



OFFENSIVE LIVE FIRE OPERATIONS

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RONALD F. ROKOSZ

Offensive live fire operations are absolutely critical for building confidence, teamwork, and cohesion in infantry squads and platoons. Such operations are inherently dangerous, however, and must be done right.

“Doing things right” in live fire operations does not imply that such exercises have to be unrealistically structured or hampered by excessive control mechanisms. Rather, it demands a sound, systematic process in the planning and execution of such training, as well as a strong chain of command that willingly assumes the responsibility for seeing that training is done safely. As in combat, a good unit does not make mistakes in training that will result in the death or injury of soldiers from friendly fire.

The following constitutes a common sense approach toward planning and conducting squad and platoon live fire operations:

- Live fire operations are planned in detail, after a specific task, condition, and standard has been developed.
- Those plans are briefed down to the fire team leader level in garrison.
- The battalion commander always walks the ground with his company commanders and personally approves the location and concept for all live fire operations.
- TEWTs (*tactical exercises without troops*) are conducted down to the lowest level possible on the ground.
- Extensive blank fire rehearsals are conducted. A rehearsal

must be the validation of a unit’s readiness to conduct live fire operations. Accordingly, that rehearsal must be measured against the exact training objective that will be evaluated on the live fire exercise itself. An element should not be allowed to negotiate a live fire exercise until it has performed to standard during a blank fire rehearsal.

- The training should be carried out during the day first, then at night; nothing should be changed at night except for adding the required safety measures.

The concepts for squad and platoon offensive live fire operations must be kept simple. Grandiose concepts involving sweeping maneuvers just cannot be done within the safety restrictions on most ranges. They almost always result in excessive administrative safety measures that detract from the realism a unit is trying to achieve. Of greater importance, they tend to shift the focus away from what is really important—teaching squad and platoon leaders to control their soldiers during assaults.

A training objective should be very specific, with standards that list the desired performance measures so that leaders know what is expected and can use the training objective as a checklist for preparing for an operation. (The training objectives listed in the accompanying box are examples of offensive operations that can be done safely on most maneuver ranges.)

During live fire operations, safety is a chain of command responsibility—starting with team leaders. The training objectives shown in the examples include the critical safety measures as part of the standard. That's the first step in developing safety consciousness in the chain of command. A squad leader, for example, is evaluated not only on how he leads an assault but also on his performance in ensuring that the safety requirements are met.

The fire team leaders carry cleaning rods during all exercises, plus red filter flashlights at night. To emphasize the point, their ability to accomplish safety performance measures should be practiced and evaluated against a specific intermediate objective, such as the one that follows:

TASK: Clear weapons.

CONDITION: Rifle platoon deployed in a hasty defense

with organic weapons. Each fire team leader has a cleaning rod and red filter flashlight. Day and night.

STANDARD: All weapons are physically cleared and report rendered to the unit chain of command. The platoon leader renders the report to the range officer in charge. The following performance measures will be used:

- Platoon leader, using a clearly recognizable signal, signals "cease fire" and "clear weapons."
- All soldiers cease fire, lock bolts to the rear, place weapons on "safe," and remove magazines or ammunition as applicable.
- Fire team leaders physically rod each weapon and make certain that chambers are clear, magazines are removed, and weapons are on "safe." At night, the red filter flashlights are used to make visual checks.

EXAMPLE TRAINING OBJECTIVES

TASK: Conduct a platoon breach and live fire assault.

CONDITIONS:

- A rifle platoon in wedge formation, 50 meters short of a simulated woodline.
- Platoon members equipped with individual weapons, LCE, and protective masks.
- The platoon equipped with 815 rounds of 5.56mm ball, 133 rounds of 5.56mm tracer, 600 rounds of 5.56mm SAW 4 + 1, 200 rounds of 7.62mm 4 + 1, 12 rounds of 40mm TP, three smoke grenades, and three parachute flares (night only).
- Selected platoon members equipped with wire cutters and grappling hooks.
- Triple strand concertina obstacle, five meters beyond the edge of the simulated woodline, across the front.
- An objective 50 meters beyond the wire with nine positions arrayed across the front.
- Platoon leader and squad leaders equipped with whistles.
- Fire team leaders equipped with cleaning rods.

