

# Fire Planning at the Company Level and Below

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**T**he King and Queen don't always speak the same language. Whether it is in the castle or on the battlefield, until they can communicate and learn to work together, they will not be effective. Fire planning at the company level and below is a challenge that infantry and artillery leaders have a difficult time overcoming. With the myriad of tasks that must be planned, rehearsed and executed, the detail required for a sufficient fire plan is often overcome by events.

Planning for indirect fire at the company level is not really that much different than planning how you are going to use your organic machine guns. Maneuver leaders should understand artillery as well as they know their machine guns' capabilities, constraints, and effective employment. In reality, effective use of artillery can be accomplished with better communication between the maneuver leader and the fire supporter.

Many maneuver commanders/platoon leaders do not use fires because they lack a real understanding of how to employ them.



Staff Sergeant Jeffrey A. Wolfe, USAF

*A fire support officer eyes a strategic target on the horizon in Kirkuk, Iraq, during Operation Ivy Cyclone in November 2003.*

In most of the educational institutions maneuver leaders attend, they are taught about the capabilities of the artillery available to support them. But characteristics such as range and the rate of fire are a very small portion of producing a good fire support plan. Fire supporters, be it a fire support officer (FSO) or forward observer (FO), and maneuver commanders sometimes speak two different languages. A perfect example is when an FO or FSO is told he needs to "destroy" a light-skinned vehicle on the objective during an attack. He knows the maneuver leader outranks him, and that leader has experience that exceeds his own, but does the leader understand that it will take more than 50 rounds to "destroy" a light-skinned vehicle? The FO may come back telling the commander that his nominated targets were denied because of the excessive rounds requested. The fire supporter may not understand how to effectively communicate the fire plan to the maneuver leader.

Effective communication and development of the fire support plan has three primary pieces that inhibit its effectiveness. First, the clear communication of intent by the maneuver leader to the fire supporter is essential in the development process. Second, the effective use of time during a condensed planning process ensures the plan is completed. Finally, a clear and simple dissemination of the plan to those who will execute it completes the communication process from commander's intent to observer implementation. Understanding these problems, and developing simple techniques to prevent them, will aid in developing an adequate fire plan.

A portion of this misunderstanding is the leader's inability to clearly communicate how he wants the fires used, coupled with the inability of the FSO to communicate how to use them. Many of the terms exchanged between the two as they develop a fire support plan are not clear in terms of intent. And while the maneuver leader thinks he understands exactly what he's asking for, he must ensure that what he is communicating is what he expects to see on the objective. This is particularly difficult in a time-constrained environment.

Commanders at the company level are not afforded the luxury of time while planning, especially at the combat training centers (CTCs). This only serves to increase the probability that the fire support plan is not given sufficient attention. This frequently takes the form of a commander or platoon leader giving an FO a route and the objective, mentioning some smoke at a breach site, and sending the fire supporter away so he can finish his plan. Fortunately, many fire supporters are able to sort out the little guidance they were given and come up with a decent fires plan. This plan, however decent, may not be effective or responsive and

leads to maneuver leader frustration with the fires assets. The root of this frustration is a lack of proper planning.

While it may appear that time is the answer in developing a detailed, effective fire support plan, the reality is that better communication is the solution. Communication is key not only on the part of the maneuver leader to the fire supporter, but also from the fire supporters to the observers that will execute the plan. If observers do not clearly understand their role in executing the plan, the quality of the planning is irrelevant. Commanders and fire supporters must work hand in hand to determine the best use of the assets available.

### Developing the Plan

The maneuver leader at the company level and below does not have a staff to help him see the battlefield clearly; fortunately the FSO is there to fill that void. As the leader develops a course of action, he should use the FSO as a sounding board for his ideas. The FSO must be with the CDR as he develops his maneuver plan to understand how he sees the events unfolding and why. As the leader thinks out loud during course of action (COA) development, the things he chooses not to do are just as important as those finally decided upon. The understanding of intent gained by cooperative planning will provide the FSO the information he needs without forcing the commander to focus his thoughts on things like the definition of destroy, neutralize, and suppress. A clear understanding of the commander's intent will help him develop a plan that supports maneuver from beginning to end.

As a commander talks through his maneuver plan, he identifies key events that must occur in order to maintain momentum. The FSO participates in this exchange of ideas and then develops them into essential fire support tasks (EFSTs). Those are nominated as targets to the BN FSO, as part of the bottom up refinement process. This process of target development takes advantage of time through what is essentially parallel planning. If the commander and the FSO discuss the targets, along with what the desired effects are at each critical point in the battle, the quality of the fires plan is significantly increased. The nominated targets are

thought through and well integrated with the maneuver plan. However, targets nominated at the company level are not always approved at the battalion level. What comes back from higher may be less than what is needed to execute all of the targets nominated, and this may affect the course of action.

Maneuver leaders should not expect to always get every asset on the battlefield and should develop plans that are not dependent on the success of fire support to reduce an objective. Leaders must understand that there are not unlimited supplies of ammunition, even when they do have priority of fire. A maneuver commander plans how his machine gun ammunition will be used to the last round, ensuring he can place effective fire at the proper place and time to support his maneuver plan. From a fire supporter's perspective, every round is accounted for and targeted before the fight ever begins. This results in decisions above company level that limit the fire support available to facilitate the company commanders concept of the operation. Targets nominated do not always equal targets supported. If all of the targets are not supported, this does not necessarily mean decreased flexibility, but it does mean you and your FSO have some work to do. Once you have approved targets, you must ensure that they will support your plan. Targets will be easy to manipulate when an effective fire support plan was developed. The FSO will know where the commander's priorities lie and adjust the plan to best support the commander's intent.

