
The Light Infantry Attack

Letting Go of the 90-Degree COA

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For most of us, Ranger School is a pretty profound experience, and the lessons we learn there tend to stick with us for a while. One lesson that many of my peers and I learned (and admittedly things may be different now) is that the maneuver plan for a typical Ranger School attack looks something like the sketch in Figure 1.

The attack begins with the support force “suppressing the objective.” At some magical time (too early leaves the assault hanging and too late risks friendly casualties) the support force shifts fires, and the assault force “sweeps across the objective.” So that the support force can fire at more of the objective for a longer period of time, it is usually positioned about 90 degrees from the assault force. I will therefore call this course of action “the 90-degree” COA.

As a small-group instructor in the Infantry Officer Advanced Course, I have observed that many of my students seem to have learned this same lesson somewhere. In fact, this is the first COA that comes to mind for most of my students—and for most of the company grade officers I’ve met.

While the factors of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time) may make the 90-degree COA a viable option in some cases, this viability depends upon the existence of most of these five conditions:

- There must be grazing fire from the support position to the objective.
- The support position must be at least 400 meters from the objective to

get the benefit of the machinegun’s range. (My rationale for these first two points is Field Manual (FM) 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, p. 5-29, which states that “Machine gunners should always attempt to engage at their maximum effective range and should strive for grazing fire.”)

- Over the course of this 400 meters, there must be clear observation and

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fields of fire, and there must be cover and concealment at the support position.

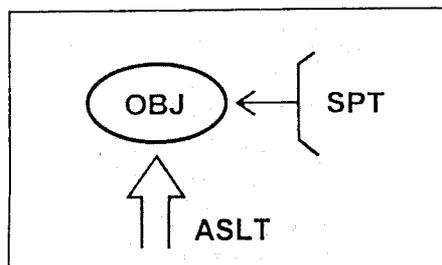
• The support position must facilitate the fire distribution and control measures necessary to engage the enemy and shift fires as the assault force advances. (The origin of the third and fourth requirements is FM 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, p. 4-34, which

says, “Each weapon in the support element should be assigned a specific enemy position or sector of responsibility.”)

• If the support force’s task is to suppress, then it must be suppressing an enemy that would otherwise be interfering with the breach force or the assault force passing through the breach. (Support for this requirement is abundant; in fact, it is the entire basis for my argument. Among other sources, FM 7-10, p. 4-31, describes the S in SOSR—suppression, obscuration, security, and reduction—as being “suppress the enemy covering the obstacle/breach site.”)

I contend that most times when we use the 90-degree COA, few if any of these five conditions exist.

The solution, I think, is to reduce the angle between the support force and the breach. As a general rule, I’d say the closer the support force is to the breach the better. Thus, I suggest that the form of maneuver in most cases is going to look more like a penetration and less like an envelopment. This idea certainly is not original. I was first exposed to it in an article called “Night Attack,” by then Lieutenant Colonel Lynn D. Moore (INFANTRY, May-June 1990, pages 39-41). Colonel Moore’s technique has since been incorporated in Student Handout 7-45, *Fire Planning Handbook*, pages 3-8 through 3-10. Even more important, this idea is depicted in FMs 7-10 and 7-20, *The Infantry Battalion*. (Incidentally, all my remarks are intended to apply to light infantry



TRAINING NOTES

attacks only, but I'm not sure they have to.) I began by saying that we learned the 90-degree COA somewhere and that for me that was in Ranger School. All I know is that no one learned the technique from FM 7-10 or 7-20.

After reconnaissance and movement, FM 7-10 says, the next step in a deliberate attack of a strongpoint is to "isolate the objective" (p. 4-29). Note the use of the all-encompassing term

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"objective." FM 7-20 is even broader in its requirement that the support force "isolate the battlefield" (p. 3-11). In either case, the emphasis is on forming a "protective umbrella" that stops both escape from and reinforcement into the objective. If, as both manuals state, the attack is organized into assault, support, and breach forces, this overall isolation obviously falls under the responsibility of the support force and may look something like Figure 2.

Once this large-scale isolation is complete, we can turn our attention to a more local isolation. FM 7-10 (p. 4-31) is specific about this:

Once the isolation of the objective area is complete, the CO focuses on isolation at the breach point or the point of attack. This isolation is to prevent enemy reinforcement at the breach site and also to suppress enemy weapons and positions that have observation of the breach site. The support element is assigned the main responsibility for this isolation.

Likewise, FM 7-20 says that the support force must "suppress enemy fires covering the obstacle" (p. 3-11) and provide "suppressive fire on enemy elements adjacent to the point of the breach" (p. 3-29). Note that the emphasis is on the breach, not 90 degrees away from it. This is important,

because the support force has a lot to do. At a minimum, it must isolate the objective, probably with more than one blocking position or ambush. Asking it to suppress positions at the breach as well—frittering away combat power against an enemy 90 degrees from the breach without inflicting casualties—would be folly.