STANDARDS:

- The platoon deploys into a linear formation as it approaches the woodline, soldiers crawling on hands and knees so that machineguns are positioned on the flank to provide initial suppressive fire.
- Squads are on line in wedge formations behind the breach points.
- Squads have designated breach teams in the forward wedges.
- On the platoon leader's signal, M60s initiate suppressive fire; breach teams smoke the far side of the obstacle and conduct the breach.
- Breach is completed within two minutes.
- Squads move through the three breach points and deploy on the far side of the wire so that the platoon is in an assault line, one meter on the far side of the wire.
- On the signal of the platoon leader, machineguns cease fire and are rodded.
- On the signal of the platoon leader, the platoon commences the assault with squads using fire and movement. Individual soldiers use good three-to-five-second rushes so that there is a continuous forward motion while suppressive fire continues at a steady rate.
- The platoon establishes a hasty defense beyond the objective. All weapons are rodded and cleared by team leaders.
- Squads dispatch search teams and search the objectives. Other special teams perform duties as required.
- On the platoon leader's signal, the platoon smokes forward to obscure its withdrawal.
- Ensuring that the smoke has first billowed, the platoon withdraws squads by fire teams back through the breach points

(which, at night, have been marked with engineer tape or chemical lights).

- Squads withdraw to the simulated woodline and then the platoon re-forms into a wedge formation.

TASK: Conduct a squad assault.

CONDITIONS:

- A rifle squad moving in traveling overwatch formation, 15 meters from the edge of a woodline (simulated on the range with camouflage nets raised on poles).
- Squad members carrying assigned weapons, load carrying equipment, and protective masks.
- An objective 50 meters from the woodline with three enemy positions with pop-up targets.
- Squad equipped with 272 rounds of 5.56mm ball, 30 rounds of 5.56mm tracer, 200 rounds of 5.56mm SAW 4 + 1, nine 40mm white star flares (night only), one illumination flare (night only), and one HC smoke grenade.
- A counterattack array with three targets 300 meters forward of the objective, two targets at 200 meters, and two at 100 meters.
- Squad leader equipped with whistle and each team leader equipped with a cleaning rod.
- Executed both day and night.

STANDARD:

- Squad deploys from wedge formation to an assault line, crawling on hands and knees into a linear deployment with at least two meters between soldiers.
- Squad opens fire on the squad leader's signal, immediately engaging and striking the first three targets on the objective.
- Squad immediately initiates fire and movement, maintaining forward motion, using three-to-five-second rushes, and sustaining a steady rate of suppressive fire on the objective.
- Fire team leaders lead their teams in the assault.
- Squad assaults through to the far side of the objective and establishes a hasty defense.
- Weapons are put on safe and checked by the team leaders. Ammunition is redistributed.
- Squad engages counterattacking force so that at least two of the three targets at 300 meters are hit, both targets at the 200-meter range, and both at 100-meter range.
- Upon order of the squad leader, all weapons are cleared and rodded by the team leaders.
- Squad withdraws by fire team bounds to the edge of the woodline, employing smoke to obscure enemy observation of the withdrawal. Smoke billows before the squad commences withdrawal.
- Squad re-forms into wedges and continues withdrawal.



Squad and team leaders must maintain fire on the objective.

- Reports are rendered from fire team leaders to squad leaders to the platoon leader.
- These actions are done while maintaining a tactical configuration and without violating light and noise discipline.

THE ASSAULT

A good infantry assault is one in which the assaulting element closes on the objective in the shortest possible time while maintaining continuous suppressive fire and minimizing the exposure of the attacking force. Squad and team leaders must maintain continuous forward motion in order to close on the objective before the enemy has time to react. They must maintain fire on the objective to keep the enemy's head down so he can't react to the assault. And they must use three-second rushes so as to lessen the squad's exposure to an enemy who may react by detonating a claymore mine on the assaulting element.

If they maintain continuous forward motion, someone within each fire team is always moving. If they maintain continuous suppressive fire, someone within each fire team is always firing. If they use three-second rushes, the fewest possible soldiers within each team will be exposed at any one time.

In addition to this general guidance, the following points should be noted:

- Leaders must have positive control over the initiation of assault fires. The fires themselves can be used to initiate an assault, of course, but the leader must have ironclad control over their initiation so there is no chance of starting the assault prematurely.
- Leaders can use whistles as tactical signals to cease fire during the assault, but they must also have visual backup signals planned in case someone does not hear the whistles.
- Fire team leaders must lead. The best technique for gaining and maintaining the momentum of the assault is to have the team leaders rush forward immediately when the assault commences. Although they do not fire initially, starting to move gets the line moving quickly and begins a momentum

that carries through the entire assault. Team leaders should not need to give commands. They rush forward and the members of their teams follow the example of their leaders, moving forward in some practiced sequence that is standard for the teams.

