Armor-Light Operations
Light Infantry Against a Heavy Force

LIEUTENANT COLONEL STEPHEN W. GARDNER
CAPTAIN JAMES H. JOHNSON

It appears from recent missions that light infantry and armor will operate together more frequently in the future. Light infantry is becoming more lethal in its tank killing capability. As part of a heavy task force, light forces are likely to be called upon to attack and kill enemy armor during heavy-light operations.

Effective armor-light operations require, however, that both heavy and light commanders change their traditional methods of operation. The heavy brigade commander must decide how to employ his attached light battalion; the light battalion commander must reorganize his forces as well as alter the way he fights. Correctly task organizing the light force for these operations can make the difference between success and failure.

The traditional approach to task organizing for armor-light operations is to divide the attacking light forces into assault, support, and reserve elements. This approach works, however, only if the light battalion is to attack enemy dismounted infantry. If it is directed to assault enemy heavy forces, the organization must be completely changed to make it more effective.

An effective task organization for a light force preparing to attack an enemy heavy unit consists of a reconnaissance element, a security element, a long-range assault element, a short-range assault element, and support element.

The following scenario illustrates how a light task force, organized into these five elements, can contribute to a successful attack by the heavy brigade:

Enemy Situation

An enemy motorized rifle battalion (MRB) is in a deliberate defense. Its mission is to block a choke point and prevent a brigade-size mechanized force from passing through. The battalion has two motorized rifle companies (MRCs) occupying battle positions that tie into the restrictive terrain and form a kill zone in the choke point. The third MRC is positioned in depth with supporting fires into the kill zone. The MRB also has two dismounted infantry companies that occupy restrictive terrain on both sides of the choke point.

Friendly Concept of the Operation

The brigade commander directs the light battalion to infiltrate, bypass the enemy dismounted infantry, and destroy the right flank MRC that is tied into the restrictive terrain. By attacking this company, the light task force unhinges the flank of the enemy battalion defense, forces the enemy to fight in more than one direction at a time, and prevents the enemy from massing all his combat power in his kill zone. The destruction of this MRC will allow the mechanized forces to pass through the opening and destroy the MRB from the flank and rear.

The light battalion initiates the attack on the MRC before first light so the heavy force can assault shortly after sunrise. The synchronization of the heavy and light attacks is critical to the accomplishment of the mission. Each attack must complement the other.

Task Organization

With the concept of the operation understood, the light infantry commander forms his five combat elements and develops a concept for each:

Reconnaissance. The reconnaissance element consists of the battalion scout platoon plus one squad from a rifle company. Its mission is to pinpoint vehicle locations in the MRC so the assault elements can destroy them. Additionally, it will attempt to locate the enemy battalion's reserve and other key weapon systems.

The reconnaissance element infiltrates two nights before the attack and begins reconnaissance the next night using small teams and long-range thermal sights. The teams observe the MRC battle position to find the prepared vehicle and hide positions. The thermal sights, carried in by the attached squad, are used to scan the entire MRB battle position for high-value targets. The attached rifle squad, in addition to being an excellent intelligence gathering source, provides additional security for the scout platoon and allows a better distribution of the mission essential equipment. This added security and carrying ability give the reconnaissance element a better chance

of infiltrating to the objective with the equipment it needs to accomplish its mission.

Security. The security element consists of a rifle company (minus), an attached engineer squad, and a Stinger section. Its task is to ensure that the infiltration lane is clear for the following assault and support elements and then to isolate the objective from enemy reinforcement during the attack.

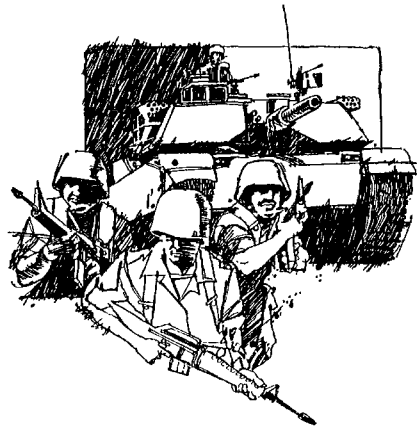
The security element is the first main-body element to move down the infiltration lane. The engineer squad opens lanes in obstacle belts for the follow-on elements as needed. The security element is the lightest main-body element in terms of firepower and soldier's load because its antiarmor and mortar sections are detached.

