Protecting the Obstacle

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During the defense phase of a rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), the success of a mission often hinges on a unit's ability to destroy the enemy's mechanized force in designated engagement areas (EAs). Central to effective EAs is the use of obstacles that either turn, disrupt, block, or fix the enemy to help concentrate combat power against the attacking force.

Though defending units have made great strides seeing that obstacles are emplaced in the right locations, the opposing force (OPFOR) continues to be successful in the attack. The reason for this success starts hours before OPFOR mechanized forces cross the line of departure, when dismounted elements breach the obstacles.

Units that protect obstacles from OPFOR breaching efforts succeed because they effectively execute several basic tasks:

- Having leaders participate in the reconnaissance of the obstacle location and the emplacement of key weapons.
- Ensuring that the obstacle is covered by observation and direct or indirect fire.
- Securing the key weapons.
- Executing a counterreconnaissance and combat patrol plan.

Before the first U-staked picket is placed in the ground, the leader responsible for securing the obstacle (usually the company commander) must conduct a reconnaissance with the engineer. Otherwise, the engineer may emplace the obstacle on the basis of his own general orientation without regard to the capabilities of the unit's weapons. Unfortunately, the result may be that machineguns firing along the friendly side of the barrier have no effect on the enemy as they conduct the breach, or there may be extensive dead space that limits the weapon's capabilities.

A small amount of time and some visual aids can prevent this problem. The engineer must explain to the leader the purpose of the obstacle and what is required (tying it into certain terrain features, for example) for it to achieve the desired effect. Engineer tape should then be strung where the obstacle is to be positioned (several pickets can be used if the obstacle will extend over a long distance). The gunner of each primary weapon and the leaders who will direct its fires should first site the weapon. If the gunner cannot place effective fires from this site, it may be possible to reposition the wire or the mines so the weapon can attain the desired effects, with the obstacle still achieving its purpose. If not, the leader must consider alternatives, such as indirect fire, to cover the barrier.

Clearly, before an obstacle can be covered by either direct or indirect fire, it must be observed. Although units usually have good intentions of maintaining observation of the obstacles, this task is not always accomplished. The primary reason is poor situational awareness on the part of the soldiers. Ineffective rest plans significantly decrease the soldiers' ability to maintain surveillance of an obstacle. (Unfortunately, the OPFOR units usually conduct their reconnaissance and breaching operations when our soldiers are asleep.) To counter this deficiency, leaders must develop and enforce rest plans. They must also be active in ensuring that soldiers on watch are awake and alert, which means periodically "walking the line."

Traditionally, units that use night observation devices (NODs) during hours of limited visibility succeed in protecting obstacles. With the current modified tables of organization and equipment for most units, every soldier in a company should have an assigned NOD. When AN/PVS-7s are properly worn, with the night sight mounted on the head harness, soldiers are better able to acquire and identify the OPFOR. Although the older AN/PVS-4s have limitations, the newer generation tubing greatly improves their resolution and their acquisition capabilities. For this reason, the PVS-4 should be mounted on selected weapons. In addition, the unit should use thermal devices, including the AN/PAS-7, AN/TAS-4 or 5, and the thermal weapons sight currently being fielded.

Even assigning a NOD to every soldier in a unit and seeing that he uses it properly still does not guarantee success, however. Observation plans must ensure that the entire area is covered by NODs and that observation systems are redundant and overlapping. This includes giving soldiers sectors to observe. PVS-7s and 4s should orient on relatively open areas and the thermal devices on more wooded terrain. Thermal devices are better suited for wooded areas because they can acquire heat signatures through vegetation that might conceal personnel from observation with PVS-7s or 4s. Booby traps and early warning devices should be used in NOD dead spaces. In addition, an illumination plan should be developed. Mortar and handheld illumination, if properly employed, can greatly improve observation and target acquisition.

Once the leader determines that the obstacle can be covered by direct fire,

and once the weapon that will prevent the breach of the obstacle has been emplaced, forces must be arrayed to secure that weapon. Depending on conditions of METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time), several weapons may be committed to securing the obstacle, but usually crew-served weapons such as M60 and .50-caliber machineguns or Mk 19s are the ones used for the defensive effort. The leader must regard these weapons and crews as the unit's main effort, because they are essentially accomplishing the mission of preventing the breach of the obstacle. Too often, leaders try to position all the unit's weapons to cover the obstacle, disregarding the need for 360-degree security. The OPFOR can then envelop the unit by conducting an attack from the rear or rolling up the unit's flank.

