

# ECHO COMPANY

## IN A HEAVY TASK FORCE

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Since its inception, the antiarmor company (Echo Company) in a mechanized infantry battalion has achieved, at best, only inconsistent success. At first, the company lacked a body of doctrine to describe its proper utilization. Task force and company commanders relied on their experiences, professional articles, and word of mouth advice from commanders who had fought an antiarmor company successfully. (See, for example, "Echo Company: The Fifth Player," by Captain Michael S. Hackney, *INFANTRY*, July-August 1985, pages 20-24; "Echo on the Battlefield," by Captain George E. Knapp, *INFANTRY*, September-October 1985, pages 30-33; and "Echo Company," by Captains Glenn L. Burch and Christopher B. Valentine, *INFANTRY*, September-October 1986, pages 37-38.)

Later, the doctrine that was developed was vague and general, a fact highlighted by a recent study conducted at the National Training Center. The study concluded that the problem was not that the companies failed to follow the

doctrine but that the doctrine itself was incomplete. Although the Echo Company suffers from severe limitations in its equipment and organization, the main reason it has not achieved much success at the NTC is that it has not been properly employed at the task force or company team levels.

Admittedly, the doctrine is still not specific enough in many areas, but it is very clear on the organization and the role of the antiarmor company. According to Field Manual 7-91 (Tactical Employment of Antiarmor Platoons, Companies, and Battalions), for example, the task force commander "uses the antiarmor company to influence the battle without having to use tanks or infantry in a mainly antitank role." The manual goes on to explain that this frees tanks and infantry from antitank missions and allows them to be employed more effectively, and that "the preferred choice (of task organization) is to leave the company intact under the control of its commander."

This doctrinal note, recently reiterated by the Infantry

School's Directorate of Combat Developments in INFANTRY Magazine ("Echo Company: A Vital Player," September-October 1991, pages 13-14), also reflects the experiences of successful company and battalion commanders who have used Echo Company to great effect: economizing forces by massing long range antiarmor fires, thus freeing tanks and infantry to play a greater, more decisive role.

Echo Company, as presently configured, does have several endemic problems, but that is not to say that it is ineffective or that it should not be retained as a worthwhile member of the combined arms maneuver team. Previous articles by successful Echo Company commanders have demonstrated the combat potential of this force if it is used properly. By first understanding the nature of the company's very real weaknesses, we can then examine techniques for exploiting its equally real capabilities.

First and foremost among these limitations is self defense. The improved TOW vehicle (ITV) provides a stable, stationary platform for the TOW missile, but it is not designed to engage vehicles while it is moving. In addition, its air defense and area suppression capabilities are almost nonexistent. This makes the vehicle extremely vulnerable to air and ground attack.

Generally, if a moving ITV platoon makes contact with an enemy force, it has available few organic means it can call on to suppress or destroy its opponent immediately. Thus, Echo Company commanders sometimes feel as though they have stumbled into a gunfight armed only with a knife. (Platoon leaders usually try to engage chance ground and air targets on the move or from short halts with their M2 machineguns, either destroying or suppressing them and giving the TOW firing vehicles time to seek cover and bring their own systems into action. This reflects the techniques currently employed by the M901/M113-equipped platoons, which, unfortunately, enjoy limited success and sustain high losses in the process.)

To solve this problem, task force and company team commanders must thoroughly understand how the IPB (intelligence preparation of the battlefield) and the mission of an Echo Company affect the company's employment. If it is to operate independently, the task force commander should give it some tank or Bradley fighting vehicle (BFV) platoons (as he would with any other company) to ensure that it can accomplish its mission.

The second major concern is the mobility difference between the antiarmor company and the rest of the task force. The ITVs are slow, which reinforces the complaint that in the offense "Echo Company never gets into the fight." In a quarter-mile sprint, Bradleys or Abrams tanks will certainly beat the ITVs hands down. But in a movement formation where such factors as command and control, limited visibility, and the artillery's ability to keep up with maneuver units affect the task force's rate of march, this is not the problem that critics of the organization have made it out to be. The ITVs do slow the task force down, especially in rough terrain. But when they fail to play a decisive role, the real reason is usually that they have been relegated to

the rear of the task force movement formation.

To correct this problem, we should first determine why we take a combat system that has limited mobility and exacerbate that limitation by placing it in the rear of a formation. We should then direct our efforts at positioning the ITVs in our formations so that they need not rely solely on their automotive systems to get into the fight.

Another problem is that the leaders in the antiarmor company fight in a completely different environment from the one in which their crews fight. The commander, executive officer, and platoon leaders do not have the target acquisition and surveillance capabilities the ITVs have. As a result, a leader often must base his decisions on second-hand reports instead of on his immediate knowledge of the situation. In daylight, in good weather, he can use his binoculars, but at night he is relatively blind and must rely solely on the unit's organic image intensifier viewers.

