITV cross-attachment, therefore, should be made by ITV platoon. The obvious benefit of this is the command and control aspect of having a trained, ITV-qualified platoon leader control the employment of a unit's antiarmor assets for his attached commander.

For an armor-heavy brigade, in which the ITVs are consolidated, the brigade commander may augment an armor task force with a six-ITV platoon, or he may direct that the heavy ITV platoon (eight ITVs) be divided with four ITVs going to each armor task force. One group of ITVs would be under the control of the platoon leader, the other under the platoon sergeant.

The decision on whether to use Echo Company pure, as a company team, or to attach its ITV platoons to the maneuver companies is contingent on an in-depth METT-T analysis. For both offensive and defensive operations, the commander must determine whether the terrain will allow freedom of maneuver for five company teams. In many cases, either because of constricted space or restricted mobility corridors, the battalion commander may elect to use just the four maneuver companies in his maneuver plan.

If he should decide not to use Echo Company as a maneuver element, the commander must determine how he can best use his ITV assets. In many cases, he will employ the company pure, with a mission of providing general support for the battalion. In so doing, he retains centralized control of the ITV assets, which best ensures a comprehensive, coordinated antiarmor fire plan throughout the battalion's sector. The Echo Company commander obviously must fully understand the battalion commander's intent and must be tactically capable of implementing the ITV plan in conjunction with that intent.

The Echo commander, with the battalion commander and the S-3, formulates an antiarmor fire plan and executes it through his platoon leaders, controlling the platoons' movement to alternate firing positions and engagement positions. Sometimes the terrain or other requirements will not allow the Echo Company headquarters to control or execute the antiarmor fire plan effectively. In these situations, the battalion commander should augment the maneuver company teams with the ITV platoons, making the respective company team commanders responsible for an ITV platoon's tactical employment and fire control.

Unfortunately, as with any attached unit, the ITV platoon attached to a company team often will be forgotten in the heat of battle while that team commander maneuvers his primary assets. A battalion commander should certainly consider this potential for neglect when he organizes his battalion for combat and should be fully aware of his subordinate commanders' ability to use an ITV platoon properly and effectively.

The use of Echo Company for a given mission does not depend totally upon a tactical analysis; it requires a logistical analysis as well. The current battalion organization does not have the resources it needs to support five maneuver teams equally. The standard rifle or tank company's recovery section, medical section, and mess section with water trailer are not directly available to Echo Company, whether it is employed pure or organized as a company team. If the battalion support resources have been severely reduced because of maintenance or combat losses, the problem becomes particularly acute.

THE OFFENSE

When Echo Company is employed pure in the offense, in

both a movement to contact and a deliberate attack, the ITV platoons are maneuvered immediately behind the lead company teams on the axes of advance for the battalion. As the lead company teams move forward, the ITV sections rotate — one overwatching while the other continues to move behind the company team. The Echo Company commander controls the movement of his ITV platoons so that mutual support is maintained between the axes of advance. By observing the company team locations and monitoring them through their reports over the battalion command net, the Echo commander starts, stops, and maneuvers his ITV platoons to support the battalion advance.

Movement to Contact

In a movement to contact, as the battle is joined and the initial enemy locations are determined, the battalion commander directs the orientation of his force and issues the battle orders necessary to overcome his opponents. The dispersion of the ITV platoons on the battalion's axes of advance makes it easier for the Echo commander to respond quickly and to bring antiarmor fires on the enemy. As the situation develops, the Echo commander can maneuver his ITV platoons so that all of them can fire on the opposing force.

This gives the battalion commander a unique flexibility: He can maneuver Echo Company's assets, much the way he would a reserve force, to provide the firepower needed to assist his units in contact. This allows him to keep his other company teams on their primary axes of advance and to maintain the initiative while his units in contact develop the situation.

Deliberate Attack

The employment of Echo Company for a deliberate attack is similar to that for a movement to contact. The ITV platoons, again dispersed on the battalion's axes of advance, trail the lead company teams. To achieve the best stand-off ranges for the ITV, the Echo commander should conduct a careful terrain analysis of the objective to determine the probable enemy dispositions (if they are unknown). His analysis should take particular note of the terrain that allows the enemy his best routes either to *withdraw from or to reinforce the objective*.

Once this analysis has been made, the positions — both primary and supplementary — from which the company can overwatch the battalion assault on the objective should be determined. These positions, ideally, should provide effective fields of fire to the enemy positions from a minimum distance of 2,000 meters, and should also allow the ITV platoons to engage any enemy forces that seem intent on reinforcing or withdrawing from those positions.

When the terrain permits, an ITV platoon should be positioned to cover these enemy routes at the longest

engagement range possible, even if its primary firing position does not allow the platoon to engage the objective area directly.

