The Commander's Role in Combined-Arms Breaching Operations

by CPT John D. Barrington and CPT Stephen M. Harmon

Your unit receives orders to seize an objective beyond an identified enemy obstacle belt at Refrigerator Gap while at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, CA. After seizing the objective, your unit conducts passage of lines with a follow-on unit. Your enemy is a mechanized-infantry company deployed in an area defense (Figure 1). There is a reconnaissance platoon in the disruption zone, six 152mm 2S19s (self-propelled howitzers) in support and one air-defense-artillery team.

You believe the obstacle belt needs a breach, so you have to decide how to enable your subordinates to effectively conduct it. How will you, the commander, apply doctrine and forces to generate situational understanding within the time available to meet your superior's intent?

As company-team observer/controller/trainers (O/C/Ts) at NTC, we observed more than 100 breaching operations like this scenario. We noted some trends within that group; better-performing units used similar techniques when they planned and executed their plans. We determined that units achieved success when their commanders controlled synchronization of assets and maneuver in time and space, executed timely decisions based on situational awareness and ensured timely casualty evacuation (casevac) and resupply operations. Although there are myriad tasks implicit with breaching, commanders who applied leadership primarily on these areas were typically successful.
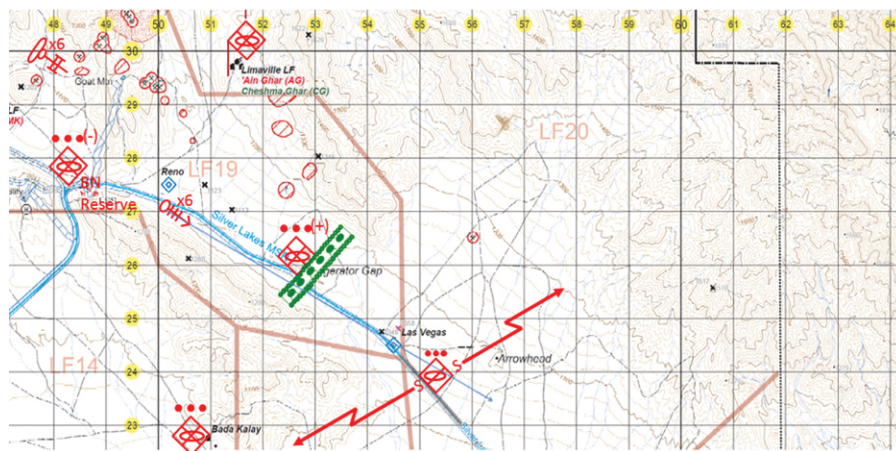

Figure 1. Mechanized-infantry company force array.

Planning, briefing

Foremost, we observed that successful commanders create a common operating picture (COP) for subordinates by using members of their and higher elements' staffs to describe the battlefield and its effects. They define the area of operations (AO), area of interest and area of influence by orienting to the general location. They provide graphical boundaries to box the areas, physically tracing important internal boundaries and terrain features. They familiarize their Soldiers with graphic-control measures (GCMs).

Successful commanders also explain the military aspects of terrain to ensure understanding of how their primary effects can influence the operation. They describe obstacles, including reinforcing tactical obstacles such as wire and mines and enemy protective obstacles like bunkers and trench lines. They also describe natural obstacles such as hills, mountains and hydrology.

The challenges associated with each obstacle changes significantly depending on the capabilities of organic and attached equipment available. For example, a Stryker infantry battalion will find an obstacle containing wire, buried mines, an anti-tank ditch and berms more challenging than will a combined-arms battalion. Conversely, an

armor organization finds that an enemy in rugged, hilly terrain surrounding a narrow corridor provides more challenges than will an organization with more infantry. Therefore, successful commanders must know the capabilities of the units under them when planning.

Successful commanders also must address avenues of approach for mounted and dismounted elements across high-speed, undulating and cross-country mobility corridors. They group mobility corridors and classify appropriate size, speed and formations for avenues of approach. As a result, subordinates can plan routes and understand time calculations for fires, resupply and reinforcement. The mission and intended avenues of approach determine key terrain. Successful commanders know that control of key terrain provides an advantage; thus, they make sure their plans affect the key terrain to their unit's advantage. These commanders also ensure shared understanding of information collection (IC) assets available from binoculars to thermal sights to air assets. They ensure observation and fields of fire encompass the capabilities of available IC platforms for both friendly and threat organizations.

