

manders must be able to visualize the terrain in three dimensions and must see the action in relation to the task force commander's intent.

Good land navigation skills at all levels, an aggressive spirit with an offensive attitude, well-rehearsed react-to-contact drills, and a responsive command and control system are all essential to success.

Units that do not snatch the initiative from the OPFOR and instead choose to position themselves in a hasty defense are routinely destroyed in detail. Some units stop the OPFOR's forward momentum but are not in a position to gain a tactical advantage from it. Few, if any, units choose to conduct a hasty attack on the AGMB, yet this is the course of action that has the greatest chance of suc-

ceeding. All it takes is the proper spirit, a sound training program, and a determination to engage and defeat the enemy.

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# JRTC Lessons Learned

## An Airborne Platoon in the Defense

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During my battalion's training at the Joint Readiness Training Center earlier this year, we faced a new scenario: Perform an airborne assault on a landing strip; expand the airhead to prevent direct and observed indirect fires on the strip; and then move immediately to defend it from an armored and mechanized enemy so that follow-on forces could land.

At platoon level, this proved to be an extremely challenging mission but a highly realistic one, considering that a forced-entry airborne assault could be required in any number of locations around the world against modern or semi-modern mechanized forces.

Our mission was to establish a platoon battle position at a ford. We had to prevent the enemy armor from using the ford and push him northward into an engagement area overwatched by the company's main element. Bad weather and a rerouted airflow delayed the company's assembly, and by the time my platoon arrived at its tentative defensive position, time was short.

Rapidly preparing to defend against an enemy force that could easily outmaneuver and outshoot us presented the pla-

toon with some problems we had not faced before. The quick answer, of course, is that this preparation was a simple question of assigning priorities of work. But a drastically reduced time window and a lack of engineer support and barrier materials forced us to reconsider how we would approach this mission.

With less than 90 minutes before we could expect the first opposing force (OPFOR) T-62 tanks and BMPs in our area, we quickly established local security and put in our crew-served weapons. We would face the OPFOR with only the weapons we had carried when we jumped

in: Two M40 Dragons, six AT4 light antiarmor weapons, and 19 M21 antitank mines. My squad leaders and I understood full well that with these limited antitank assets, the amount of time we had to prepare defensive positions, and virtually nonexistent resupply for the first few days, we would have to force the enemy to fight on our terms. This meant reducing his ability to maneuver, which would force him to dismount and fight without his armor protection.

Obviously, a mechanized infantry OPFOR travels much faster and, in some ways, is more agile than the light force



an airborne platoon usually trains to fight. These differences force an airborne unit leader to reconsider some of the fundamentals he may have taken for granted. In our case, it required an analysis of the situation that was fundamentally different from the one we had made in the past in terms of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time). The most significant difference may have been our understanding of time, speed, and distance management as it applied to a mechanized force.

The first consideration in fighting a mechanized force is the way its speed affects the planned use of indirect fires. The use of trigger points is critical; the time it takes for a fire mission to be cleared through the fire support net, added to the rounds' time of flight, must be computed in terms of the distance the enemy will travel between the time a fire mission is requested and the time the rounds hit. This distance must be "backed off" the target reference point (TRP) and designated a trigger point. Implied, of course, is that the trigger point is under observation, like the TRP itself, and this may mean putting a forward observer (FO) well forward of the position. Without such fire control measures, a leader accustomed to dealing with dismounted rates of movement will find his indirect fires falling harmlessly behind a fast-moving mechanized force.

The same thought process must influence the positioning of observation posts (OPs). Thinking in dismounted terms, I had placed my early warning out as I had been trained to do and found that, just as the soldier in the OP was completing his warning transmission, the enemy was upon us. An OP against a mechanized force must be placed much farther out in front than is adequate against a dismounted threat. The OP must also be given a hide position to allow the enemy to pass over it while the soldiers wait out the battle. Obviously, the soldiers manning it cannot race back in on foot ahead of BMPs. Again, having an FO with the OP will help.

Engaging the enemy at the maximum effective ranges of the platoon's weapons is not as effective as it is against a dismounted enemy, particularly when few

antiarmor assets are available. Using his mechanized force's inherent speed and agility, the enemy can quickly close the distance between the extreme weapon ranges and the platoon's close-in defensive measures before dismounting.

An airborne defender—in case he is unable to fix the mounted enemy effectively with his direct fire—must pay close attention to the preparation of alternate and supplementary fighting positions. If a mechanized enemy can maneuver on a platoon battle position before he dismounts, he can certainly render a planned defense ineffective. Counteracting this ability requires a flexible defensive posture. Even when preparation time is short and actual positions cannot be built, subordinate leaders still need to know how, when, and where to displace so they can react to the unexpected. All the soldiers must rehearse the occupation of alternate and supplemental positions so they understand how to shift in a rapidly changing situation.

When the necessary antiarmor weapons are available, several two-man hunter-killer teams can contribute to the platoon's flexibility in the defense. These teams rely upon concealment and covered escape routes to the next firing positions, where antiarmor weapons are cached, ready to be fired. Firing on the enemy from the flanks of his route of march can wear him down and fix him, forcing him to turn into the planned engagement area. Hunter-killer teams must avoid decisive engagement and link up later with the platoon's main body at a pre-designated rally point.