Along with its tactical limitations, the company's combat support and combat service support assets are not capable of sustaining it in combat. For example, it has little maintenance support — no dedicated recovery vehicle, no attached medical personnel or ambulance, and no fire support team or vehicle. Perhaps most critical of all, the executive officer — the tactical second in command — does not have a combat vehicle. All of these sustainment areas must be addressed at task force level when the leaders are identifying tasks and purposes for the company.

Many of these inherent limitations stem from the fact that the ITV is primarily a defensive system, a brainchild of the active defense. Thus, it is no surprise that the lack of doctrinal guidance is most pronounced for offensive operations.

A heavy task force will usually conduct five types of offensive operations: deliberate attack, hasty attack, movement to contact, exploitation, and pursuit.

Hasty attacks and deliberate attacks differ only in the amount of time available for planning and preparation. The other operations employ similar techniques that are embodied in a movement to contact. The roles of the company in the task force deliberate attack and movement to contact therefore illustrate the principal techniques for its use in offensive operations.

Field Manual 71-2, Tank and Mechanized Infantry Task Force, states that the task force scheme of maneuver for a deliberate attack normally consists of three elements: main attack, supporting attack, and reserve. It makes sense, then, that Echo Company should be employed in the supporting attack role, especially with the shortage of dismounted infantrymen in a Bradley task force. By using the Echo Company in this role, the task force commander can retain his infantry and tanks for his main attack and as a reserve to exploit a penetration or complete the destruction of the enemy's position.

In this role, Echo Company can suppress or destroy forces on the main task force objective to isolate the point of penetration for the main attack. In most cases, it will fight pure, but it can be given tank or infantry platoons if

warranted by such conditions as enemy and terrain.

FM 71-2 further states that supporting attacks by fire should come from a direction other than the one used for the main attack. The NTC study mentioned earlier revealed that most units understand this, but that "this guidance is often ignored in mission orders, when the ITVs are ordered to support by fire but are relegated to the rear of the battalion formation along the main axis." This method of employment seems to stem from a concern that the slower ITVs will delay the forward progress of the main attack. This, in turn, causes the company to arrive at its support-by-fire position too late to accomplish its mission effectively.

At the task force level, the key to solving this problem is to make sure the main attack and the supporting attack are fully synchronized. Ideally, the arrival of the main attack force within the effective range of the enemy's direct fire weapons should coincide with the placement of effective friendly direct and indirect fires on the objective.

As the nucleus of the supporting attack, Echo Company can support the main attack by moving on one or more axes of advance to occupy one or more support-by-fire positions. Or it can follow the lead team along the main axis and then break off early enough to begin engaging the enemy on the objective.

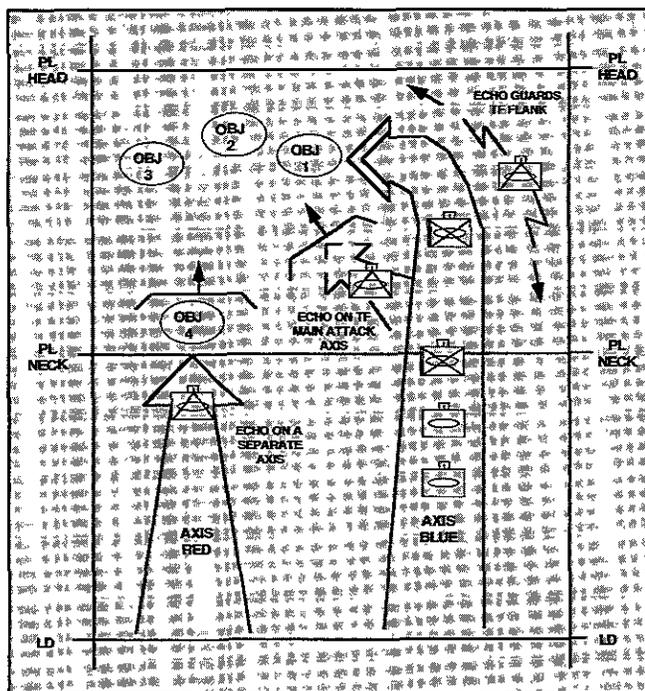


Figure 1. Echo Company using three offensive techniques — separate axis, main axis, and screen or guard.

fire support vehicle, with adequate communications. In some cases, this vehicle may have to come from the battalion's fire support element.

If the terrain is not conducive to a supporting attack by fire, another technique is to use Echo Company to supplement the scouts by screening or guarding the task force's flank. This mission can be performed at one of several points in the operation, the timing and location of which must be based on the IPB process. For example, the company can cross the line of departure before the main attack and emplace a static screen on a flank as the task force approaches its objective. But this option keeps the company from supporting the other TF elements and could even require that it be reinforced. (The unit can conduct only a static screen, because it is too slow to conduct a mobile screen of the main body's flank unless the task force commander is willing to tie his rate of movement to that of the company as it displaces from position to position.)