Effective commanders depict significant surface danger zones or risk estimate distances, then discuss their impact on fire and maneuver during the operation with their subordinates. They also discuss cover and concealment for all eight forms of contact along identified avenues of approach and near planned mission-task locations. The take-away for future commanders who execute this type of operation is to consider using the highest level of protection for each weapon-system type. An example of this level of detail is "the wadi's walls will provide cover for 35mm and below weapons, but provide no overhead cover." On the example map (Figure 2), how will your unit use the obstacles, avenues of approach, key terrain, observation and fields of fire, and cover and concealment to your advantage?

Describe threat

Describing the threat is crucial, so successful commanders develop threat-force concept sketches for two levels up and include any hybrid threat when applicable. Threat graphics show the location, task and purpose for two levels down within a commander's area of operations. The goal is to provide subordinate elements with a shared understanding of how the threat will fight in sequence.

The threat plan must be as detailed as the friendly plan. Instructors at the Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC) teach how to transition from traveling to traveling overwatch to bounding overwatch. Some graduates of MCCC said they felt rushed as company commanders. As a result, they developed their threat plans without enough detail to understand when contact became possible (traveling overwatch) or likely (bounding overwatch). However, successful commanders understand when and how their threat plan affects the friendly operation before creating the friendly plan, and they plan adjustments to maneuver accordingly.

Better units refine intelligence information until it is specific enough for the most junior squad leader to understand. Their rehearsals provide the right amount of threat detail two levels down and ensure friendly plans specifically address each threat element. This level of detail provides understanding of the threat's direct and indirect fire ranges and sectors.

In Figure 1, the mechanized-infantry platoon (MIP) your unit will attack occupies the objective along a linear obstacle. Figure 2 shows how to plan the enemy's defense. How could your plan and rehearsals improve understanding for your subordinates?
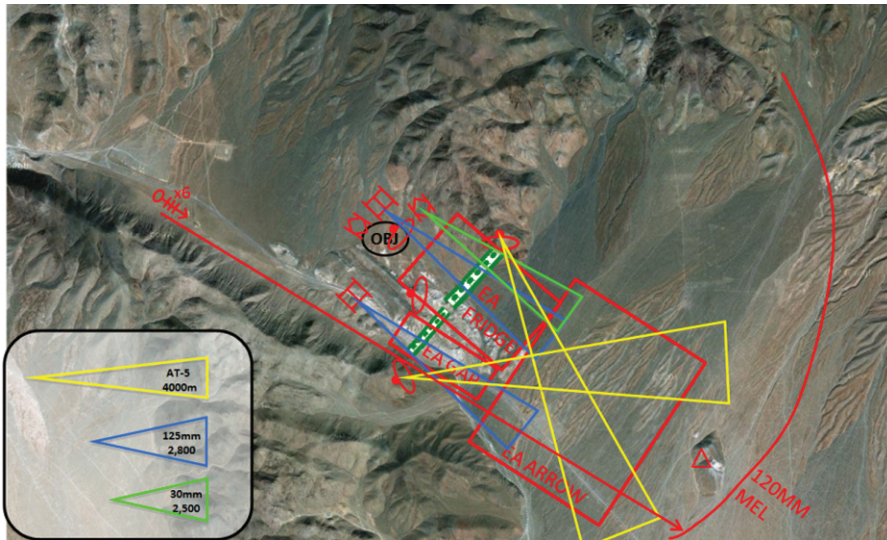
Figure 2. MIP(+) at Refrigerator Gap.

Direct, indirect fires

Synchronization of direct and indirect fire-control measures (FCMs) is critical across the formation when conducting the breach. Commanders found it exponentially more difficult and time-consuming to redirect fires and their effects based on a changing threat situation without planned control measures. However, successful commanders use the restrictive fire line, maximum engagement line, target-reference point, target array, enemy quadrant, formations and weapon-control status and engagement area. They also plan FCMs in conjunction with the fire-support officer (FSO) and incorporate FCMs from higher headquarters.

Better units also mass fires to generate the greatest effect for the least amount of fires used. An often-used example of effective massed fires is "if 14 Abrams tanks fire 14 sabot rounds, we should see 14 burning hulks." During planning and execution, the most successful commanders focus on synchronizing effects across assets. For example, their Multiple-Launch Rocket System fires suppression-of-enemy air defense (SEAD), then shifts to the enemy's reserve or destroys the mission-command nodes identified through signal intelligence or IC. Simultaneously, field artillery concentrates on anti-tank positions and mortars obscured with white phosphorous. Close-combat attack uses airspace deconflicted laterally by altitude or by time to destroy armored vehicles. Tanks and infantry fighting vehicles engage point targets prioritized within their sector of fire to achieve suppression and destruction of threat platforms that could affect the breach lane or objective. Synchronization of assets often determines the effectiveness of a plan.