After crossing the line of departure, the Echo commander maneuvers the ITV platoons much the way he does in a movement to contact — to overwatch the initial movement of the lead teams. As the lead maneuver teams approach the objective, their axes or routes of advance may not go through the ITV platoon's designated objective overwatch positions. Therefore, the ITV platoons will have to leave the "cleared" area of march that the lead teams have passed through and move on their own to their objective overwatch positions. This is a critical maneuver for the battalion commander, because moving the ITV platoons through terrain that has not been cleared risks his ITV assets.

Sometimes, the battalion commander can use one or more mechanized rifle platoons to provide security for the ITV platoons and to clear their overwatch areas and access routes. At other times, the combat power of the battalion, or the delay that would be involved in getting a mechanized rifle platoon back to its company team for the attack, may make this kind of protection impossible. Accordingly, the ITV platoons may have to clear and seize their overwatch positions unassisted.

During the advance, the depth of the objective or a repositioning of the enemy forces can force the Echo commander to move the ITV platoons to different overwatch positions, and alternate positions must also be planned to allow for such a contingency. Echo company accomplishes this mission much the same way it conducts a movement to contact mission, with the ITV platoons displacing to identified locations on order, and in accordance with a preplanned event-triggered execution matrix.

In the attack, the ITV platoons cannot limit themselves to a narrow range of targets. Any point target that brings effective fire against friendly forces, and that cannot be destroyed by some other indirect or direct fire means, is a TOW missile target. Enemy bunkers, dismounted ATGM positions, and helicopters — as well as tanks, personnel carriers, air defense vehicles, and artillery positions — are all appropriate ITV targets. Because of the enemy's capabilities, however, coupled with the availability of ammunition, a stringent delineation of target priorities may be necessary. If the enemy has a large number of tanks on the objective, or if he is expected to counterattack with a heavy armored force, then the battalion commander should specify any target limitations for the ITVs.

Consolidation

Once the objective has been seized and the primary elements of the attacking force have begun to consolidate, the ITV platoons should begin moving to their objective positions. In many cases, especially if the enemy resistance had been tough, the ITVs will be low on missiles



ITV commander checks line of sight through the periscope.

or out of them entirely. It is therefore smart, whenever possible, to have an ammunition resupply truck under the control of the Echo executive officer or first sergeant ready to move forward from the combat trains to a designated resupply point. This movement must be done rapidly to allow the ITV platoons to re-arm quickly enroute to their consolidation positions. *If time and distance factors do not allow re-arming enroute, then a designated section from each platoon should move to a re-arm position and load as many missiles as it can carry and deliver them to the other vehicles in the platoon.*

As in any defensive situation, terrain permitting, the long range fires of the ITV platoons are critical to the successful consolidation of the objective and to the defeat of the expected enemy counterattack. The Echo commander must conduct a METT-T analysis to this end. Once the objective has been seized, he must position his ITV platoons, fully re-armed, where they can best defend against the enemy's probable avenues of approach.

THE DEFENSE

The defense, by its very nature, offsets many of the limitations and vulnerabilities the ITV faces in the offense and also makes the most of its capabilities and its strengths. For one thing, the options for employing a battalion's ITV assets are significantly more varied in the defense than in the offense. (For purposes of this discussion, it will be assumed that a battalion task force is operating as part of a division main battle area force.)

A battalion's defensive mission and the terrain over which the battle will be fought are the primary factors a battalion commander will consider in determining his ITV task organization. For a defend-in-sector mission, in which centralized ITV fire control is desired, a battalion

commander can choose to keep his Echo assets pure. He can better control the ITV fires on specific engagement areas and, through the Echo commander, can quickly maneuver the ITV platoons to overwatch or defensive positions to cover the movement of his company teams from position to position.

This same responsiveness is present when the battalion is defending in place. The mobility of the ITV platoons gives the Echo commander a great deal of flexibility in responding to the situation as the battle develops. As in the offense, this ability of the Echo platoons to maneuver also allows a battalion commander to deal with an enemy force without a major repositioning by his company teams or a premature commitment of his reserve.

When factors of METT-T do not favor a centralized retention of ITV assets, a battalion commander can attach an ITV platoon to another company team and employ the remaining ITV assets as an Echo Company (minus). Or the battalion commander can parcel out his ITV assets and make Echo a company team.

In the latter configuration, an Echo team can be employed the same as any other company team. (A task organization of five company teams, in fact, gives the battalion commander more options: He can position four elements forward with one in reserve, or he can place three company teams forward, hold one to give his position depth, and use the fifth in a reserve role.)

When Echo Company (minus) is employed as a company team, with a mechanized infantry rifle platoon and on occasion with a tank platoon as well, the Echo team should be positioned where its assigned sector or battle position allows it to cover as much of the primary antiarmor kill zone (AKZ) as possible.