Echo Company may also move with the main attack or on a separate axis to screen or guard the task force's flank during the assault itself. Again, its movement and positioning should allow it to be employed rapidly and to achieve its purpose of providing early warning of a threat to the flank. The logical corollary to this technique is to use it in the TF's exploitation phase to protect the TF's flank as it penetrates deeper into the enemy rear area.

As noted above, there are few specifics that illustrate how the company is employed in the offense, and nowhere is this more apparent than for the movement to contact. FM 71-2 states that in a movement to contact the antiarmor platoons are used as flank and rear security or are positioned to overwatch the advance guard. (Needless to say, and because of the unit's known limitations, commanders must

give careful consideration to providing more detail on the way it is to perform these tasks.)

When ITVs are employed to screen or guard, the primary difference between the attack and the movement to contact is that in the attack they occupy a static position, while in the movement to contact they are usually in constant motion.

A flank guard provides security to the task force by allowing it to gain the time and space to maneuver in the event of contact. It is usually the first element to make contact in a given direction, and its mobility should be equal to that of the force it protects. But all of these considerations highlight the limitations of the ITV instead of capitalizing on its strengths. For example, if the flank guard does not get enough early warning from the scouts, or through its own efforts, then the platoon will be engaged before it can bring its TOWs to bear. Having the platoons move in bounds reduces the risk, but again the task force commander must be willing to tie his rate of march to that of the flank guards.

When the ITVs are used with the advance guard in an overwatch role, Echo Company will have to move continuously, risking engagement by the same force that contacts the advance guard. If the advance guard does make contact, the company will usually become fixed, and the task force commander will lose his ability to mass his antiarmor fires to support the main body.

Another technique sometimes used in a movement to contact is to position the antiarmor company behind the lead team (in a task force column or wedge) or teams (in a task force box or vee formation) of the task force's main body. This allows the company to move far enough forward to influence the battle and to take advantage of the protection offered by the other TF elements. Once enemy contact is made, the company can then move and mass its fires, fixing the enemy so that the task force's main body can maneuver.

This forward placement also permits the company to provide support by fire for another operation that is not usually practiced in training — covering the task force's main body as it tries to break contact and withdraw in the face of a superior enemy force.

The offense thus presents the greatest challenge in employing the antiarmor company with all of its limitations in mobility, protection, and sustainment. If we bear in mind, however, that Echo Company should attack primarily with the massed fires of its ITVs, that its positioning should be synchronized with the commitment of the task force's main effort, and that it may require task organization to accomplish its mission, then there is no reason to believe it cannot have a significant effect on the enemy and the outcome of the battle.

Even though doctrinal guidance is more explicit in spelling out how Echo Company is used in the defense, there are several ways of improving its use there as well. Generally, the company is used to provide massed antiarmor fires on enemy avenues of approach, and it frees the tanks from their more recent role as stationary gun platforms. This, in turn, gives the TF commander greater flexibility in using

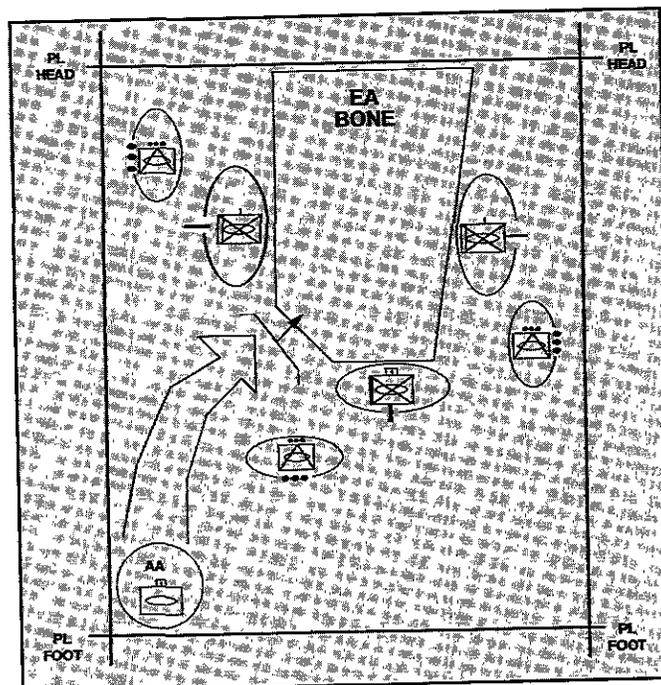


Figure 2. Echo Company in general support in the defense.