Fires and effects often happen sequentially at NTC rather than simultaneously. Units struggle with this because they retain too much control over weapons employment. Rather than issuing engagement criteria or rehearsing employment triggers, poor-performing units require rigorous reporting requirements. Unfortunately, this slows the operation to the rate of communication with, and approval by, the commander. Conversely, successful commanders achieve synchronization of fires that allows the quickest effect on the threat and the least amount of combat power lost by employing the following:

- FCMs unified across all attached assets, which gives the best opportunity for simultaneous engagements;
- An orders process – including a combined-arms rehearsal with internal and enabler assets – that provides a good COP and a clear, concise scheme of maneuver;
- A solid understanding of all assets assigned and their capabilities; and
- An operations schedule or execution matrix complete with brevity codes.

Sustainment

Sustainment provides the means for a commander to fight and is exceptionally critical in the breach. While it is the executive officer's job to plan and support sustainment, the commander must incorporate key areas into his plan

and execution. Better units produce graphics for the location of sustainment assets and discuss them thoroughly during the troop-leading procedures process. Ammunition expenditure is very high in the breach across all platforms, especially in engineering assets. Therefore, successful commanders position caches and company trains as close to the breach as possible while allowing for cover and concealment. Usually a "terrain feature back" enables quick resupply or recovery if required. The maneuver commander provides special emphasis on emergency resupply of Class III and V, with specific emphasis on Engineering Class V, and ensures incorporation into rehearsals.

In many instances, operations follow a different tempo than expected. Successful commanders and their staffs calculate and plan for resupply, refuel and rearm time across all platforms organic and attached to their units.

Casevac and recovery are an important part of almost any breach lane, including in the decisive-action training environment at NTC. Successful commanders ensure their units understand the evacuation plan for casualties and combat platforms. Soldiers can die of wounds when commanders fail to understand the availability of casevac platforms and the distance to higher levels of care. Successful commanders and staffs who estimate casualties during wargaming and plan mitigation measures often decrease the numbers of Soldiers lost.

They also rehearse the loss of combat platforms in the breach lane and ensure subordinates understand when and how recovery occurs. Normally, this recovery only extends to clearing room in the breach lane until all enemy elements are cleared from the objective. Some GCMs successful commanders use are casualty-collection points, ambulance exchange points, supply or emergency caches, trains positions at echelon and chemical-decontamination routes and areas. Commanders risk pyrrhic victories or an inability to accomplish follow-on missions without appropriate planning.

Preparation, execution

Successful commanders assign roles for their key personnel: senior noncommissioned officer, executive officer, FSO and subordinate maneuver leaders. They must ensure key personnel understand the higher element's IC matrix, and commanders request more assets if they are available. Also, they manage internal or assigned IC assets to provide timely feedback and to influence the planning process while maintaining availability for actions during the operation. Commanders must ensure they or their subordinates who manage the IC understand the capability of the cone or sphere specific to each IC sensor so they can employ the most effective asset.

Successful commanders also gather obstacle intelligence and update products throughout the planning process. They disperse the obstacle's description as soon as possible to increase parallel planning effectiveness. They also employ fire-support teams, maneuver elements and scouts to employ fires, isolate the threat, defend the obstacle and conduct target handovers. Scouts, mortar crews, snipers and supporting isolation elements must understand the position of artillery assets, gun target lines for SEAD, and preparatory fires and reporting requirements. Successful commanders provide scouts and snipers focus, tempo, engagement criteria specific to each weapon system and displacement criteria. They destroy threat observation and disruption forces while ensuring all elements maintain a viable casevac and resupply plan.

Suppression

The primary objective of the support force is to enable the breach force to create a lane and reduce the threat forces' ability or will to engage breaching assets. Also, the support force and breach force must reduce the threat forces at the objective to a number small enough for the assault force to destroy. If they fail to do so, the assault force typically suffers high numbers of casualties, fighting a larger than 3:1 ratio. Circumstances may require an increase in rates of fire, changes to FCMs or commitment of attached assets faster than planned.

With this in mind, successful commanders position themselves where they can make these decisions. During execution, some commanders use the operations schedule to keep fires in order and deconflicted. Whatever the commander uses to understand the situation, success requires a system to synchronize timely fires and decision-making.

