

Indirect Fire for the Close Fight

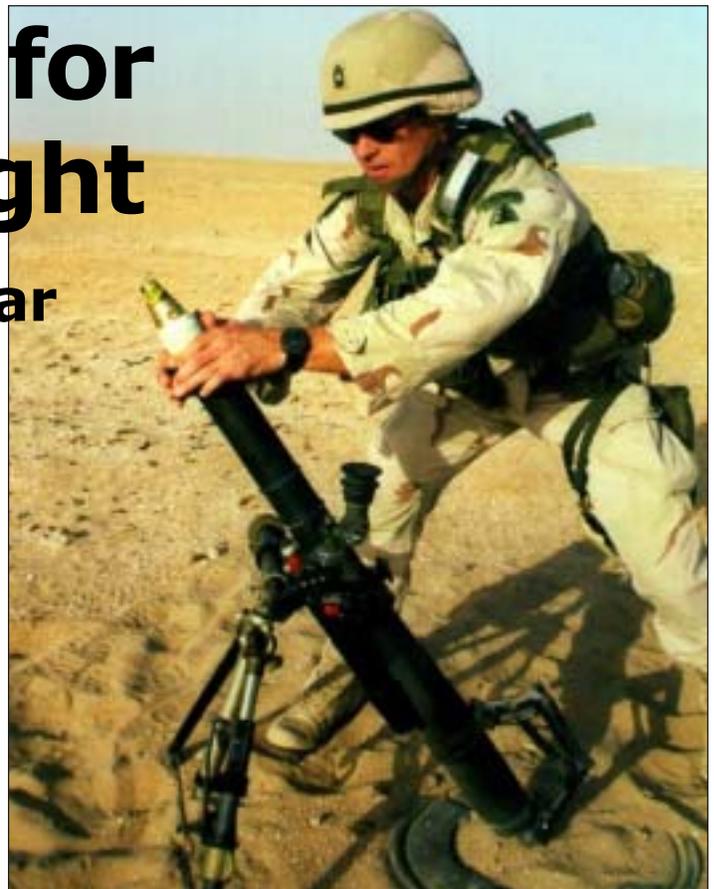
The 60mm Mortar

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Army-wide, light infantry platoons are reluctant to incorporate indirect fires, specifically from the 60mm mortar, when the enemy establishes contact in the close fight. Some platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders, team leaders, and also forward observers (FOs) are reluctant to use the mortars in the close fight because they are not familiar with the weapon system, nor do they trust it. This situation should cause great concern. The mortars exist to support infantry platoons, enabling them to conserve their combat power during chance contact and to maximize it during the decisive fight. The 60mm mortar can be a valuable asset to a light infantry platoon by providing highly responsive and short minimum range indirect fires that either kill the enemy or suppress his fire, thus enabling the assaulting rifleman to close with and kill him. We cannot blame the platoon leadership for being wary of using mortars. I wouldn't use a weapon system that I wasn't familiar with or did not trust. It is vital that we develop a solution that will help platoon and company leaders establish trust in a weapon system that is a "critical and irreplaceable element of a rifle company's maneuver."

After action reviews from the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) from the 4th Quarter, Fiscal Year 94 to the 1st Quarter, FY 00, have shown that there is a recurring trend in infantry battalions — team leaders, squad leaders, and platoon leaders are not aware of or just not comfortable with calling for fire. The result is that units have failed to integrate indirect fires into chance contacts with the enemy, thus allowing the enemy to break contact on their own terms. A former senior brigade fire support observer/controller at JRTC stated that the failure to adjust indirect fires onto a fast-moving enemy when contact is made contributes to the 7:1 loss ratio between the blue force (BLUFOR) and the opposing force (OPFOR) at JRTC. The 60mm mortar is the only indirect weapon system organic to the light infantry company. Regardless of the conditions or constraints applied by higher levels, the 60mm mortar is all-weather, always present, and approved at company level. The situation in Afghanistan reinforces the need for infantry platoons to incorporate mortars into the close fight and fix the problem. Because of conditions such as extreme altitude and inclement weather, coupled with mission specific constraints, there were times when the 60mm mortar was the only indirect fire asset available to companies conducting dismounted patrols during combat operations. The fact is that without the employment of mortars during the close fight, platoons can neither conserve nor maximize their combat power.

A proposed solution to the dilemma consists of three elements:



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The 60mm mortar can be a valuable asset to a light infantry platoon by providing highly responsive and short minimum range indirect fires.

- * Establishing relationships between the mortars and the FO teams;
- * Educating the platoon leadership on the capabilities of the mortars; and
- * Incorporating mortars into all maneuver training.

