

Mortar Employment in Korea

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The 4.2-inch mortar platoon in a mechanized infantry battalion, when correctly employed, provides the commander with an invaluable fire support asset. As part of his organization, it is responsive and potentially effective. But all the battalion level maneuver and fire support planning and coordination are wasted if the mortar platoon leader fails to maneuver and employ his platoon properly.

The following elements are critical to the platoon's tactical operation:

Platoon SOP. A comprehensive, organized, and well-thought-out SOP is the cornerstone of a combat-ready mortar platoon. The SOP should cover vehicle load plans, maintenance, packing lists, actions on enemy contact, assembly area procedures, preparing for combat, local security, hipshoots, day and night occupation of a firing position, battalion alert procedures, blank operations orders, and fire direction center operations.

The SOP has three major functions: To serve as an instant source of reference for all members of the platoon; to speed the integration of new personnel; and to ensure that critical combat tasks, such as boresighting and maintenance of all weapons, are considered.

The SOP should not be considered a rigid guideline. It should be combined with common sense and considerations of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time) to form the basic system under which the platoon operates while in the field.

Battle Drills. A battle drill is any mission essential drill that the platoon or

section does. Some examples are tactical road marches, day and night occupations of both hasty and prepared positions, hipshoots, firing position reconnaissances, reaction to enemy ground attack, reaction to indirect fire, reaction to aerial attack, and reaction to nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) attack.

In a fast-paced battle where there is little or no time to give complex orders, simple, workable battle drills are essential. If these drills are rehearsed to a high standard of proficiency, the mortar platoon will be ready for immediate employment. The SOP plays a key part in successful battle drills; even when key leaders are absent, the next soldier in the chain of command can execute a drill with little loss of mission performance.

Terrain and Weather. The Korean terrain, combined with the bone-numbing cold and sweltering heat, make the country itself a formidable opponent.

Korea is composed mainly of steeply graded hills and rice paddies. The ideal position—at the base of a hill on the reverse slope that protects the platoon or section from direct and indirect fire—is rarely possible. Too often, steep paddy dikes, uneven slopes, and maneuver damage considerations prevent reverse slope employment. River beds, untilled fields, and terrain mortar positioning (TMP) offer the best positioning solutions.

TMP uses non-standard formations of fitting the platoon or section to the terrain available and then uses the M23 mortar ballistic computer (MBC) to correct for differences in individual mortar

carrier positioning. This may mean that a platoon or section is zigzagged around an area, but the MBC takes this into account and still allows the mortars to fire parallel sheafs.

The rugged and compartmented terrain in Korea—along with the lack of dedicated maneuver areas and the conscious decision to limit maneuver damage—often confines movement to roads. In addition, the surface conditions of the rice paddies require a thorough reconnaissance. A vehicle can become mired on a seemingly firm piece of ground, even in winter.

As for the weather, the winter cold will freeze the grease in standards and turntables, sap the energy of batteries in hours, and dampen the morale of the soldiers. The summer heat will make soldiers listless, and humidity or moisture will fog the M53 mortar sights.

The best defenses against the terrain and weather are strong leadership and a comprehensive maintenance program. Strong leaders can form tactically sound solutions and motivate soldiers to perform well regardless of the conditions. Good maintenance can help ensure that equipment is ready to perform even under grueling conditions.

Platoon or Section Operation. The pace of mechanized infantry operations and the large maneuver area covered usually dictate split section operations as the standard maneuver method. Split section operations ensure full coverage of the task force sector, provide continuous indirect fire support, offer increased survivability for the platoon, and allow the platoon to react better to

changes in the tactical situation.

A disadvantage is that split section operations put an added strain on the platoon's leaders. The platoon leader must stay in contact with both section leaders and keep up with the entire tactical situation so he can position the sections properly. In addition, he must communicate with the fire support officer to make sure the fire support plan is being carried out correctly, reconnoiter advance positions, and anticipate the way changes in the tactical situation will affect mortar employment.