Obscuration, breach force

Successful commanders place friendly forces in advantageous positions that offer survivability while retaining effectiveness. Engineering assets like the Armored Breaching Vehicle are precious to friendly forces and of exceptionally high value to enemy forces. Better units use and implement a combination of elements to achieve obscuration. They use terrain on approach to the breach passage point, and smoke or white phosphorous targets to conceal the breach force from the last covered and concealed position to the breach release point. Vehicles and dismounts also employ smoke salvos or smoke grenades to obscure their own positions. Many thermal sights can see through most smoke, so the most effective obscuration for the breach force is a destroyed or effectively disrupted enemy.

Figure 3. An Armored Combat Earthmover fills a ditch. Engineering assets like this one are of high value to enemy forces. *(Photo by CPT John Barrington)*

Securing breach lane

The commander ensures the breach force is lined up and prepared to execute once the support-by-fire element gains fire superiority. Successful commanders do this through reports from subordinate maneuver elements and/or from a senior leader who controls actions in the assault position. When commanders decide to commit the breach force, they consider many variables. They develop breach criteria to codify the circumstances that must be achieved before committing the breach force. The criteria is specific enough to ensure the suppression force understands the effect they must achieve to trigger the breach force.

Once the unit sets those conditions, successful commanders ensure the synchronization of subordinate elements to shift fire and the passing of information on approach to the battle handover line. Most often, priorities of fire shift to the breach force. We recommend commanders be ready to make this decision quickly by monitoring progress toward breach criteria, employing an execution matrix to include fires and understanding the ammunition expenditures of the support force.

Better units also shift air assets using informal airspace-coordination areas to attack deep targets out of the artillery gun-target line and ensure each element understands its sectors of fire and primary targets. In doing so, they avoid target overkill and improve effectiveness of direct fires. As the breach force moves forward, successful commanders ensure the breach assets keep at least 50 percent redundancy ready and prepared to execute. Commanders also must track casevac to ensure assets remain available for follow-on operations. This graphic provides a recommended example of GCMs and FCMs.
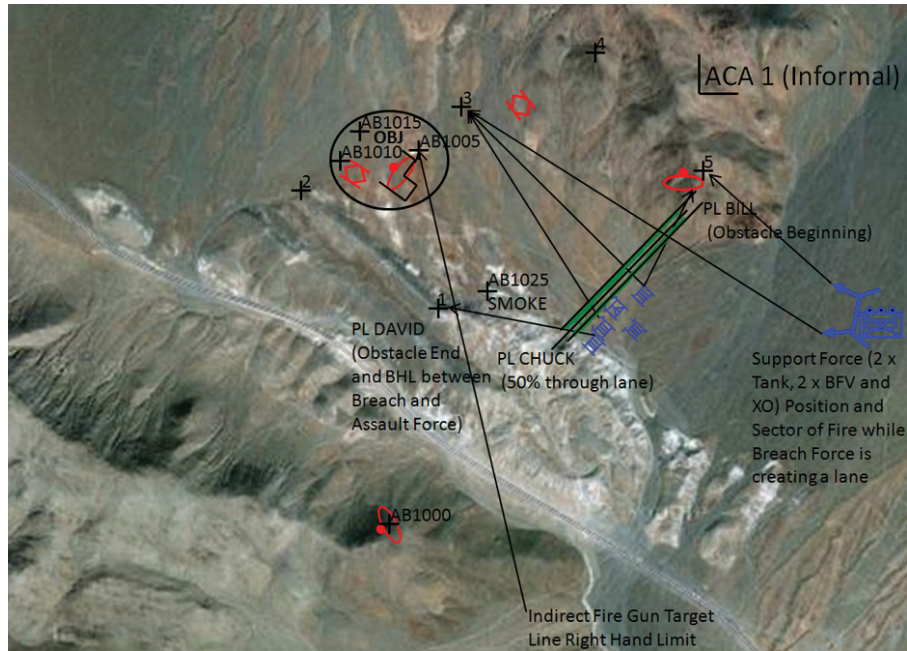
Figure 4. Suppression shifts, breach begins, assault prepared to seize.

Reducing obstacle

Successful commanders develop a reporting system or brevity codes to track progress while reducing the obstacle. All subordinate elements must understand the progress of breaching assets through the lane to ensure fires suppression on the enemy; obscuration of the breach continues while the breach force suppresses the enemy on the far side of the obstacle and the assault force prepares to execute.

Successful commanders develop a trigger that allows the assault force to begin its movement based on time-distance analysis. They synchronize the approach of the assault force so that it arrives as the breach force reduces the obstacle and secures the far side with the lane clear and the passage point marked.