Consider Figure 3 as an illustration. The enemy has established a typical defense in which every position has a sector of fire. The enemy the support force is suppressing has a sector from say two o'clock to four o'clock. The breach and assault are at six o'clock. Therefore, it really doesn't matter whether the support force suppresses this enemy or not, because he has no fields of fire toward the breach anyway. The only thing this support force is suppressing is fires directed at itself, and if it weren't there those fires wouldn't have started! But there is an enemy responsible for a sector from four o'clock to eight o'clock. Since that is where our breach and assault forces are,

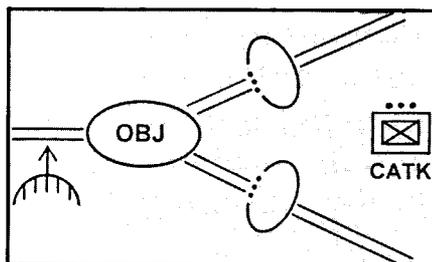


Figure 2

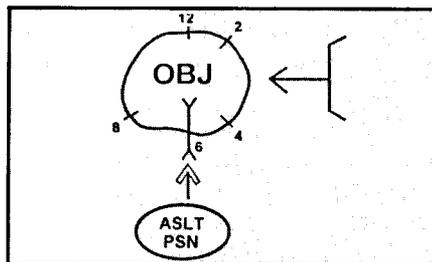


Figure 3

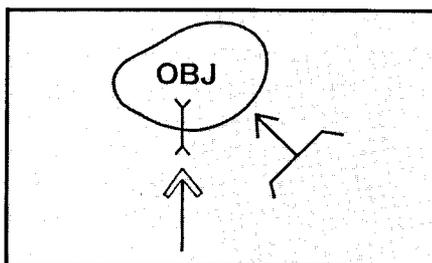


Figure 4

if we really want to help them out, that enemy force is the one our support force should be suppressing.

In some cases, the enemy's most probable COA may be to reposition forces from other locations to reinforce at the breach site. If that is truly the case, and if the S-2 has examined all available intelligence and committed to it, then the 90-degree COA makes a little more sense. Then, however, the task for the support force should probably be to *fix* instead of *suppress*. Given the defender's advantage of interior lines, terrain masking, and supplementary positions, the *fix* task will be difficult from a support-by-fire position several hundred meters away. Such support-by-fire positions are generally out of range of the M16s, so if the enemy has planned to reposition, he probably can. To improve chances of success, the control measure for the support force should probably be an axis of attack with a limit of advance outside the wire instead of a stationary support-by-fire position. This allows the support force to close with the enemy, decisively engage him, and therefore restrict his freedom to reposition.

My question is that, if we really believe the enemy is going to reposition to wherever we breach, why would we want to persist in attacking into his strength? A better COA might be to have a feint attack to cause the enemy to reposition and then have the main effort assault into the vacated portion of his defense. I don't think the enemy, in most cases, plans to abandon his hard-dug positions at the drop of a hat and fight above ground; generally, defenders try to fight from their primary positions.

So unless we come up against that rare case in which the enemy's most probable COA is to reposition to the breach site, we can consider something other than the 90-degree COA. I suggest that this new COA focus on the FM 7-10 injunction to "mass all available combat power at the initial penetration or breach point" (p. 4-31). Because FM 7-10 tells us "the support element provides effective suppression for the breach" (p. 4-34), we are justified in reducing the angle between the support

force and the breach. This COA may look like Figure 4. This configuration allows the support force to truly suppress the breach (the area, in fact) that needs suppressing. Because it is closer to the breach command and control is easier, which makes the shift-fire decision easier to execute.

The decision that now must be made is where the close-in support element, a part of the breach force (as shown in Figure 5), stops and the actual support force begins (see FM 7-20, p. 3-29). The close-in support element works directly for the breach force, as opposed to supporting it. If the obstacle is lightly defended or the area is very restrictive, a close-in support element may be all that is needed. If so, the support force, or a

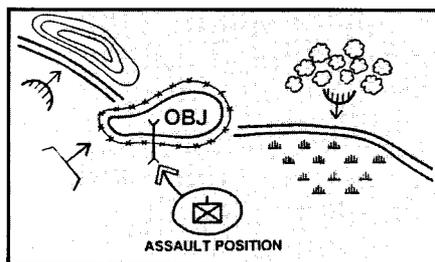


Figure 5

large part of it, can concentrate on isolating the objective as a whole. FM 7-10 recognizes that in some cases external units may be adequately supporting the attack and that a company support element is optional, depending on the conditions of METT-T.

My suggestion (Figure 5) is a COA that shows ambushes to isolate the ob-

jective, and a support position adjacent to the breach. Nonetheless, the 90-degree COA persists in IOAC and elsewhere. In my opinion, a better COA is right under our noses in FM 7-10. I recommend we change our mindset to consider concentrating our combat power at the breach instead of diffusing it elsewhere, and limit the 90-degree COA to those conditions under which it is the only viable course of action.

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Bradley Gunnery Standardization Yields Stability

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A Bradley gunnery crew is most effective when each member knows precisely what his job is in relation to the jobs of the others. Conventional wisdom with respect to Bradley gunnery assumes that the only way to achieve a high level of crew proficiency is to stabilize members by keeping them together for as long as possible—in short, battle rostering.

Battle rostering is one way to achieve crew stability, and most would argue that stability leads to killer crews and successful gunneries. To achieve stability, a commander must match the permanent change of station dates of the Bradley commander (BC), gunner, and driver. But circumstances beyond

the control of commanders often prohibit crew stabilization. In peacetime, an unforeseen levy, injury, or emergency leave can have commanders scrambling to put crews together. In wartime, what happens when a crew member is injured or killed? Can the unit capitalize on the experience of the remaining crew members without a resource-intensive train-up period? If all the crews in the task force have been trained exactly the same way, the answer is “Yes!”

Since January 1993, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, has fired three gunneries—the first two on the multipurpose range complex at Fort Stewart, Georgia, and the third on Carmouche Range at Fort Benning. The

battalion average was more than 900 points for all three gunneries, under both adverse and favorable weather conditions. External Bradley crew evaluations (BCEs) and computer scoring were used in all of these gunneries, and all the crews in the battalion were trained using the same gunnery program. In short, it was standardized.

The argument for standardization is an old one. Soldiers trained to the same standard with respect to scanning techniques, target acquisition, crew checks, and the like, can attain peak proficiency because a common standard for coaching and evaluation is created. Initially, no two crews are alike, but a common gunnery program