The platoon sergeant must also keep informed of the tactical situation in case the platoon leader becomes a casualty. In addition, he must track the positions of both sections and respond to their requests for maintenance and resupply.

Despite these demands, split section employment usually meets the task force commander's requirement for mortar support better than platoon positioning or three two-gun "sections."

Platoon positioning offers easier command and control and logistical support, but there is little terrain on which an entire platoon can position and have sound tactical security. Without that security, the entire platoon can easily be destroyed by either enemy counterbattery fire or enemy infantry.

The use of the platoon leader's vehicle as another FDC allows three two-gun sections to be employed, which permits greater coverage of a wide area, provides three viable indirect fire support assets, and can decentralize fire support control directly to the mortar section or company team level. But it also significantly increases command and control and logistics and reduces the effects of the mortar fires on separate targets.

A key question in positioning a mortar platoon is how far forward to place the sections. A good guideline in the offense is one-half to two-thirds of the maximum range of the M329A2 high explosive round (6,840 meters) forward of the FLOT (forward line of own troops). But this distance needs to be adjusted to the task force commander's maneuver concept.

During movement, unless the maneu-

ver plan dictates otherwise, the mortar platoon needs to be 300 to 400 meters directly behind the lead element. One reason for this is the increased tempo of operations for units with Bradley infantry fighting vehicles. Another is the long train of rear fighting units and logistical vehicles that can clog the narrow roads (often one-lane with steep drop-offs on either side) and prevent the mortars from getting to the fight. Following closely behind the lead elements also requires the mortar platoon to pay close attention to local security and the battle immediately ahead.

The one-half to two-thirds guideline also works well in the defense, but contingencies must be anticipated and multiple positions planned that will enable the platoon to provide the most responsive and effective fire support.

Local Security. Mortar platoons and sections often neglect local security and with grave consequences. Security always needs to be 360 degrees and 24 hours a day, no matter what friendly units may be in the area.

Reconnaissance parties must use clearing techniques to ensure that no enemy personnel are present. They must also use NBC detection measures (M256 kits, M8 paper, M8 alarm) to avoid chemical contamination. At night, all members of the reconnaissance party need to have night observation devices (NODs), and the unit's M2 .50 caliber machinegun must have the night sight mounted on it with the flash suppressor attached to the barrel. Finally, vigilant security must be maintained during quartering party operations to prevent an enemy ambush.

Any available cover and concealment must be used in positioning. Mortar carriers need to be positioned so that they are protected by berms or concealed among weeds and small trees; or they can use tank and artillery firing positions of the Republic of Korea Army that offer good protection from both direct and indirect fire. The section must still have unobstructed mask and overhead clearance so it can fire to its full capabilities.

Camouflage is another important consideration because of the potentially

devastating effects of enemy attack helicopters and indirect fire. Camouflage nets need to be erected immediately in the defense and whenever possible in the offense. Using available concealment to the greatest extent possible is often the best solution during quick offensive movement.

The next step is to develop a local security plan that emphasizes the use of observation, automatic weapons, and individual fighting positions. An observation post (OP) needs to be placed out at once, usually on the side or top of a hill for the best observation. The OP should have communication (either wire or radio) back to the firing position, binoculars for observation, and the M60 machinegun—with tripod, traversing and elevating mechanism, and AN/PVS-4—for firepower.

The soldiers in the OP dig hasty fighting positions for protection against enemy ground attack. The section leader orients his three M2 machineguns along the most likely mounted and dismounted avenues of approach. Next, he gives each squad a sector of fire to ensure all-around coverage. The squad leaders have their soldiers begin digging hasty fighting positions, at least two per mortar carrier.

Once the digging has begun, each squad leader prepares two copies of each range card for the machinegun and each of the squad sector sketches. The section leader then assembles all the squad range cards and makes two copies of a section sector sketch. During limited visibility, the section leaders need to be reminded often to make the best use of observation devices (including NODs), automatic weapons, and individual fighting positions.

Time permitting, obstacles can be constructed, local security patrols sent out, and fighting positions further improved. Every member of the platoon or section must know the location of the rally point in case the unit is attacked in position and must disperse. Local security is an inherent task for all operations, but one that no leader can afford to neglect or take for granted.