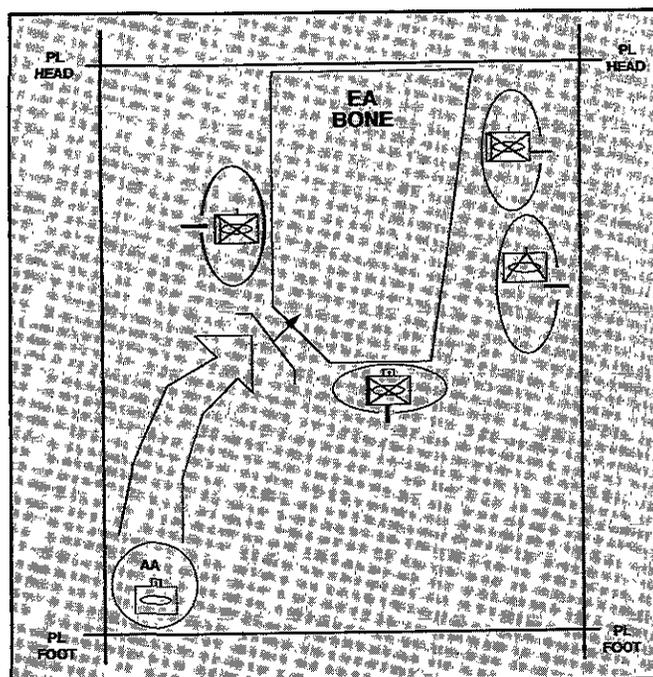


Figure 3. Echo Company in battle position.

his tanks to maneuver or to exploit opportunities.

The company is employed under the control of the company commander and can take the form of one of three techniques:

- Use the company in general support, to direct massed antiarmor fires into the task force engagement area from several battle positions (Figure 2).
- Assign the company a separate sector or battle position, depending on the defensive pattern chosen by the task force commander (Figure 3).

- Use the company as part of the task force's security force.

In determining the company's use, the task force and Echo Company commanders should use METT-T to determine when and where the decisive point in the antiarmor battle will occur and then place the company where it can make the most of its stand-off capability. This can occur from a single, company-sized battle position or from multiple platoon-sized battle positions.

The most flexible form of employment is to position the ITVs on multiple battle positions, in general support of the task force. In this way, their long-range massed fires can be directed into the engagement area from several directions under the control of a dedicated antiarmor commander. The other team commanders also have antiarmor responsibilities, but they are now free from the responsibility of fighting two battles at once — trying to destroy enemy vehicles at long range and also trying to repel an infantry assault.

TOW fires also complement tank main gun fires, providing depth to the defense and allowing the tanks to be used for such operations as counterattacks. This method also places the TOW platoons where they are better able to derive security from the other TF elements in their vicinity. Additionally, if company teams must reposition, they can do so using their dash speed while the TOW platoons overwatch their displacement.

While this employment technique is the most flexible, it is also the most difficult for the company commander to command and control.

The second technique, defense from a single battle position, can be used when the terrain supports it. If, by dispersing his TOW platoons, the company commander cannot achieve proper distribution (mass) and control of his fires, a single battle position for the Echo Company may be required. Another, less likely, consideration occurs when the task force commander's estimate tells him he needs a fifth team that is capable of retaining terrain.

If the company undertakes the third operation in the defense, one or more platoons are used to form part of the task force's security force. FM 71-2 recommends that the TOWs be positioned to cover open terrain to make the most of their range.

There are several limitations to using antiarmor this way. First, the mission detracts from the platoons' ability to prepare for defensive operations in the task force's main battle area. Additionally, the missile's time of flight makes it difficult to destroy the fleeting targets presented by infiltrating enemy reconnaissance vehicles. ITVs are great sensor platforms, but in this instance, instead of engaging targets, they should probably be used to supplement other, faster weapon systems. Finally, care must be taken in withdrawing the TOW platoons. If they are left out too long and make contact, their inability to shoot on the move will give them little chance of survival during a withdrawal under pressure.

Echo Company is vital to our ability to wage true maneuver warfare at the task force level. In the offense, dedicated to long range attacks by fire, it fixes the enemy in his position while in the defense it engages him throughout the depth of his formation. Thus, Echo Company allows the dismounted infantrymen of the task force to close with and destroy the enemy or to repel his assault, and to exploit the mobility, shock action, and firepower of the tank.

That is not to say that the company's organization is perfect or that ITVs are the vehicles it needs. With the advent of the line-of-sight antitank (LOSAT) weapon system, it is time to reconsider our employment of the antiarmor company. Indeed, if we continue using the same methods we now apply, we will be perpetuating the company's misuse — the same problem in a different wrapper.

As the foundation for the maneuver of the task force, Echo Company has a great deal of potential. By applying a few commonsense techniques, we can truly realize how great that potential is.

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