
Support by Fire

The Key to the Light Infantry Attack

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The overwatch and support by fire (SBF) mission is critical to a successful attack. When it is executed to standard, the support element destroys enemy personnel, bunkers, and vehicles; keeps the enemy from repositioning; and, above all, prevents the enemy from killing friendly personnel in the assault force. Unfortunately, operations orders rarely address support by fire in adequate detail, and it is seldom mentioned in unit standing operating procedures (SOPs).

The purpose of an SBF element is to allow the assault element, usually the main effort, to accomplish its mission. The element prevents the enemy from effectively engaging the assault force as it closes on the objective. Significant actions in suppressing an objective are ensuring that key weapons and personnel are in the SBF position, identifying targets and distributing fires, controlling rates of fire, and maintaining communications and observation with the assault force.

Leaders planning for SBF must first consider the composition of the enemy force and the capabilities of friendly weapons. This information will determine the types of weapons and the way they will be used. If the enemy is dug in with bunkers, AT4 and M72 light antiarmor weapons should be employed. If the enemy is operating in a trench line, indirect fires should be planned with variable time fuzes for airbursts, and plunging fire for the M60 machineguns should be considered.

If the enemy has armor, the leader

should plan to use Dragon medium antiarmor weapons. For a platoon attack, the platoon leader may task organize his M203 grenade launchers into a section of three or four men under the control of a team leader to mass the effects of the 40mm rounds. This is also a good technique for controlling M203 illumination during a night attack.

For an SBF mission, all available assets must be massed at the critical time and place. This includes not only



organic machineguns and antiarmor weapons but also indirect fire, close air support (CAS), and attack helicopters. The soldier who is trained and has the communications to control these assets is the forward observer (FO), and leaders should consider placing him in the SBF position where he can best observe the fires. The FO is usually with the platoon leader conducting individual movement techniques on the objective and not in a position to observe the enemy.

The 60mm mortar, the company com-

mander's most responsive indirect fire asset, should also be included in SBF planning. The 60mm is most effective when the direct lay method of fire is used, because corrections can be made more quickly than in the indirect mode, and the fires are usually more accurate. The SBF position offers the required observation for direct lay and also provides security for the mortars and personnel carrying the ammunition.

Indirect fires must be coordinated with the SBF position for easier suppression. The minimum safe distance (MSD) of a weapon should be considered in the planning to allow the assault element to move as close to the objective as possible without risking fratricide. One technique, called the "onion peel," has all available indirect fire assets initially massed on the objective. As the assault force moves closer to the objective, the larger rounds (105mm, 81mm) are shifted to other targets. The 60mm mortar, which has the shortest MSD, are the last to be shifted. Since the bursting radius of the 60mm white phosphorus (WP) round is less than that of its high explosive (HE) round, it can be directed closer to troops. WP is also effective for marking targets for CAS or attack helicopters. The complexity of such synchronization is another argument for positioning the FO and 60mm mortars with the SBF element.

A leader for the SBF element must be designated. In a company attack, this task is usually given to a platoon leader. In a platoon attack, the platoon sergeant

is the most logical choice because of his experience, but he may be better employed at the casualty collection point or with the reserve. A unit that has a weapons squad leader should consider tasking him to lead the SBF. Whoever is given the mission must be able to communicate with the platoon leader and accomplish several tasks at the same time.

In a hasty or deliberate attack, the SBF element must be in a position that allows the soldiers and leaders to see both the objective and the approach axis of the assault element. There are situations in which this may not always be possible, but the inability to observe the objective may necessitate the premature lifting or shifting of fires, which may allow the enemy time to resume his defensive posture.

When planning for an SBF mission, the leader must conduct a good terrain analysis to determine whether he can see the objective and effectively place fire on the enemy. He should avoid ground that is lower in elevation than the objective and also positions from which the assault approach masks the support fires. Additionally, he must ensure that his position has adequate cover and concealment.

Once the SBF leader has identified the objective, he must determine the enemy's strength and the location of crew-served weapon positions and weapons that will immediately affect the assault element. He must also identify key terrain that will support isolation of the point of penetration. At this time, the leader must identify where he wants fires concentrated and the limits of the sector.

Once the attack begins, there are several techniques that assist in the distribution of fires. The leader may fire single tracers at the limits while yelling, "Right, center, left," as he engages points within the sector. (Tracers can be effective during daylight if fired high into a wooded or dark background.) He could direct an M203 gunner to fire smoke or ground illumination at the limits. If the situation allows, he could also identify terrain features or enemy posi-

tions as target reference points and have the team leaders disseminate the information to the individual soldiers. Most important, the SBF leader must designate the decisive point where fires are to be concentrated. One method is to fire tracers at the position with his weapon set on burst. At night, the AN/PAQ-4A infrared aiming light may be used to designate targets for soldiers who have AN/PVS-7 night vision goggles.

The best support positions will fail if the soldiers run out of ammunition before the assault element makes it to the objective. It is therefore critical that rates of fire be controlled. Every soldier should know the cyclic, sustained, and rapid rates of fire for all platoon weapons. One technique is to have soldiers count between bursts of their weapons to obtain the desired rate of fire. M249 and M60 gunners will achieve a sustained rate of fire if they count four seconds between bursts and the rapid rate by counting two seconds between bursts. The sustained rate of fire for an M16A2 is one round every four seconds. During training, leaders should have soldiers actually count out loud, "One thousand one, one thousand two,...."

