

Night Attack

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During my tour as a battalion commander in the 82d Airborne Division, and during previous assignments as well, I witnessed countless night attacks both by my own units and by sister battalions. In almost every case—despite careful planning, rehearsals, and rigid control measures—there was chaos on the objective. Not only has this been my experience, but it also seems to be true of infantry units at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC).

The attacks that ended in failure were characterized by the following:

- The misorientation of assault forces.
- The inability to tell friend from foe.
- Fratricide.
- Confusion when the target was not "as briefed."
- The loss of command and control.
- The failure to secure the entire objective.

It was obvious that we had to find a way to take an objective at night without killing ourselves. The technique we developed, called STARBURST, solves the problems endemic to the night attack by doing the following:

- Emphasizing stealth.
- Massing automatic weapons to support breaching operations (as in Rommel's *Attacks*).
- Task organizing down to fire team level.
- Controlling the direction of fire of all weapons.
- Requiring assault team leaders to designate team targets.
- Being independent of target description.
- Employing speed and violence of execution similar to SWAT room-clearing operations.

A STARBURST attack, as we do it, begins with the scout platoon's surveillance of the objective. Using both reconnaissance squads and snipers, the scouts make a thorough reconnaissance of the target with the primary aim of identifying the point in the defensive line where we will make our attack. We may determine this breach location by discovering a weakness in the defense or by using the

best approach to the objective.

At the same time, the scouts identify an assault position 200 to 300 meters from the target and a linkup point at some greater distance where they will first meet the battalion and brief the leaders on what they have found.

To reduce the chance of compromise, we do not make a leaders' reconnaissance if the scouts have had enough time to get

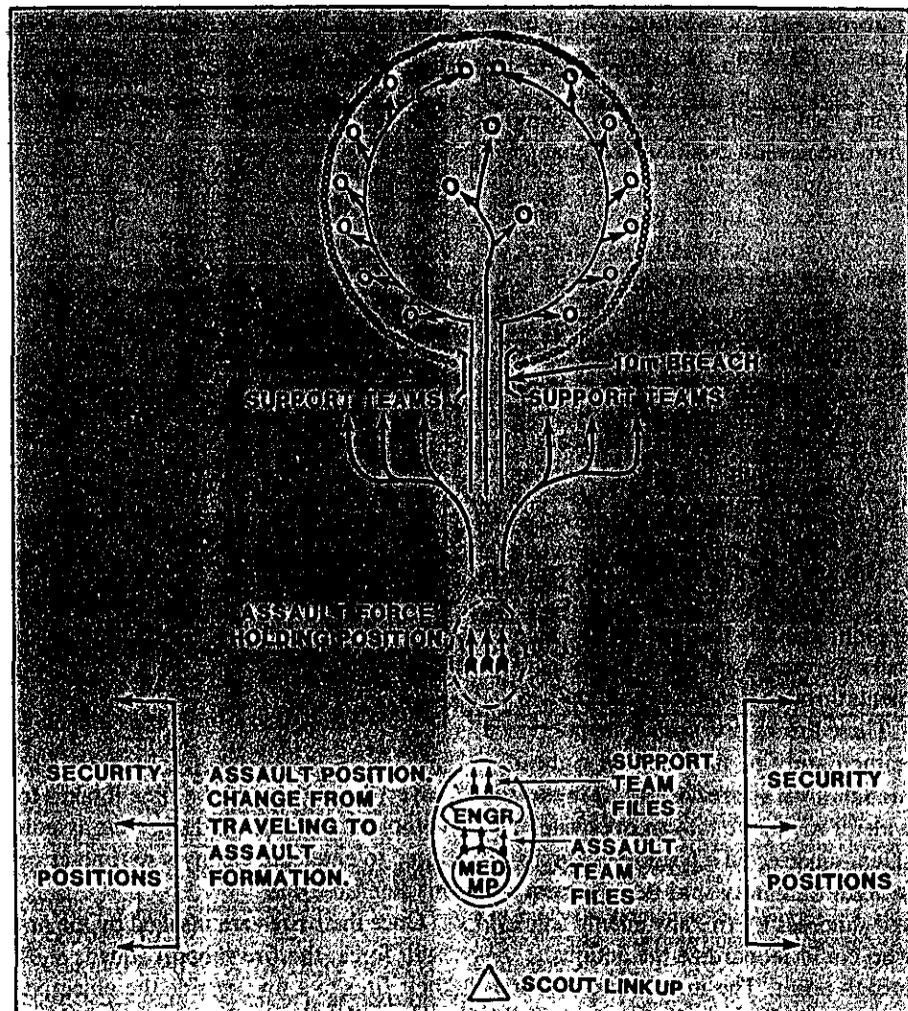


Figure 1

a clear picture of the target. Artillery harassing fire is used during the approach march to cover any noise and to get the enemy used to explosions on his perimeter in case our sappers have to make an explosive breach.