Long-range Assault. The long-range assault element consists of the battalion TOW platoon, the artillery forward observer, combat observation and lasing teams (COLTs), Stinger teams, and a rifle platoon (minus) mounted on high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs). The task of this element is to destroy at least two platoons of the MRC on the objective. It then helps the security element isolate the objective from reinforcing vehicles while the short-range assault element destroys the remaining vehicles. All the components of the long-range assault element are mounted on HMMWVs and under the control of the headquarters and headquarters company commander. This element initiates the battalion's attack on the objective.

The TOW systems, the forward observer, and COLT teams represent the battalion's primary means of destroying the enemy at long range. These systems allow the light battalion to engage the enemy with potent firepower while avoiding a direct-fire confrontation against vastly superior heavy weapons. The infantry platoon (minus) provides local security for these assets during the operation. Once the short-range assault element attacks, the long-range assault element helps the security element seal off the objective and adjusts smoke and indirect fire.

Short-range Assault. The short-range assault element consists of a rifle company with all antiarmor sections from the other rifle companies attached. Its task is to destroy the MRC remnants on the objective. It does this by breaking down into antiarmor killer teams, each consisting of a rifle squad and an antiarmor element. Each antiarmor element has two Dragons, with night sights, and AT4s. The antiarmor killer teams fire volleys of Dragon and AT4 rounds to destroy the MRC's remaining vehicles. The rifle squad that is paired with each antiarmor killer team is used to help carry extra Dragon rounds, AT4s, and Dragon night sights and to provide local security.

While these teams are outmatched by the firepower and mobility of the



mechanized enemy, their ability to deliver decentralized fires brings to the battlefield a different type of firepower and mobility. After the initial destruction caused by the long-range assault element, the wide dispersion of antiarmor killer teams that appear before first light makes the enemy feel he is being hit everywhere at once.

Support. The support element consists of a rifle company with all 60mm mortar sections attached, the engineer platoon (minus), an 81mm mortar platoon, and the Stinger platoon (minus). As the last main-body element to move through the infiltration lane, the support element must be prepared to execute a series of tasks: It acts as the battalion reserve, provides immediate indirect fire support, and provides all necessary manpower to carry the mortar rounds for the mortar sections. Additionally, it must carry enough Stinger missiles to support the Stinger teams that are moving on foot with it. Finally, this element must be prepared to open obstacle lanes for the attacking mechanized forces as they exploit the opening created by the destruction of the MRC.

In this scenario, the light force successfully infiltrates, destroys most of the assigned MRC, and helps the attacking heavy force pass through the resulting gap. The enemy forces, surprised by the light battalion's ability to destroy their armor vehicles during darkness, temporarily focuses attention away from the attacking heavy force. This diversion allows the heavy force to mass its combat power and push quickly through the gap. The enemy is then attacked from behind and soundly defeated.

By task organizing into the five elements, the light infantry battalion effectively contributes to the brigade's attack. The heavy brigade commander makes the most of the unique capabilities of the light battalion and increases his overall combat power while also preserving his armor and mechanized infantry for the main attack.

This task organization is unconventional, and each new element formed must rehearse its part. Although it may not be necessary to follow this exact task organization for all light operations against armor, it does provide a basis upon which other ideas on task organizations may be developed in similar situations.

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen W. Gardner commanded the 4th Battalion, 17th Infantry, and is now G-3, 82d Airborne Division. He is a 1973 ROTC graduate of Tulane University.

Captain James H. Johnson is assigned to the 3d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. He previously served in the 82d Airborne Division and commanded companies in the 7th Infantry Division.