Several methods can be used to protect key weapons and ensure that obstacles are not breached. Supporting efforts that will assist the main effort can have a variety of objectives. Using the platoon as an example, squads can be tasked to destroy the OPFOR, provide early warning, call for and adjust indirect fires, and conduct counterreconnaissance or combat patrols. But the key point is that they are not protecting that primary weapon, preventing the OPFOR from neutralizing it or disrupting its mission. The following is an example of a platoon's scheme of maneuver:

Weapons squad, the platoon main effort, destroys OPFOR to prevent the breach of the obstacle. First squad destroys OPFOR to prevent the envelopment of the main effort. Second squad provides early warning and calls for and adjusts fire to prevent the OPFOR from surprising the main effort and disrupts the OPFOR's breaching effort. Third squad destroys the OPFOR to prevent the attack of the main effort from the rear of the platoon position.

Another way to facilitate the success of the main effort is to determine when and where the enemy is preparing to attack, and then focus combat power to disrupt that attack. The OPFOR's tactics are much like the U.S. Army's requiring the establishment of objective rally points (ORPs), the conduct of reconnaissance, and the attack. In addition, they usually move in large elements (platoon and company size) to achieve mass at their objectives. Objectives include key terrain such as crossing points and choke points, locations where obstacles are normally emplaced. It is therefore important to develop a plan to counter these activities and get into the OPFOR's decision cycle. Two ways to do this are through counterreconnaissance and synchronized combat patrols intended to disorganize the OPFOR as they initiate their attack.

The intent of counterreconnaissance is to deny the OPFOR information about the friendly unit's disposition. To do this, leaders must be aware of all the OPFOR's potential information collectors. These include civilians, special operation forces, terrorists, insurgent groups, and division and regimental reconnaissance assets. Consequently, the first step of a sound counterreconnaissance plan is good operational security (OPSEC) and good situational awareness on the part of the soldiers.

A more active form of counterreconnaissance is the employment of forces to locate and destroy the OPFOR's recon elements before they can determine the unit's disposition and relay the information to their higher headquarters. Although this battle is usually conducted at battalion level, companies and platoons can assist the effort by adhering to the OPSEC standards outlined in ARTEPs 7-8, *Mission Training Plan for the Infantry Rifle Company*, and 7-10, *Mission Training Plan for the Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad.*

The purpose of combat patrols in the scheme of maneuver is to disrupt the enemy's attack and prevent him from concentrating combat power against the main effort. Again, the unit may conduct ambushes along likely enemy avenues of approach. In addition, attacks on the enemy's occupied ORPs adversely affect the enemy's synchronization. Both of these provide early warning to the defending unit and prevent surprise.

Depending on METT-T conditions, the unit tasked to conduct the combat patrol may not be required to dig fighting positions, thus freeing its soldiers to execute tasks of counterreconnaissance or manning observation posts (OPs) during the preparation phase.

Another technique that can be used to provide early warning and disrupt the enemy's attack is squad OPs. Positioned on a likely enemy avenue of approach, a squad OP makes it possible for the unit to conduct continuous surveillance operations and call indirect fires against the enemy as they move. Though very effective, the OP must have the appropriate organization for combat and must be in a location that promises success.

The unit should consider using a forward observer (FO) and giving the squad additional radios. The platoon leader—along with the company commander, fire support officer, OP leader, and FO—must develop a detailed fire support plan, ensuring that it is tied in with the company's purpose of fires. This plan should include the use of trigger lines and visual target reference points to ensure effective and responsive fires. In addition, a casualty evacuation and withdrawal plan must be generated to support the operation.

A unit's armor killing assets are generally considered the heroes of the defensive fight. At the JRTC, there is no sight more glorious than dozens of blinking enemy vehicles. But if those OPFOR vehicles cannot be turned into an EA or blocked to allow effective antiarmor fires, the unit cannot achieve this desired end state. On a real battlefield, the results of this shortcoming could be measured in soldiers' lives. But with the application of basic doctrine, coupled with experience and initiative, obstacles can be protected and victory can be realized on the JRTC battlefield, and in combat as well.

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