We plan preparatory fires but use them only if we cannot get close to the objective using stealth. Often, the close-in approach requires us to drive the enemy observation posts and listening posts back inside their perimeter, but our first choice is always to bypass and let the scouts take them out when the attack starts.

While the scouts are working, we organize the battalion in the assembly area into a support group and an assault group.

The support group is made up of two platoons from a line company. The first, augmented by four M60 machinegun teams from the assault group, serves as the point platoon in leading the battalion to and through the scout linkup point and into the assault position. Once in the assault position, the platoon splits into two sections to provide right and left flank security while the main body moves into the assault position and changes to the assault formation.

The second support platoon's mission is to provide suppressive fire during the breaching operation conducted by engineer sapper teams. Depending on the enemy's disposition at the selected breach point, this platoon will have as many as six support squads. Each of the squads has a squad leader, an M60 team (two more taken from the assault company), two M249 machineguns (SAWs), and an AT4 gunner.

This amount of firepower, concentrated on a narrow front on each side of the breach, ensures that we will be able to make the breach and move the assault elements through it relatively unopposed.

These fire support squads are positioned immediately to the left and right of a breach area approximately ten meters wide. They move into an overwatch position—undetected if possible but prepared to fight their way into it if necessary—and suppress by fire any enemy soldiers who could jeopardize the actions at the breach point. The members of the support squads fire only if the attack is dis-

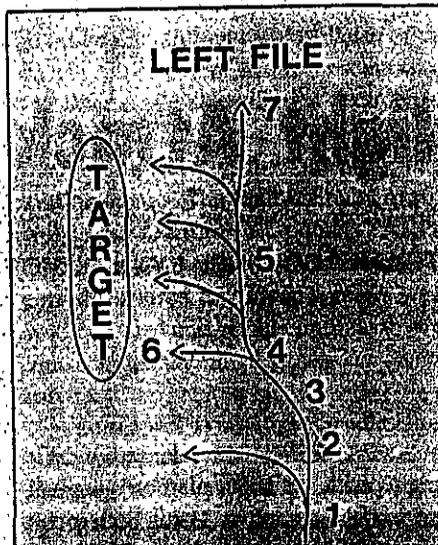


Figure 2

1. The last member of the preceding team breaks left to go on line.

2. The team continues around and makes its point man of this file. By now he has identified the previous team's marker and is ready to take over the breach point.

3. He identifies a target and fires at his marker. (This is announced by a hostile target, he makes a point only a sound effect that, depending on the circuit, will allow manually or automatically or both.) He then announces the direction of movement and the file's color, the distance to the target, and at the same time reads his marker.

4. He throws the marker and in the same motion, or while approaching position. As the team comes on line to his right he provides suppressive fire, showing the left flank limit of the team and announces the target location relative to the marker.

5. A member of the team in front of him exchanges a target for a sound effect in the direction of the movement (if a team) and is replaced by the next squad member.

6. If there are individual overwatch elements by doing this, the team can utilize the chance of the enemy's team being able to stay on the line. The team will be initially overwatched. The enemy should be able to see the team's second file.

7. The remainder of the file continues around the perimeter.

covered and only for the time it takes to complete the breach and allow the assault force to enter the enemy's perimeter or his defensive line.

Once their fires are masked by the assault force, the fire support squads shift their fires to a line outside the objective to keep the enemy from escaping from

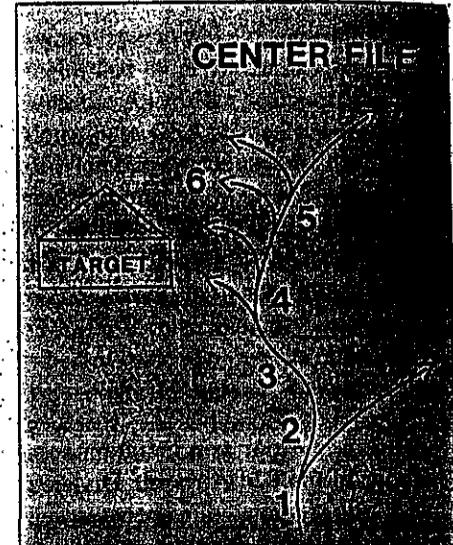


Figure 3

1. Same action as the other file, but the captain of the target should be with the element in the direction of assault.

2. The team continues around and makes its point man of this file. By now he has identified the previous team's marker and is ready to take over the breach point. He identifies a target and fires at his marker. (This is announced by a hostile target, he makes a point only a sound effect that, depending on the circuit, will allow manually or automatically or both.) He then announces the direction of movement and the file's color, the distance to the target, and at the same time reads his marker.

