

Multinational Engineers in a Decisive-Action Training Environment

by CPT Taylor M. Lee

As an Army, we focus on standards, procedures and doctrine to guide operations and gauge effectiveness. Those same standards assist leaders in identifying strengths and weaknesses within their units to design training to meet those needs.

In the multinational environment, the way units plan and execute in accordance with doctrine is often used as a measuring stick. While many of our multinational partners draw from our doctrine, many of them deviate from doctrine for various reasons. No area exemplifies this better than multinational engineer operations, specifically mobility and breaching operations. It is important not to assume these partner units are incorrect for deviating from U.S. doctrine but rather look closer at how many of them arrive at the same endstate despite what many U.S. units would view as shortfalls in breach assets and equipment.

When planning for and conducting breaching operations, U.S. engineer units work hand in hand with maneuver elements to integrate the breaching tenets and synchronize their efforts. These tenets serve as the foundation that allows elements to place equipment and personnel appropriately on the battlefield to ultimately achieve the endstate of expeditiously moving a maneuver force through an obstacle. While the tenets of *intelligence*, *breaching fundamentals*, *breach organization*, *mass* and *synchronization* guide the planning and execution of breaching operations, what actually allows us to execute our plan is our superior and constantly improving inventory of combat vehicles and equipment.

For example, how would our maneuver commanders choose to employ engineers if not for platforms like the Armored Breaching Vehicle or breach assets such as the mine-clearing line charge (MICLIC)? What if those same maneuver commanders didn't have equipment as advanced as our Bradley Fighting Vehicles or M1A2 Abrams tank to provide overwhelming combat power to destroy the enemy and seize the objective on the far side of the breach?

After considering those questions, assume that the enemy dug in on the other side of the obstacle possessed similarly advanced equipment to our own. It's safe to assume there would be slight deviations to our planning and execution of breaching operations. During decisive-action training environment (DATE) exercises at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC), this is the scenario many of our multinational partners confront and overcome each rotation by employing various methods that play to their strengths.

Many multinational units embrace a breaching approach that relies more on finesse than raw combat power but that still adheres largely to the breaching tenets. The tenets of breaching fundamentals, breach organization and mass are very much approached and employed in the same manner as our own units do. It is in the other two tenets, intelligence and synchronization, that you can often see a more deliberate approach by multinational units to ensure the necessary amount of emphasis is placed in each of these areas during breaching operations.

Multinational differences

Again, intelligence can be attributed to the limited equipment many multinational units bring to the fight and their reluctance to place it in harm's way unless absolutely necessary. During JMRC's Exercise Combined Resolve II, scouts from Lithuania were able to provide the ground truth for much of the enemy obstacle effort to the maneuver commander through their aggressive methods of reconnaissance. These aggressive reconnaissance efforts are shared by many of our multinational partners and undoubtedly allow the commander the ability to see how the enemy is using the battlefield and terrain to shape engagements.

In addition to intelligence, many multinational units manipulate their task-organization in ways that often force synchronization. In breaching operations, synchronization is arguably the most important due to the complex nature of a combined-arms breach. To account for these challenges, many of our partners allow their leadership to become absorbed into the higher headquarters of the maneuver element they are supporting.

This has been observed in slightly varying ways at JMRC but most recently with the Dutch during Allied Spirit I. While at home-station, engineer-company commanders and platoon leaders serve a similar role as our own by concentrating their efforts to train and prepare their soldiers for combat. Once in a combat scenario, however, we observed company-grade officers become absorbed by the headquarters of either the maneuver company (platoon leaders) or battalion (company commander). In both cases, the officers assumed an advisory role to the maneuver commander, which allowed for ease in synchronizing engineer support to maneuver operations. The decision to task-organize in a way that absorbed the engineers into the maneuver element from the squad level to the company headquarters allowed the companies and battalion to operate as one unit, thus eliminating much of the challenge with synchronizing forces.