The first relationship that we need to address is between the FO teams and the mortars. The platoon leader should feel comfortable with his FO and trust his judgment and actions. This is crucial because the FO is the go-between of the platoon and the 60mm mortar section. The FO, most of the time, is responsible for calling for indirect fire in the close fight. Therefore, the FO and the mortars need to have an established habitual relationship. You can develop this relationship only through continuous and focused training. I will discuss a sample training plan that could be effective in establishing this habitual relationship.

Training begins with call for fire on short-range training round (SRTR) ranges established in open fields and training set, fire observation (TSFO) training. An effective technique is to have the mortars set up outside the TSFO building and process the fire missions from the FO teams inside the building. The more familiar the FO is with the person on the other end of the radio, the more confident he will be in his own abilities. The next type of training includes static call for fire ranges. A culmination training event between the FO teams and the mortars is a "walk and shoot" range. During this training, the mortars and FO team maneuver in a

simulated platoon or company formation when the FO team makes contact, which forces the mortars to conduct a hip-shoot to fire a mission. This contact occurs many times as the mortars and FOs move down a 500-1,000 meter lane. Through a similar training plan, the mortars and FOs can develop and perfect effective indirect fire standing operating procedures (SOPs) for chance contact.

The next element of the solution consists of the relationship between the platoon leadership and the mortars. In developing this relationship, the platoon leadership undergoes a series of instructions on the capabilities and employment of the mortars. Such instruction should consist of, for example: maximum ranges of the mortars, basic loads for the mortars, rates of fire, the different employment options for the 60mm mortar (conventional, direct alignment, direct lay, and hand held), call for fire, minimum safe distance (MSD), risk estimate distances (REDs), and echelonment of fires. It is important for leaders to have this knowledge, especially understanding the difference between MSD and RED and how both affect the echelonment of fires.

MSD, used for peacetime training missions, is the prescribed minimum safe distance in meters from the intended center of impact at which a specific degree of risk and vulnerability will not be exceeded with a 99 percent assurance.

The intent behind the echelonment of fires is to employ all available indirect fire assets as close as possible to friendly forces, allowing them increased freedom of maneuver within proximity to the enemy. The end state is friendly forces essentially assaulting behind a “wall of steel” until they are as close to the enemy as possible. With the echelonment of fires, you initiate with your most casualty producing munition available to you, and when your lead element approaches the RED distance from the target (350m in the scenario in the diagram) you lift or shift the fires from that system and transition to the next most lethal indirect asset that has a lower RED. This process continues until you get to the 60mm mortar.

The 60mm mortar is the last asset that you incorporate before the infantry assaults an objective. A few factors that affect the echelonment of fires are the movement rates of the maneuver elements, ammunition available, desired effects of the indirect assets, training level of your indirect assets and FO teams, and the amount of risk the commander is willing to take when employing the REDs. RED is only a guideline to help the commander as he tries to affect the enemy on the objective while allowing his infantry to move as close as possible to the objective.

In conjunction with providing the platoon leadership with the above information is applying the knowledge during static call-for-fire ranges in a stress-

free environment. This will enable the leaders to become familiar with the weapon system and to feel comfortable calling for fire. Depending on ammunition and training time, the leaders should also conduct a “walk and shoot” exercise.

The last element of the solution is incorporation of the 60mm mortars into all maneuver training. To continue to develop the relationship between the platoons and the mortars, it is important that mortarmen be trained as infantrymen first. During squad lanes, mortars should not be OPFOR but considered an additional squad going through the training. This will increase the combat power of the infantry company because during missions the mortars will have the skills to provide their own security, and it also increases the platoons’ confidence in the ability of the mortarmen as fighters.

Leaders should include the 60mm indirect fire into all platoon live fires and the live fires should incorporate chance contact where the plan allows for the utilization of mortars by the FO and also the lead team leader or squad leader. The only way for the FO and platoon leadership to feel truly comfortable with the mortar system is controlling the indirect fires during live-fire conditions with maneuver elements. Range Control dependent, the live-fire plan should also incorporate mortar firing onto the objective and allow the lead elements to maneuver as close to the objective as possible with the rounds still firing. Another technique not to be overlooked is using the mortars in hand-held or direct-lay mode from the support-by-fire (SBF) position, where the mortars have eyes on the objective. In either of these modes, the mortars are essentially another direct fire asset. They can control their own fires and shift in conjunction with the SBF.

Editor’s Note: *The author submitted a more comprehensive article including example battle drills and illustrations. Due to operations security (OPSEC) concerns, we did not include these in the print version. However, the original version will be available through the Army Knowledge Online Web site. The article can be found under the Infantry Magazine section.*

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Staff Sergeant Kyle Davis

Specialist John Dugar and Private Mark Escobar of the 10th Mountain Division check the positioning of the mortar tube during Operation Mountain Viper in Afghanistan.