Communications. The mortar platoon should monitor a variety of radio

nets. The platoon leader needs to monitor the battalion command net and the mortar FDC voice net. The platoon sergeant should monitor the mortar FDC voice net to stay abreast of the fire support situation and then move over to the battalion administration and logistics (A/L) net whenever necessary to coordinate logistics. The FDCs should monitor the battalion command net, the mortar FDC voice net, and the platoon internal net.

Absent from this list is the battalion fire support element (FSE) digital net. There are only three potential solutions to this problem: Have the FSE tell the mortar FDC when a digital message is coming so the FDC can turn to the digital net; have the FDC monitor the FSE digital net instead of the platoon internal net; or outfit the FDC with an additional radio system.

Each of these solutions has its drawbacks. Having the FDC switch channels to the digital net interrupts digital communication, and not having the FDC monitor the platoon internal net can be catastrophic to a platoon leader's maneuver plan when he needs to contact the section FDCs. It is difficult for the mortar platoon to find two extra radio systems in the battalion to place in the FDCs. But the best solution is to have the FDC monitor four radios to ensure instant digital communication between the FSE digital message device (DMD) and the MBC.

The SINCGARS radio system, combined with the KY-57 Vinson device, is the best tactical radio system in use today. Its ability to hop frequencies prevents enemy jamming and radio detection finding. If the SINCGARS is to function properly, however, all soldiers and leaders must be trained on it and experienced in using it. Losing the correct frequency-hop time on the SINCGARS can be devastating to a task force's fire support plan and to the platoon leader's employment plan.

Logistics. There is rarely an area more troublesome to the successful tactical employment of a mortar platoon than logistics. Broken-down vehicles, lack of fuel and equipment, late rations, and lost ammunition resupply trucks are

only a few of the logistical challenges.

The mortar platoon sergeant is the primary coordinator and logistician for the mortar sections, but the process begins with the section leaders. A section leader identifies any maintenance problems (on DA Forms 2404), fuel and ammunition status, or any parts needed. He then informs the platoon sergeant over the platoon internal net of the section's status and the logistical support it needs to continue the mission. The platoon sergeant can either request the necessary support over the battalion A/L net or go directly to the combat trains to coordinate for it. The platoon sergeant gives the section's position to the appropriate maintenance section and is usually responsible for leading the maintenance team, fuel truck, or ammunition resupply truck to it.

The fuel truck is brought along with the evening meal, and feeding and refueling are accomplished at the same time. Refueling in the dark prevents a compromise of the section's position. In-position refueling allows the section to continue providing fire support, prevents disturbing the lay of the mortars, retains the position of the automatic weapons, and eliminates unnecessary noise from tracked vehicles. The section leader must manage his personnel carefully to ensure efficient feeding and refueling, as well as security.

Vehicle breakdowns are another area of concern for the platoon sergeant. Each section's M577A2 is equipped with a tow bar and shackles that enable the section to recover one of its own vehicles in the position. Vehicles almost always break down, however, while the platoon is maneuvering to a new firing position. In such cases, the section leader immediately calls an eight-digit grid coordinate of the disabled vehicle's location to the platoon sergeant on the platoon internal net. The section continues to its next firing position, and the platoon sergeant takes over the recovery and repair of the disabled vehicle. The platoon sergeant communicates with the vehicle crew over the platoon internal net and receives a damage assessment from the

squad leader. He then contacts the combat trains maintenance team, which dispatches either a team with parts or an M88 recovery vehicle. The platoon sergeant receives an updated damage assessment from the maintenance team, informs the platoon leader, and either takes the repaired vehicle to its next firing position or plans to pick it up later at the combat trains after it has been repaired.

For ammunition resupply, a five-ton truck is brought from the field trains to the section positions under the supervision of the support platoon leader. The platoon sergeant coordinates with the support platoon leader (using the battalion A/L net) on section positions and the amount of ammunition needed. The FDC chief computer is responsible for tracking ammunition status and informing the platoon sergeant when each section has expended half of its basic load. It is critical that the platoon sergeant be informed when a resupply of ammunition is needed.