Ideally, the AKZ should be along the enemy's primary mobility corridor at a range of 1,500 to 3,800 meters from the company team positions, but these ranges will not always be attainable. (The minimum AKZ should extend

from 1,500 meters out to the greatest possible effective range.) Whether the ITV platoons are under centralized control or not, the AKZ must be further subdivided into company team and ITV platoon engagement areas to achieve effective fire control. The platoons must not duplicate targets any more than necessary.

Between the range of 2,000 and 3,700 meters, the ITVs engage the enemy. As the enemy comes in to a range of 2,000 to 2,500 meters, the tank platoons engage these targets. As he closes to Dragon range, the Dragons and tanks maintain the fight.

Two or three ITV sections should be positioned in depth 1,000 to 1,500 meters behind the forward elements. These ITVs can then provide continuous fires while achieving the best stand-off ranges against any remaining enemy forces that may try to penetrate the main defensive line.

As the enemy closes to within 1,500 to 2,000 meters, the forward ITVs should begin moving to their alternate positions to maintain their range advantage and to reduce their close-in vulnerability. If the battalion intends to hold its forward position, lateral movement by the ITVs to alternate firing positions becomes essential, but a decision to move to those positions before the enemy closes to 1,500 meters must be carefully weighed. For example, it takes three or four minutes for an ITV section to move to an alternate position 300 meters away — longer if the route is not direct or easily traversed. The loss of its firepower for that amount of time can be critical, particularly if more than two sections are displacing. Of course, the survivability of the ITV and its crew must be maintained, but any significant loss of ITV firepower from the AKZ is potentially detrimental to the battalion's success. Unless the forward position is under ATGM or accurate indirect or direct fires, ITVs should not displace to their alternate positions until the enemy has closed to within a range at which tanks can take over — 1,500 to 2,000 meters.

If the mission is to defend in sector, the decision to move to alternate positions must be made before the enemy closes to less than 2,000 meters, and the movement order must be well into its execution stage by the time the enemy reaches 1,500 meters. (Experiences at the NTC have clearly shown that if a commander waits too long to give the appropriate orders, or if the task force fails to move quickly enough, a task force will be overrun or the enemy will be so close behind that he will literally occupy the next position at the same time as the task force.)

By positioning two or three ITV sections in depth, a battalion task force provides itself an overwatch element for any movement it must make from the forward defensive positions. Regardless of the task organization, the ITVs should be the first element to displace to alternate positions. There are several reasons for this: The ITV's longer range allows better overwatch for the other teams; once displacement is triggered, the enemy is usually within effective friendly tank fire range; and the ITVs are much more vulnerable to enemy tank and ATGM fires, given their comparative lack of armor protection.

One real Echo Company limitation, whether it is

employed as a team or pure, is its lack of a fire support team (FIST). Thus, when necessary, the Echo commander must do the detailed time-consuming fire support work that a FIST chief normally does.

VERSATILE

Despite the lack of a FIST, the antiarmor company is a versatile unit. This versatility adds tremendously to the potential combat effectiveness of the Division 86 mechanized infantry battalion task force. This is particularly true for the M113-equipped units that are not scheduled to change over to Bradley Fighting Vehicles in the near future. These units must rely solely on the ITV as their long-range tank killer. It is therefore important for a commander to make the most of his Echo Company.

For the BFV battalion task force, particularly when it works with tank companies that are equipped with the Abrams, the ITV is not as crucial to its long-range combat power. Still, the primary mission of the ITV platoon is to augment the task force's fires with the long range fires of the TOW system — a singular task that the BFV and its infantry squad are not expected to perform, given the five-missile capacity of the BFV. Even with the greatly increased armor killing ability of the BFV task force, though, the task organization options for using his ITVs are as important and potentially favorable to a BFV task force commander as they are to an M113 task force commander.

The lack of a battalion task force operational doctrine that incorporates a "how-to" for Echo Company reduces the potential combat effectiveness of our Division 86 units. This void is now being filled through unit initiative, but the result is an obvious lack of inter-unit standardization. The specific doctrinal roles an Echo Company is to play in combat must be clearly established. If an active maneuver role is to be its primary mission, then the battalion logistics and fire support capability must be broadened to adequately support the company in this role.

Until an antiarmor system is fielded to replace the TOW, that weapon will continue to be a battalion's mainstay for long-range antiarmor fires. When it is mounted on an ITV, its accuracy is complemented by better survivability and mobility. The ITV system, integrated into a combined arms fire plan, makes a task force's long range fires far more lethal.

This firepower, combined with the maneuver command capability of an Echo Company headquarters, is a critical combat force. But that force must be employed properly by brigade and battalion task force commanders if it is to succeed on the battlefield.

Captain Michael S. Hackney has led a rifle platoon and an antitank platoon in the 3d Armored Division and has commanded Company E, 2d Battalion, 34th Infantry at Fort Stewart. He is now commander of the headquarters and headquarters company of the same battalion. He is a 1979 ROTC graduate of the University of Alabama and has had two previous articles published in INFANTRY