Although the mechanized enemy's mobility limits the effectiveness of an airborne platoon's direct fire weapons, the situation may allow the platoon's antiarmor gunners to take certain measures to increase their hit probability. For instance, civilian and friendly traffic in the engagement area enables an antiarmor gunner to practice tracking in his sector. It allows him to find the points where the terrain either inhibits or aids his ability to track, and it also enables the platoon to rehearse its engagement priorities and criteria. For example, *Dragon 1 fires at the lead tank as it enters the ford, Dragon 2 fires at a specific tank only af-*

*ter Dragon 1 has hit or missed, and the AT4s fire at specific BMPs.* Once these priorities and criteria are clearly established, they will help ensure maximum killing power at the decisive point, with a minimum of target overkill (or worse, missed targets), and that is essential to an airborne defender when resupply is questionable and assets as valuable as antitank weapons must not be wasted.

The most important asset an airborne platoon can use to counteract the enemy's mobility advantage may be the M21 antitank mine. Each soldier in my platoon—except for the machinegunners, antiarmor gunners, and radio operators—had carried a mine when he jumped in. This mine (along with two 60mm mortar rounds for the company mortars) had greatly increased the soldier's load and had required significant planning. But what had seemed like an unreasonable burden in the intermediate staging base took on life-or-death importance once we realized external support could not reach us in time. Accordingly, our immediate priority was to establish a hasty minefield. We intended to use the mines to destroy as many enemy vehicles as we could, to fix the others so our antiarmor gunners would have a higher hit probability, and to force the enemy infantrymen to dismount so we could engage them with our direct fire weapons. In doing so, I learned the following lessons:

**Infantry units have to be prepared to emplace and record hasty minefields.** Field Manual (FM) 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, describes this task and lists many subtasks for the platoon leader himself to complete. In our situation, however, emplacing the primary minefield had to be a squad mission, and the NCOs performed admirably with little guidance from me. All of the leaders in a rifle platoon must be thoroughly prepared to execute this mission. Since the promised engineer support had been restricted by the airflow and other command and control problems, infantrymen at platoon and squad level emplaced most of the minefields in our task force sector.

Using DA Form 1365-1-R to record minefields is the ideal, but at the very least a sketch of it must be made and for-



warded to higher headquarters. Additionally, the minefield should be indicated on the sector sketch the platoon leader submits to the company commander.

The NCOs in my platoon did make detailed sketches of our obstacles, but I failed to get them to my company commander before I and some of the NCOs were evacuated as casualties during the ensuing battle. As a result, some friendly vehicles and personnel that did not have complete knowledge of my obstacle plan were operating in the area after the company's defense was successful. Luckily, there were no incidents of fratricide. Given the resupply problem, however, these reusable mines had to be recovered, and the lack of a sketch made the job unnecessarily difficult.

**The mines must be buried, despite the time it takes.** In our haste to get the minefield established, we surface-laid our mines and had to go back and bury them as time allowed. Burying the mines proved important for several reasons: First, M21 mines are not sensitive to the touch, and if we had not had our obstacle under observation and covered with direct fire, an enemy vehicle could have dismounted a single soldier to slide the mines out of the way and clear a path. Second, although the tilt rods need only a few degrees of tilt to explode a mine, they are fairly stiff. If a vehicle contacts a rod when the body of the mine is not

securely anchored in the ground, the mine may simply fall on its side instead of detonating.

**An infantry unit must plan for friendly vehicles to travel through its obstacle.** There was plenty of civilian traffic through the area at the JRTC, and it is not unrealistic to expect similar situations during an actual deployment. Additionally, friendly vehicles, for one reason or another, wandered into our minefield without prior coordination. As a result, we had to station someone near enough to stop the traffic, move the surface mines out of the way, allow the traffic to pass, and then rebuild the obstacle. This seriously affected the platoon's ability to complete other work. In a real conflict, it would also demonstrate to any potentially hostile civilians in the area just how easily the minefield could be breached.

Another platoon in my company came up with a remarkably simple and effective idea. The soldiers buried mines on the sides of the road and emplaced false tilt rods in the roadway itself. Then they used a direct-fire TRP to cover the road with antiarmor weapons. In an actual deployment, this would serve several purposes: First, an enemy moving on the road and spotting the tilt rods might assume the road was mined, try to bypass it, and move right into the real minefield. Second, friendly vehicles could pass

through the obstacle with relatively little disruption. And if a civilian unknowingly drove through the obstacle, his vehicle would be unharmed; the only damage would be to a few false tilt rods. On the other hand, if a civilian driver came to a quick stop and turned around when he spotted the rods, this suspicious activity might warrant further action under the governing rules of engagement.

In today's world, it is certainly possible for a light force to be deployed to an area where it will have to defend immediately against an armored enemy while waiting for friendly heavy forces to arrive in theater, which might take days or weeks. Thus, it was not unrealistic for an airborne battalion task force to face such a situation at the JRTC, or for my platoon to defend against T62s and BMPs.

A deeper understanding of time, speed, and distance management when dealing with a mechanized enemy, and a better appreciation of the capabilities and limitations of the M21 antitank mine, can greatly increase the effectiveness of an airborne platoon in the defense.

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