The practice of using the platoon sergeant as the primary logistician places strain on him, especially since he has only one M998 HMMWV. If two vehicles break down at two different positions, the platoon sergeant must quickly decide which task can be handled directly by maintenance and which requires his direct attention. Employment by section doubles the platoon sergeant's logistical tasks, and employment by three two-gun "sections" triples them. Whenever it is necessary to use three sections, the platoon sergeant and platoon leader must coordinate in advance with the combat trains so they will be prepared to help with maintenance, refuel, and feeding operations without the platoon sergeant's direct assistance. The platoon sergeant should still be in charge of the platoon's logistical operations, but his role should be that of a coordinator so he can maintain overall logistical control and then determine which section's logistical tasks require his presence.

The platoon sergeant's role as logistician removes him from the tactical play of the battlefield, and the section lead-

ers must be trained and experienced enough to operate independently. The platoon leader coordinates tactical decisions directly with the section leaders and contacts the platoon sergeant to discuss both the tactical and the logistical situations.

Maintenance. A mortar platoon lives or dies by its maintenance practices. The M106A2 mortar carrier and M577A2 command post vehicle are aging pieces of equipment that require special care. In addition to these vehicles, there are the M30 mortar system, M53 sight, M2 .50 caliber machinegun, SINCGARS radio system, M23 MBC, M2 aiming circle, night observation devices, individual weapons, and protective masks.

None of these items is more important than the other. All of them must have weekly preventive maintenance checks and services to operations manu-

al standards with status written up on 2404s. The equipment must also be cleaned, repaired, and serviced. In the field, at least one 2404 on each vehicle usually must be written up daily and given to the platoon sergeant to take to the combat trains. All other items must be checked to standards and any deadline defects recorded on 2404s.

A good maintenance program should be an integral part of the mortar platoon's operation, and quarterly services must be a period of high intensity maintenance, with the sole objective of improving the platoon's equipment readiness status. Services must be coordinated not only with the company maintenance officer, but also with the communications repair shop, the armorer, and the direct support weapons repair shops. These services must include protective masks, NBC equipment, and TA-50 equipment, all of

which must be thoroughly cleaned and inspected.

Platoon SOPs, battle drills, the Korean terrain and weather, platoon and section operations, local security, communications, and logistics and maintenance are the essential elements of the successful tactical employment of a 4.2-inch mortar platoon. These building blocks should not be restricted to the platoon's immediate chain of command. They should also have the attention of company commanders, battalion commanders, and battalion S-3s as a part of planning and executing mortar platoon training and operations.

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Scouts

Engagement and Risk Assessment Criteria

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Stealth is a key element of all reconnaissance operations. In a textbook reconnaissance, the scout platoon moves undetected to its objective, gains whatever information is required, and reports that information without the enemy ever knowing it was there.

Of course, this is all easy to say and hard to do, and it does not address all battlefield situations. For this reason, standing operating procedures (SOPs) and orders for scout platoons (and other units that conduct reconnaissance) should include instructions for two key criteria—target engagement and risk

acceptance.

It is almost universally accepted that the scouts are the "hunters" as opposed to the "killers" on the battlefield. As far as direct fire goes, the scout platoon's limited size and its lack of automatic weapons make this pretty much a foregone conclusion. But the scouts' ability to call for and adjust indirect fire does provide a tremendous potential for destruction.

During a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), for example, a scout squad pinpointed the opposing force's battalion supply point and

destroyed most of the site. The mission was performed without a single friendly casualty. Such success is rarely achieved by entire battalions during deliberate attacks against similar objectives. Obviously, then, there are times when it is appropriate for scouts to be "killers." The question is, "When?"

It is too late to begin answering this question when a scout observer finds himself frozen behind marginal concealment with an enemy platoon on a direct azimuth to his location. His actions must be guided by what he has already learned from SOPs, the opera-