For example, the breach force identifies the leading edge of the minefield and prepares to deploy the mine-clearing line charge (MICLIC). The assault force reports Readiness Condition 1. The breach force reports 50 percent through the obstacle. The assault force reports initiation of movement. The breach force reports breach lane marked and clear. The assault force reports entering the breach lane and assumption of priority of fires.

Simultaneously, the commander reports to the higher element to prepare for passage of lines. This synchronization reduces the chance of the assault force arriving too soon or too late, either of which could allow the enemy time to adjust fires against the assault force.

Assaulting objective

Commanders initiate the assault with a simple code word in ideal situations. The assault force usually doesn't have visibility of the passage point from its assault position. This makes the rehearsed lane marking standard operating procedure (SOP) and execution critical to success when passing through the breach force while executing the assault on protective obstacles or the objective. If possible, the assault force incorporates assets with breaching capability such as plows, rollers and demolitions, or even attached engineer assets, to defeat enemy protective obstacles and continue the assault. FCMs and positive identification are critical during the assault to prevent fratricide in an AO filled with obscuration and undulating terrain.
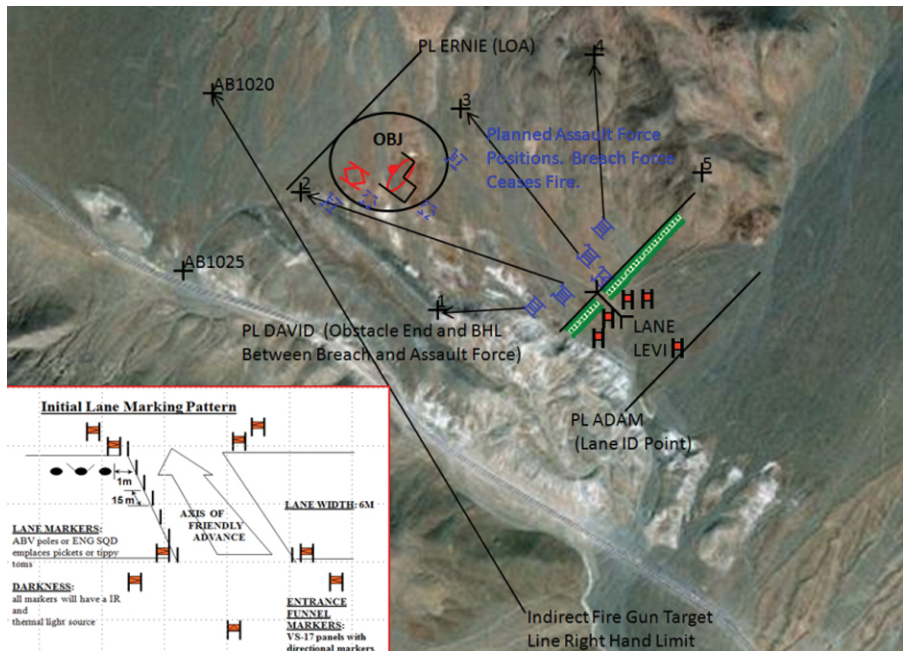
Figure 5. Lane open, breach force ceases fire, assault seizes.

Generally, successful commanders move through the obstacle with the assault force. Doing so allows the commander control of all planned and unplanned fires faster than anyone else from a position best for making timely decisions in case of counterattack. Once the assault is complete, usually units are required to pass subsequent formations through their own.

The passage-of-lines SOP should be coordinated with the higher echelon to avoid confusion. In absence of a SOP, successful commanders coordinate with adjacent units during the planning phase and then directly on internal frequency-modulation nets or through digital systems during execution. Typical observed points of friction include positive identification, lane location and vulnerability of the adjacent unit to counterattack during its passage through the lane. Digital tracking systems, marking SOPs and quick, efficient reporting enables the most success.

Figure 6. Soldiers use a MICLIC to clear the lane at NTC. *(U.S. Army photo)*

Figure 7. An obscuration and plow tank moves into position at NTC. *(Photo by CPT John Barrington)*

In summary, successful commanders understand their role and the systems needed to control and synchronize a formation. They ensure their unit is ready to execute casevac and resupply. By making timely decisions, the commander can apply doctrine within the time available to best prepare forces for breaching operations. Planning tools to understand friendly forces, enemy capabilities, synchronization of time and space, and a COP allow commanders to place themselves in the best position mentally and physically for timely decision-making. By applying systems and procedures, rehearsing the planning process with subordinates and ensuring subordinates understand the commander's intent, a unit is prepared for successful execution in the decisive-action training environment.

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