

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Convoy Planning

MAJOR JEFFREY J. GUDMENS

The battalion had conducted combat operations for three days and needed supplies. The S-4 put together a convoy and assigned the antitank platoon leader to take it forward. As the convoy moved down the road, the lead TOW vehicle encountered a minefield, and the entire convoy stopped as the crew dismounted to clear the mines. A well-concealed opposing force (OPFOR) squad opened fire and in 20 minutes destroyed all of the battalion's resupply, the TOW platoon, part of the aid station, and half of the mortar platoon. Since the AT platoon leader had not given an operations order, the soldiers did not know what to do when they were attacked.

This story is not unusual at the Joint Readiness Training Center; it happens often. Leaders who are responsible for conducting convoy operations forget one important thing: A convoy is a combat operation and is planned like any other combat operation. Then the information is disseminated to the lowest level, and the operation is rehearsed.

The convoy commander receives his mission from various sources—the battalion commander, the tactical operations center, and the like. He is often given sketchy information and a task such as "Move these supply vehicles to the release point." While this statement allows him great latitude for planning, it also requires him to find the information he needs to accomplish his mission.

The convoy commander issues fragmentary orders any time he has further mission information for members of the convoy. These warning orders contain enemy situation, friendly situation, mission, tentative time schedule (planned from arrival time backward), and instructions to key leaders (vehicle and supply preparation, OPORD time, rehearsal time, among others).

After issuing warning orders, the convoy commander makes a tentative plan using the estimate of the situation. As he develops the plan, he considers the following battlefield operating systems (BOSs):

Intelligence. The S-2 and the convoy commander conduct an intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to identify choke points, bridges, tunnels, road conditions, populated areas, and possible ambush locations. The commander should know what the enemy has done in the past and his current order of battle. The S-2 determines the availability of intelligence assets such as low-level voice intercept and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Maneuver. The convoy commander determines the task organization and the order of movement. The following is a sample task organization:

Advanced guard—two HMMWVs with M2/MK-19s and an engineer squad in HMMWVs.

Main body—a rifle platoon on three

five-ton trucks and convoy vehicles.

Reserve force—a light infantry company with five UH-60 and two AH-64 or AH-1 helicopters; or a mechanized infantry company team of four M1 tanks and nine M2 Bradley fighting vehicles. (M2 BFVs or tanks can be substituted for HMMWVs.)

The distance between elements and vehicles depends on METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time), but the advanced guard is far enough ahead to clear any obstacle before the main body arrives (but not so far that the enemy can block the route after it passes). The rear guard is close enough to provide immediate support but not close enough to join the end of the main body.

The convoy moves on a primary route that allows for rapid movement and avoids such hazards as built-up areas, tunnels, bridges, and the like. The alternate route should be one that the convoy can move to easily if the primary route is interdicted.

A convoy can expect to encounter various situations during operations and should prepare for each with a battle drill. The obvious battle drills for the convoy are *react to ambush*, *react to indirect fire*, *react to air attack*, *react to an NBC threat*, *react to civilians on the battlefield*, *react to obstacles*, *react to sniper*, *vehicle recovery*, *break contact*, and *secure at halt*.

Convoy security is improved by aerial

assets. Attack and scout helicopters can find trouble before it happens or help destroy enemy forces that the convoy encounters. U.S. Air Force AC-130 gunships also provide excellent security and support, especially at night. Planned close air support (OA-10, A-10, F-16) can help secure a convoy and provide immediate, close, and accurate fire.

Fire Support. The convoy commander needs a forward observer (FO) with radios in his vehicle and, if possible, a forward air controller to plan and execute close air support. The convoy commander and the FO develop a fire support plan that helps the convoy move without interruption. The convoy should be allotted one priority target that the FO can plan and shift as the convoy moves on its route.

Mobility, Countermobility, Survivability. The convoy commander considers some mobility tasks, such as hardening vehicles traveling on roads that may be mined and seeing that wheeled vehicles have sandbags or flak jackets to protect the crews and passengers from land mines, booby traps, or small arms fire. Hardening vehicles is a difficult, time-consuming task, but it saves lives. If possible, a dedicated route clearance team precedes the entire convoy. This requires the engineers with the advanced guard to clear only hasty or "panic" obstacles.