3. He throws the marker and in the same motion, or while approaching position. As the team comes on line to his right he provides suppressive fire, showing the left flank limit of the team and announces the target location relative to the marker.

4. The interior file continues.

the position or reinforcing it. The assault units do not break cover until the enemy weapons firing on the breach site are suppressed and a relatively unopposed passage through the breach is insured.

The assault group, for a battalion size objective, has four rifle platoons organized into three- or four-man assault teams (maintaining fire team integrity as much as possible). The number of assault teams used is determined by the size of the defensive perimeter or line, or by the number of known or suspected enemy positions. The assault teams go through the breach in three closely spaced files, each of which is responsible for a specific portion of the perimeter.

The left file, facing in the direction of attack, takes the left side of the perimeter, the right file takes the right side, and the center file goes for the softer targets in

the center (see Figure 1).

One of the main purposes of this technique is to prevent fratricide; in other words, each assault team attacks away from the other teams inside the perimeter as well as away from the support squads that remain near the breach. To accomplish this, the assault teams must be given the responsibility for designating team targets, task organizing down to fire team level, and exercising strict fire control and maneuver rules.

RULES

The general fire control rules we set down for the assault teams are the following:

- Perimeter assault teams are armed with M16s or M203s. Interior or center assault teams have one M16 (team leader), two shotguns, and one 9mm pistol.
- The team leaders, and whenever possible the assistant team leaders as well, wear AN/PVS-7 night vision goggles during night operations.
- When visibility is limited, no one without night vision goggles may fire into the perimeter, and those with the goggles may fire only at a positively identified enemy soldier or unit that presents a clear threat to a team.
- Within the perimeter during the assault, only semi-automatic fire is allowed; any automatic weapons firing in the perimeter will therefore be the enemy's.
- No grenades, flares, or smoke are used in the assault.
- To mark his team's targets, each team leader uses chemical lights or, in daylight, weighted pieces of colored panels.
- Team leaders load 100-percent tracer rounds. Assault team members orient their assault and fires on the team's target marker and may not fire outside the limits defined by the tracers fired by the team leaders to their immediate right and left.
- To signal the teams to come on line and begin individual movement techniques (IMTs), the team leaders throw the target markers. Because speed is essential in the attack, leaders do not uncase and throw their markers until their teams are



close enough to complete the assault with just one magazine of ammunition. (The assault should move too quickly to allow time for a magazine change.)

The teams then come on line and the left file assaults as shown in Figure 2, and the center file assaults as shown in Figure 3. The right file's assault mirrors that of the left file.

The assault company commander travels in the center file. He has enough teams in front of him to subdue all known or suspected enemy interior positions; he also has a number of assault teams following him to act as a reserve in case other assault teams need additional forces. Once the assault teams report that their portion of the perimeter is secure using their file and team number—"left 5 secure"—platoon leaders relay the reports to the assault company commander. Once the entire perimeter is secure, we have the option of reinforcing the position with automatic weapons from the support squads or, if the mission is to conduct a raid, of leaving them in place to cover our withdrawal.

On a final note, support such as Military Police and the aid station travel behind the assault element and are left in the assault position, secured by the support company's lead platoon, until they are called forward.

We have used STARBURST in raids and attacks (day and night), at platoon through battalion level (company level

with MILES), with equally good results. And we have begun to find many other uses for the file techniques, such as military operations in urban terrain and building clearing when an assault force is difficult to control.

Some observers have been critical of the unit's vulnerability when it is packed into the assault formation. Most have to admit, though, that whatever tactic a unit chooses, being hit by artillery in an assault position will probably cause a change of plans.

The real value of STARBURST as a night attack technique was demonstrated in a night, non-illuminated, battalion live fire attack conducted as part of a division officer professional development program. The 100-meter diameter target had 14 perimeter positions and three interior defensive positions. The assault—from the explosive breach to the clearing of the final bunker—took 137 seconds. And nobody died.

Stealth and control lead to success.

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