

The Defense Of a Mortar Platoon Position

LIEUTENANT MICHAEL P. SHANNON

The defense is a coordinated effort to cause the enemy attack to fail and set conditions favorable to assuming the offensive. Defensive operations retain ground, gain time, deny the enemy access to an area, and damage or defeat his attacking forces. An essential element of the battalion commander's combat power in the defense is the battalion mortar platoon.

The 81mm mortar platoon in an airborne infantry battalion can provide immediate, accurate, and responsive indirect fire support for the battalion task force. Mortars enable the commander to strike out against the enemy, to regain the initiative and synchronization, and to counterattack by fire. Thus, the mortar platoon is an integral piece of any defensive operation and can be used specifically for the following:

- Deceive or divert enemy attention.
- Screen friendly maneuver.
- Obscure enemy observation and fires.
- Neutralize, suppress, or destroy enemy forces.
- Fix the enemy in position for counterattack.
- Deny the enemy the use of defilade or decisive terrain.
- Illuminate the battlefield for more effective friendly direct and indirect fires.
- Harass the enemy and interdict his massing of assault forces.

A key ingredient in the mortar platoon's ability to support the task force defense is its own defense. The establishment of the mortar platoon defense should be methodical to save time and effort. The many factors the mortar platoon leader uses in building a mortar defense are the enemy situation, the commander's intent, and the ability to

range the battalion sector. He must also consider a number of enemy threats, the greatest of which are enemy counterfire, ground attacks, and air attacks.

This article discusses my platoon's standing operating procedures for the defense. The key events in the execution of the defense are shown in Figure 1.

A good mortar defense begins with a thorough mission analysis. The platoon leader must analyze the battalion scheme of maneuver and, along with the battalion fire support officer (FSO), select a location that best supports the battalion's maneuver elements. They may first select a general area of operation, and later narrow it down to a specific location on the basis of a thorough leader's reconnaissance.

The platoon leader must determine whether he can accomplish the mission from the position he has chosen. He selects the platoon firing position on the basis of the following fundamentals: mission accomplishment, tactical situa-

tion, range, target area coverage, mask and overhead clearance, surface conditions, communications, and routes. He must also consider where to emplace the aiming circle, the fire direction center (FDC) and headquarters element, and the platoon's vehicles. The defense is then tailored to the resources available and the enemy threat. Once the leader's reconnaissance is complete, the platoon can safely occupy the position in accordance with the standards in ARTEP 7-90MTP, *Mission Training Plan for the Infantry Mortar Platoon, Section, and Squad*.

A key element in the occupation of the firing position is the platoon's ability to move from the occupation to the priorities of work. Each squad leader must be diligent in implementing the priorities of work. The most important priority is the establishment of local security. Once the platoon leader is sure the area of operations is secure and defensible, the platoon can begin to execute the priorities of work. The following is a list of priorities that other platoons can adapt to their own needs:

- Establish local security (emplace observation points and early warning devices).
- Establish communications with the FDC (both wire and FM).
- Clear mask and overhead clearance.
- Camouflage positions.
- Emplace alternate aiming posts and safety stakes.
- Emplace M-8 chemical agent alarms.
- Select alternate and supplementary positions.
- Prepare sector sketches and range cards.
- Dig/construct mortar positions.

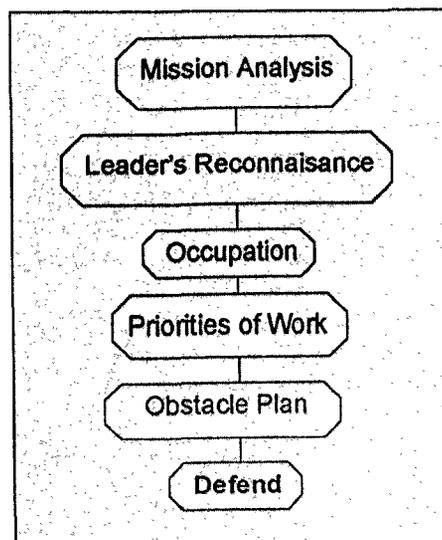


Figure 1. Execution of the defense of a mortar platoon position

- Emplace obstacles and mines (in accordance with battalion SOP).
- Perform weapons maintenance.
- Perform personal hygiene and camouflage self and equipment.
- Eat and implement rest plan.

The most effective way to accomplish all of these tasks is to delegate the priorities of work to the squad leader, who can then report the status of his squad to the platoon leader as each task is done.

The survivability of the platoon depends upon both security and a good obstacle plan that includes the use of existing and reinforcing obstacles. Depending on the engineer assets available, the platoon leader should use his resources as effectively as possible in executing his obstacle plan. Using concertina wire and mines is one of the best ways to provide protection for the platoon. Protective and tactical wire should be the main priority for wire obstacles.