- Once the assault begins, the squad leader's job is to position himself in the center of his sector and to control the movement of teams by exception. If one team begins to lag behind, for instance, the squad leader directs faster movement. The only voice heard during an assault should be the squad leader's.

During the consolidation on the objective, platoon leaders must personally position and site crew-served weapons within their sectors. They should be directly involved in positioning M60s and Dragons and should check the firing location of any mortars attached to their platoons or positioned within their sectors.

Squad and team leaders must assign sectors of fire to their men; this should be an automatic response during any consolidation.

Search teams cannot run around objectives at night using white-lens flashlights to identify positions and conduct their searches. Doing so makes them obvious targets for enemy counterfire. Ideally, search teams should use night vision devices. At worst, they should have red-filter flashlights and use them only for close-in searches of enemy positions that have been found.

The execution of a hasty defensive reaction to enemy counterattack will almost always prove to be the toughest job for squad and platoon leaders: to exercise proper fire control, fire distribution, and fire commands. Normally, too little attention is paid to this phase of the operation.

If an element is disposed in a hasty defense, enemy targets observed must be engaged in the most efficient manner possible. Long range targets should be engaged with indirect fire weapons, crew-served weapons, and the like. A lone target or even two targets at 300 to 400 meters might be engaged by selected marksmen at the direction of fire team or squad leaders.

Soldiers should engage targets only in their sectors. Clearly defined sectors of fire are essential to preventing wasted fires. If squad leaders all assign sectors using reference points only 100 meters to their front (for example, "from that rock on the left to that bush on the right"), targets that are exposed at 300 to 400 meters may not be properly engaged. A better approach is for squad leaders to define sectors of fire at 100 meters, then redefine those sectors with terrain reference points at 300 to 400 meters. Of course, sectors assigned at 300 to 400 meters must be consistent with the squad sectors assigned by the platoon leader.

During a typical live fire exercise, rifle squads and platoons usually open fire with everything they have available as soon as a target array is exposed—in effect, firing their final protective fires. Team leaders can be seen firing away as if they were riflemen, while the SAW gunner on their left and the grenadier on their right also fire away without any direction from their leaders. The end result is a lot of bullets put downrange with few targets hit.

Part of the problem is in how we structure our training objectives and how we display the target array. The other part of the problem is in educating leaders that their job is to *direct* the fires of the men they lead. A fire team leader probably should fire only to mark targets for his team or during final protective fires. His primary efforts should always be in directing the fire of the SAW in his team and the fire of the M203 to cover designated dead space. The squad leader should be directing the sequence of engagement, directing the fires of any crew-served weapons in his sector, and supervising the efforts of his team leaders.

Given the few Dragons he controls, the platoon leader should get involved personally in the selection of targets and the initiation of Dragon fires. He must also closely control and integrate the illumination available within his sector for the best target engagement at night. During night operations, platoons supported by 60mm mortars will have as many as three 60mm mortar illumination rounds and three M203 illumination rounds in the air at the same time. This is a waste of precious am-

munition. The initiation of illumination must be directed by the platoon leader and must be executed in the sequence he has designated so that continuous illumination can be maintained over the target area for the longest period possible.

Live fire exercises can be structured to teach this process. The emphasis should always be on portraying sequential target arrays. Point or area targets can be presented at long distances where the appropriate response is to engage them with only selected crew-served weapons or marksmen. Engineer tape can be positioned on flat, open ranges to simulate dead space for an engagement with M203s. Close-in target arrays can portray a final assault that would trigger friendly final protective fires. Such a sequential target array should be written into the training objective for a live fire operation.

Ammunition should be carefully allocated so that tracer rounds in the right mixtures are available to squad and fire team leaders so they can work out procedures and practice marking targets for their men during live fire operations.

Units must begin to educate young noncommissioned officers on their responsibilities in controlling and directing fires. This can be done in a garrison environment. SOPs should be worked out at the fire team, squad, and platoon levels to show how leaders will direct selected weapon systems to fire, identify targets, and adjust from designated terrain features.

Live fire operations are essential for training infantry soldiers. The confidence a soldier gets when he assaults forward with fellow soldiers firing on his left and right—coming to the realization that he can really depend on those men to "do it right"—is the best team-building exercise available. Such operations not only build individual and unit confidence, they also hone the individual soldier's critical combat skills. Finally, these operations more fully develop and strengthen the chain of command within infantry squads and platoons.

Lieutenant Colonel Ronald F. Rokosz commanded the 3d Airborne Battalion Combat Team, 325th Infantry in Italy and is now attending the U.S. Army War College. He previously served with the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning.