Air Defense. The convoy commander plans for air defense, even when the scenario envisions U.S. air supremacy. The convoy uses active measures that include air guards in each vehicle with a plan for 360-degree observation at different altitudes and the integration of dedicated air defense assets (Stinger, Vulcan, Avenger). The convoy also uses passive measures to avoid air attack. As the convoy lines up, the vehicles are dispersed to avoid creating a target. Drivers are instructed to keep proper intervals during movement and halts, and to seek any available cover and concealment during halts.

Combat Service Support (CSS). CSS is critical during convoys. All leaders ensure that the vehicles are mechanically ready for the mission, with mechanics inspecting vehicles just before departing if

possible. Although the goal of a good CSS plan is to avoid halting the convoy to deal with broken down vehicles or with casualties, the convoy also plans and rehearses vehicle recovery. The convoy commander plans for the worst case—more vehicles broken down than recovery assets to handle them—and for field-expedient recovery. The convoy also needs a good casualty evacuation plan for those cases where contact occurs and the convoy must fight its way out.

Command and Control. Convoy command and control must be from battalion level—the first echelon that has the assets to synchronize it properly. The convoy commander should be a captain or senior lieutenant who has experience with combat vehicles (perhaps the antitank or support platoon leader). He needs a vehicle with enough radios to monitor the battalion command net, the convoy net, and the fire support net. He needs a forward observer and a forward air controller in his vehicle with radios (backpack-mounted radios are better than none, though their range may be limited). The battalion signal officer can assist with the communications plan, determining whether the convoy can communicate along the entire route and, if it cannot, make corrections (retransmission or relay stations). Although every vehicle should have a radio, this is almost impossible, and backpack or portable (PRC-126) radios are better than nothing. If all vehicles can't have radios, those that do have them should be mixed in among those that don't.

In addition to these battlefield operating systems, the convoy planner should consider using Special Operations forces. Civil affairs and psychological operations forces can assist the convoy commander. There is a real possibility that the convoy will have to deal with civilians on the battlefield, and these specialists can help plan for and deal with them.

After the convoy commander makes his tentative plan, he continues with the remaining steps of the troop-leading procedures. The convoy commander can initiate movement at any time during the troop-leading procedures, however, and the sooner the convoy elements are centrally located, the better. This will facili-

tate the rapid deployment of march elements into the movement formation.

Even if the convoy commander has conducted a good map reconnaissance during his IPB, he now needs a reconnaissance on the primary and alternate routes. This reconnaissance can be done by other forces—the advanced guard, UAV, AH-64 helicopters with their video cameras, or cavalry helicopter assets. On the basis of this reconnaissance, the convoy commander completes his plan and issues an operations order.

After operations orders have been issued to every soldier, every leader must supervise, and the first supervision task is inspection. Leaders inspect weapons and ammunition for readiness and accessibility; vehicles for protection, maintenance, radios, and load compliance; make sure their soldiers know the mission, battle drills, and routes; and then conduct rehearsals. Conducting a full force rehearsal is best, of course, but if this is not possible, leaders should at least conduct a sand table rehearsal. As the last supervision task, the convoy commander coordinates—at least with the commander of the reserve force, the S-4, units providing fire support, and other support units such as aviation and medical.

Today, U.S. Army forces have to be prepared to conduct convoys in every type of combat scenario. Whether these are relief convoys for civilians or resupply convoys for forces in battle, they must be planned as combat operations. No convoy commander will have all the assets and the time to do all the things recommended here, but if a convoy is considered just a group of trucks driving down the road, soldiers will die needlessly and the people who need the supplies will not get them. A commander who plans his convoy as he would any other combat operation will accomplish his mission and protect his soldiers.

Major Jeffrey J. Gudmens is assigned to Operations Group, Joint Readiness Training Center, where he previously served as a platoon and antitank observer-controller. He commanded an airborne company in the 6th Infantry Division and was assistant G-3 Air, XVIII Airborne Corps, during Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, 1990-1991. He is a 1982 ROTC graduate of the University of Dayton.