The mortar defense concept my platoon has developed is shown in Figure 2. Note that the flanks of the position are covered by a .50 caliber machinegun position and a Mk 19 grenade launcher position. The rear of the position is covered by a two-man observation post that is used to provide early warning of approaching enemy. Wire obstacles, supplemented with mines, cover the most likely enemy avenues of approach. One mortar gun squad acts as the platoon quick-reaction force (QRF) in the event of an enemy probe of the position.

Once the platoon leader is confident that the priorities of work are being accomplished and the obstacle plan is in effect, he should begin to look for alternate firing positions. This begins with a thorough map reconnaissance of proposed locations. Once a primary location has been chosen, the platoon leader takes his recon party and selects the alternate firing position. He should determine the location for each tube, the aiming circle, and the platoon's vehicles, and then determine the deflections to each gun and all other critical information. A key to this process is determining a route to the alternate location and timing the movement. If at all pos-

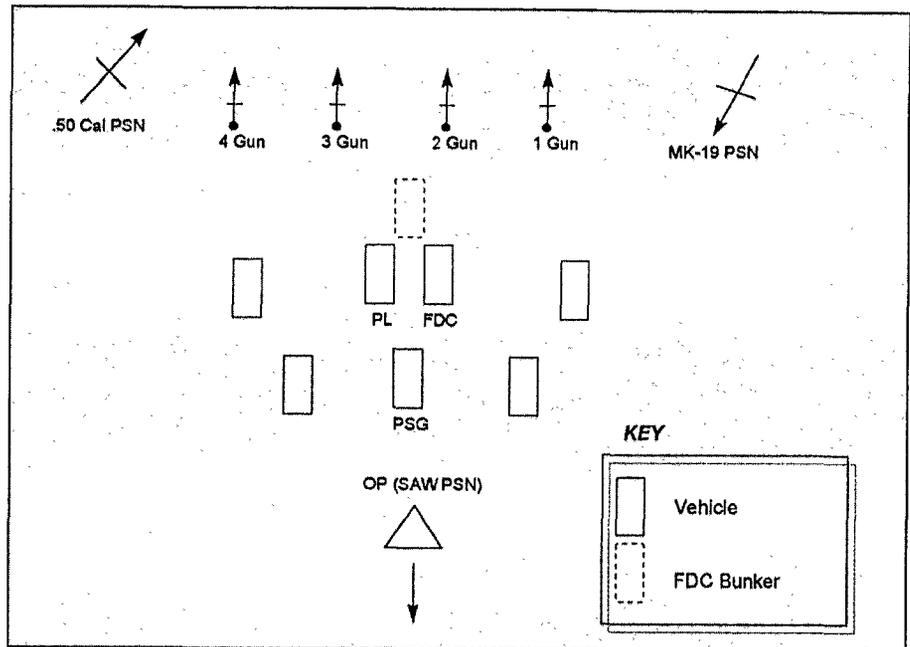


Figure 2. Mortar platoon defensive position

sible, a movement rehearsal should be conducted to determine how long the platoon will be out of action during the move. This information should be passed to the battalion tactical operations center so the FSO or S-3 can plan for the interruption of fires in the event of a displacement.

At this point, the defense is almost fully developed, and the platoon leader must supervise to ensure that the platoon is meeting his intent. He must constantly see that security is maintained. In the event of an engagement, he must control and direct fire, using the QRF. If necessary, he must also move soldiers, ammunition, and equipment within the position to ensure continuous support. He must reposition to ensure that the FDC is tracking the battle so the platoon can continue to be effective. Finally, he must reorganize and reestablish the defense during lulls in the battle.

The platoon defense plan is good only if it is known and well rehearsed. Platoon rehearsals are the only way each individual soldier will understand his part of the plan. Every soldier must know his task and purpose and how it relates to the big picture. The rehearsal should always be conducted under conditions similar to those in which you will fight. It should focus on battle drills, SOPs, and individual tasks.

Rehearsals can begin immediately after the first warning order is issued. Mission specific rehearsals usually follow the operations order. The platoon leader must establish the priority for rehearsals on the basis of time and resources. The first priority should focus on the platoon's actions at the decisive point in the battle. The most important rehearsal for the platoon defense is that for actions in the event of enemy contact, and the use of the QRF to respond to those actions. The platoon leader should brief his soldiers on the location and routes to the alternate firing position and the conditions that warrant an evacuation of the primary firing position. He should also conduct rehearsals with the QRF squad, including blank and live fires, if possible.

The prime consideration in the defense of a mortar position is survivability. The platoon must be able to accomplish its task and purpose and also defend itself. History has shown that a well planned, well rehearsed, and well executed mortar platoon defense leads to success in combat.

Lieutenant Michael P. Shannon led a mortar platoon and an antitank platoon and served as a company executive officer in the 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry. He is a 1995 ROTC graduate of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.