



Using the FORWARD OBSERVER in Mechanized Infantry Operations

LIEUTENANT CHRIS LANGLAND-SHULA

How many times have you heard someone say, “We don’t need specialized infantrymen, because anyone can pull the trigger on an M16?” Never, right? That is because this statement makes no allowance for the unique skills, teamwork and mindset that form the effectiveness of the infantry Soldier. However, this same argument is used to dismiss another highly skilled and professional Soldier, the forward observer (FO). “We don’t need FOs anymore, because anyone can call for fire.” This is especially prevalent in the mechanized infantry. I don’t think this is because anyone doesn’t think FOs are useful, but I do feel it is because there hasn’t been sufficient attention given to training the platoon leader (PL) and FO to work together in combat operations.

FUNCTION OF THE FORWARD OBSERVER

The first step to this is establishing what role an FO fills in the platoon. FM 7-7J has a good start in Chap. 2, Section VII: Fire Support. In short, the FO is the platoon’s subject matter expert on indirect fires. This includes assisting the PL with fire planning, working to establish indirect fire priorities, and ensuring that the squad leaders understand the role of indirect fires in the operation. It also includes making sure the platoon understands the capabilities of indirect fires, as well as their limitations.

The second part is the execution of fire support during the mission. This is

where FM 7-7J falls sadly short, and where units need the most practice. The FO, through a thorough understanding of the commander’s intent and plan of execution of the operation, uses indirect fires to best support that operation. The FO identifies targets, and requests fires to engage those targets that the commander and platoon leader feel warrant the use of indirect fires. The FO then adjusts those fires to ensure they achieve the desired effect on the targets in question.

Your FO is specially equipped and trained to execute this mission. He doesn’t just know how to call for fire (CFF); it is ingrained into him. FOs understand the CFF so thoroughly that they make jokes with it. Just as a maneuver Soldier is trained to react to a threat with direct fire and maneuver, the FO is trained to react with indirect fires. The FO also has been trained to identify and accurately locate targets at a significant distance utilizing binoculars, a map, and sometimes specialized lasers like the AN/GVS-5 Laser Range Finder (MELIOS) or Ground/Vehicular Laser Locator Designator (G/VLLD pronounced gl-ID). He is also trained to read maneuver and artillery map graphics. Finally, the FO team has a radio with the frequencies to all of the indirect fire assets available.

UTILIZING THE FORWARD OBSERVER

That information is fine, but how does a platoon leader in the mechanized infantry use his FO? The commandment is this:

Get your FO out of the Bradley, even if he is separated from the PL. While the FO should stick with the PL during the planning process and orders, when it comes time to execute, it is a whole new ballgame. A FO needs to stay close to the PL during light operations; the same is not true in mechanized operations. The reason is this: The pace of light infantry is limited to the speed of a Soldier on foot. This means that it is easy to get separated, and once separated, it can be extremely difficult to link back up. Thus, the FO needs to stay right next to his PL in order to assist him as the situation unfolds.

In the mechanized world, the speed is limited to the pace a Bradley can set. This opens up many options on both the maneuver and fire support side. The first thing I can tell you is this: Indirect fires are useless without eyes on the target! No matter how good your intelligence is, only 50 meters can make the difference between turning dirt over and destroying enemy personnel and equipment. Thus, if that planned target is off within the margin of error of a six-digit grid, your fires can be almost ineffective. Since indirect fire can give you more firepower than an entire platoon, you need the best set of eyes you can get to watch and control those fires. Those eyes belong to your forward observer. This means you have got to get that FO out of the Bradley! If your FO is in the rear of your vehicle, he might as well be back in the rear detachment for all the good he is doing you.

Make sure you have good radio contact with the FO and somehow get him into a

putting him on a nearby hill, or it can mean infiltrating him in prior to the attack. How to get that FO into position is up to the PL, but it must be done. This takes proper planning and tactical patience, but will pay off handsomely when done.

Once in position, the FO can send in target locations and red-hot intelligence on enemy dispositions. While assigned to the 1-9 IN (M), I listened once as one of my FOs sent intelligence all the way up to brigade. The FO can also engage those targets with indirect fire. However, keep in mind those fires belong to the maneuver leader, not the FO. Do not allow that FO to fire without your authorization, so that you can be sure your troops can be best served by those fires. By ensuring that the FO completely understands what you want to accomplish with your plan, he will be able to support you brilliantly.

Conversely, if you ignore the FO, leave him in the back of your Bradley, or otherwise prevent him from getting eyes on target, you have made your job much harder. In Korea, I saw a very simple trend — when FOs were in position to observe fires and maneuver, commanders paid attention to them, and the missions were successful. When the FOs were kept back, left in the Bradleys or ignored, the missions failed. It was that simple. I think the best example was one new company commander who instructed his platoon leaders over the radio that, “We don’t have time to wait for the artillery. Attack now.” His company was completely destroyed by the dug-in OPFOR.

Once the mission is completed, the platoon is often well past the FO’s location. This is not a problem if it is considered in the planning process. One option is having a passing element pick the FO team up. Some good choices are the company Fire Support Team (FIST), the first sergeant, or a trailing platoon. Your FO can link up with you during reconsolidation.

ENSURING CLOSE COOPERATION WITH YOUR FORWARD OBSERVER

Here is some advice on how to better integrate your FIST and FOs into your operations.

First, if your FISTers don’t already live and work with your unit, bug your chain of command to get them over to you.



If he (forward observer) sits in the back of a Bradley, he is useless. Don’t throw away the enormous combat power that your FO controls.

Keep them on your company’s training schedule. In addition to the greater integration of training between the FIST and the company, this helps the FIST to build their own skills. The reason for this is simple: Artillery battalions tend to abuse their FISTers, putting them on details, taskings, and other non-mission essential tasks which take away from their training time. These chores take away considerable time from the maneuver and artillery training and often result in FISTers spending all their time in the field or doing details. This can result in poor individual skills and similarly poor platoon and company integration. Keeping them away from the artillery battalion can help alleviate this.

Second, ask your company Fire Support Officer (FSO) to give classes to the platoon leaders and forward observers on combined arms operations. Your FSO has received a good deal of training in this area, and along with your company commander and slice element leaders (such as engineers and air defense) can really help bring the team together. Also, involve your FOs in your infantry training. The better they understand how you do business, the better they will know how to support you while in the field.

While in the field, make sure your company commander enforces this rule: Your FO belongs to you, the platoon leader, not the company FSO. Even if there are not enough FOs for each platoon, while that FO is working with you, he is yours and answers to the platoon leader. The FSO is the company commander’s fire support expert, not the FO’s boss in the field. With this authority comes responsibility, however. Use your FO like just another infantryman, and don’t be surprised when the company commander finds another place for him. FOs are far too effective at their jobs to pull security on halts or to serve as the platoon leader’s Radio Telephone Operator (RTO). That can result in the FO not being where he needs to be when he needs to be there, particularly when the unexpected occurs.

Perhaps the best thing to remember when dealing with a FO is this: Not only does he have access over his radio to more firepower than a mech platoon could ever wish for, he is an expert at using it. If he can see a target, he can either kill it or set the platoon up for success in killing that target themselves. If he sits in the back of a Bradley, he is useless. Don’t throw away the enormous combat power that your FO controls.

Lieutenant Chris Langland-Shula served as a Company Fire Support Officer with 1-9 IN (M) at Camp Hovey, Korea, from 1998-1999. At the time the article was written, he was serving as a platoon leader with 6-27 FA (MLRS) at Fort Sill, OK.