Units should have signals that tell the soldiers the rate at which to fire their weapons. One technique is to use a whistle—a long blast for rapid rate and several short blasts for sustained rate. Or this can be done verbally by passing the information down the support line. Rates of fire can also be controlled by designating certain soldiers to fire their weapons only on semi-automatic and others to fire only on burst. M60s and M249s should alternate fires, making the guns "talk" to one another.

When rates of fire are not controlled, a lull in fire usually occurs, and an unplanned lull at the moment the assault begins can be disastrous, allowing the enemy to reposition or effectively engage the assaulting force. Soldiers must recognize lulls and pick up the fire. For instance, an M249 gunner who no longer hears the M60 should increase his rate of fire.

As important as knowing rates of fire

is knowing when to increase or reduce the rate. When initiating the support, the volume of fire should be high to get enemy soldiers' heads down and preoccupy them with the support position instead of the assault. As the assault element begins its movement to the assault position, the volume of fire should decrease but still be effective enough to prevent the enemy from repositioning or observing the assault force. A fire command to help this is "watch and shoot," which tells the soldiers to fire only at observed targets.

Another technique is for the SBF leader to order an individual soldier to fire a well-aimed shot at a target while the rest of the soldiers hold their fires. For instance, the leader may say, "Jones, fire a three-round burst at the center bunker. All others hold." The leader continues this at random intervals so the enemy cannot identify a pattern. The key is to disrupt the enemy's synchronization and prevent him from locating the assault force. Before the assault begins, the volume of fires should increase to its highest pitch and precision to ensure that the enemy cannot effectively maneuver or engage the assault force.

When the assault begins, fires should be walked across the objective instead of being lifted. Ideally, soldiers in the SBF position should be able to observe the assault force; therefore, the lead assault element must have a means of marking their advance. During daylight, this may be a VS-17 panel or a pre-designated color of smoke. During hours of limited visibility, infrared strobes or chemlites, or even colored chemlites may work. If the soldiers in the SBF position cannot see the assault force, the leader must maintain FM communications with the assault leader.

The SBF leader must also be able to communicate with the soldiers at his position, and this is difficult, given the noise the weapons create. It is not as drastic with a squad as it is with the platoon or company SBF mission. For larger SBF elements, one technique is to "pyramid" leadership throughout the line: The SBF leader is positioned to the

rear with his RTOs and the FO so he can observe and listen to the radio. The squad leaders are centered behind their squads listening on the AN/PRC-126. Team leaders are located with their soldiers close to the squad leader. Instructions given to the SBF leader by FM radio are relayed to the subordinate leaders who then direct the individual soldiers. The soldiers should echo the

commands to ensure that they understand them.

The mission to overwatch and support by fire is probably the most difficult—and potentially the most important—one a unit can receive. The perfect attack would find the assault element moving unencumbered onto an objective where all the enemy had been destroyed or forced to withdraw, and this ideal can be

realized through good training, sound SOPs, and excellent leadership.

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SWAP SHOP

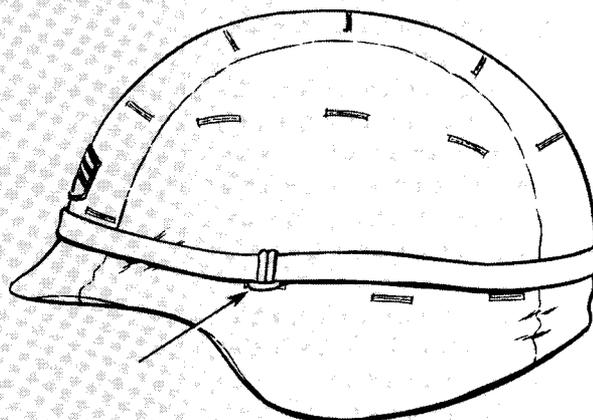
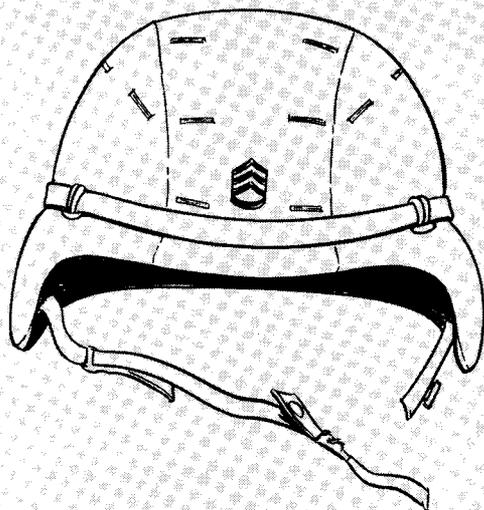


PASGT HELMET BAND RETAINER

According to Kathleen Swift, a clothing designer at the U.S. Army Natick Research, Development, and Engineering Center, here's how you make a helmet band retainer for the PASGT (personnel armor system, ground troops) kevlar helmet:

- Cut two 29-inch pieces of gutted 550 cord.
- Fold the 550 cord in half.
- Pass the bight (or fold) in the cord down behind the helmet band on the side of the helmet, above the location of the chin strap, from top to bottom.
- Pass the free running ends of the cord through the loop formed in the cord. This will form a girth hitch over the helmet band.

- Unfasten the hook and pile fasteners that secure the helmet cover to the helmet.
- Pass the free ends of the 550 cord down through the buttonhole on the cover directly below the band.
- Feed the ends down to the rim of the helmet, pass them to the inside of the helmet, and secure with a square knot around the suspension band where it is bolted to the helmet. (Do not secure to the sweat band.)
- Tie off the free running ends with half-hitches and cut. Sear remaining 550 cord so no more than one-half inch remains.
- Repeat this process on the opposite side of the helmet.
- Resecure helmet cover with the hook and pile tabs.



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