### Completing the Plan

Regardless of the number of rounds approved, whether it be eight or 80, the commander and FSO must decide how to employ the rounds effectively. When fewer rounds are allotted, greater care should be given to their employment. Commanders should know exactly when and where the rounds will land and ensure they are directly integrated with the direct fire plan. The command team must determine together how responsive the fires need to be and then figure out what needs to be done to achieve that responsiveness. Coordination measures such as trigger lines, phase lines, and selective observation post placement will ensure effective and efficient round usage. Additionally, the

commander must understand the right questions to ask in order to ensure fires meet his intent. Likewise, fire support officers must know the right answers to give. Effective communication is critical to making the process work.

#### Commanders should ask questions like:

How many rounds do I have and how long can I make them last?

How many "destroy" missions does that give me?

How many minutes of smoke do I have?

If I don't have enough ammunition, how can I make the enemy think I'm pounding them with an adjusted rate of fire?

Do I need to adjust my COA in order to mass effects at the right place and time?

Is the priority of fire simple enough for everyone to understand?

Who is the observer for each target? Is he moving or stationary?

Are you prepared to brief the observers in the OPORD?

Will you have them backbrief you?

Have we planned in flexibility what is our backup plan?

#### Commanders should give answers like:

This is the most important thing to me.

I want obscurity here. I want it to last this long.

I want this many rounds at this point in time because the breach is being set-in.

I want the FO to be able to see the lead man during movement.

I want the FO forward with this squad where he can see the best.

#### FSO/FOs should ask questions like:

Where are we most vulnerable?

Can I provide fires to mitigate that risk?

What is the rate of movement?

What key terrain along our route will fires easily be adjusted from?

Where is the decisive point?

Where do you expect enemy reinforcements to come from?

How do you want me to inform you of changes or updates during the attack?

Where do you want me during the attack?

#### FSO/FOs should give answers like:

You have this many "destroy" missions.

You have this many "disrupt" missions.

The observer is SGT Smith, he is located with 1st Squad, and these are his actions.

You will have eight 81mm rounds from phase line green to phase line red. We have this many rounds of this type for a counterattack.

### Communicating the Plan

Once the fire support plan is developed, coordinated and approved, it must be communicated to those who will execute it. If it is not communicated effectively and rehearsed, it will not be worth the time put into it.

Many times the FSO briefs the fire support plan by briefing information that is not applied directly to its use during the fight. A platoon leader does not want to be read a matrix; he wants to hear exactly how the fires will help him. The FSO should of course brief the fire support execution matrix and cover the task, purpose, method, and effect of each target. But he should also cover who is responsible for observing each target, and who provides security for that observer so he can do his job. While doctrine dictates there are certain things the FSO or FO can use as guidelines to help them communicate, he has to determine how to best communicate the fires plan to those who must execute it. The plan can be easily communicated in the form of rehearsals.

Fires rehearsals are not normally conducted at the company level unless the fires plan is very complex. However, rockdrills and terrain models are commonly used at the company level for rehearsals. The FSO and FOs must participate actively in these rehearsals. The FSO/FO should, at a minimum, ask some very crucial questions during the company rehearsal. Key observers must be present and participate in the rehearsal to ensure they understand how important their job is to the success of the unit's mission.

#### The FSO/FO should ask questions like:

Does the observer understand his engagement criteria; is it based on him or the enemy? Is it simple?

Have you allowed the observers to check their OPs?

Have you checked all of your OPs?

At what point exactly do we need to lift our indirect fires?

#### And make statements like:

This is what I need to know and when I need to know it.

I need you to show me where your triggers are on the ground.

Make sure you check with me that I have shifted the fires before you cross phase line X.

### Recommended Training Solutions

How can we train these habits in peacetime to make them second nature in combat?

Some of the obvious solutions are things like platoon and company combined live fires. These are the perfect training forum for teaching fires planning and execution. Another excellent tool is to use commander/FSO tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs) to rehearse the timing and movements as they relate to minimum safe distances (MSDs) or risk estimate distances (REDs). The ability of the leadership to understand where they will be on the ground, or where their lead element will be, enhances their understanding of when they must initiate fires or make adjustments. A march and shoot live fire for leaders coupled with



Staff Sergeant Joseph Roberts

*Specialist Wayne Hutchinson, a forward observer from the 1st Infantry Division, paints a target during a live fire exercise in Iraq.*

a TEWT is the ideal combination when an actual combined arms live fire is not possible.

When no live rounds are available, consider using the TSFO or GUARDFIST with both the maneuver leader and the fire supporter to train the intricacies of indirect fire support.

Additionally, qualifying company commanders and platoon leaders on some of the tests required for their FIST elements will greatly enhance their understanding of the specific language spoken by fire supporters. Just as they practice with machine guns to understand the job of their machine gunners, they should also know and understand the skills required of their fire support officers.

Planning for indirect fires at the company level is difficult and time consuming. Commanders and FSOs must acknowledge the challenges associated with fire planning and determine ways to overcome them. Better communication starts at the very beginning of the planning process. By developing the plan together the fire supporter will gain a clear understanding of the commander's intent. This results in EFSTs that are closely tied to the maneuver plan. A well-integrated, prioritized fires plan increases the maneuver commander's flexibility, even if he does not get all of the assets he requests. A fires plan that is synchronized with the maneuver plan will make sense when effectively communicated to those who will execute it. Clear communication, combined with quality back briefs and challenging rehearsals, will result in a fire support plan that is understood down to the lowest level and ultimately well-executed.

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