Playing to strengths

Many of the multinational engineer units that participate in JMRC exercises bring with them a firm grasp of U.S. doctrine and how U.S. units employ it. Although shared understanding exists, most units have enough self-awareness to know that committing their breach and mobility-support assets to an enemy obstacle that is observed and covered with direct and indirect fire would likely have catastrophic effects. A scenario that would prompt a U.S. unit to fire a MICLIC to reduce a lane through an enemy obstacle does not translate to most of our partner nations' engineer breaching capabilities. Most simply do not have an effective means to quickly reduce a lane, and when a breach is attempted, it often results in an overwhelming amount of casualties due to excessive time being spent at the breach. To mitigate the threat to personnel and equipment, a number of our multinational partners employ an engineer reconnaissance section.

To illustrate, during a recent DATE exercise at JMRC, 412th Armored Engineer Company from the Royal Netherlands Army employed this capability in support of their 42nd Mechanized Infantry Battalion with excellent results. The reconnaissance platoon, comprised strictly of engineers, proved to be an incredibly versatile tool for the maneuver commander by providing accurate obstacle intelligence, which allowed him to alter his scheme of maneuver to better concentrate combat power at the weakest point of the opposing force's defense. In this particular case, the engineers identified a bypass that allowed the 42nd to maneuver their forces to the far side of the enemy's obstacles without ever committing engineers to breach anywhere along the opfor's extensive obstacle effort.

Despite our own doctrine (Army Tactics, Techniques and Procedures 3-90.4, **Combined-Arms Mobility Operations**) stating that bypassing a known obstacle is always the preferred method, during exercises at JMRC, most U.S. units generally do not place a heavy emphasis on this method but rather opt to breach along their planned axis of advance. Not only does bypassing achieve the same endstate, but it also allows the maneuver force to maintain momentum as well as the offensive characteristics (Field Manual 3-90-1, **Offense and Defense**, Vol. 1) that doctrine identifies as critical to defeating the enemy.

When thinking of combat engineers, most people envision sappers on the front lines placing demolitions in the breach and cutting through enemy obstacles. With many multinational engineers, this is not always the case. Often times, as the maneuver element advances toward the objective, engineer units are positioned in the rear to provide mobility support to combat-service-support elements preparing to move forward to resupply and refit personnel and equipment. Multinational engineers are able to reduce enemy obstacles but do this in a manner more closely resembling a clearance. Again, this is largely due to the equipment they are outfitted with and their ability to replace damaged equipment. Employing engineers in the rear allows them to better safeguard limited engineer equipment while also enabling mobility for rear elements.

To say that multinational units only stick to bypass routes would be inaccurate. Some do have unique capabilities that provide flexibility to the maneuver commander during force-on-force operations at JMRC. One such capability is the pipe fascine employed by the Dutch during Exercise Allied Spirit I. This simple piece of equipment, employed by their Leopard engineer tank, allows quick crossing of an anti-tank ditch by tracked vehicles. With additional time, the fascine can also allow for wheeled-vehicle crossing.



Figure 1. A Dutch pipe fascine emplaced in an anti-tank ditch.



Figure 2. A Leopard engineer tank crosses the gap after engineers emplace the fascine.

Summary

A look at how engineers are employed by our multinational partners shows a number of differences in how we each accomplish our mission. Doctrine shows us a proven way; however, many of our multinational partners have demonstrated that just as important is the ability to focus their own strengths even if it appears to veer away from what most would view as the preferred method. By capitalizing on strengths, many multinational engineers have demonstrated the ability to achieve the same end state with less resources.



Figure 3. A Dutch soldier of Charlie Company, 42nd Infantry Battalion, 13th Mechanized Brigade, lassos a land mine before removing it from the open road during Exercise Allied Spirit at JMRC in Hohenfels, Germany, Jan. 15, 2015. Exercise Allied Spirit included more than 1,600 participants from Canada, Hungary, Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Allied Spirit exercised tactical interoperability and tested secure communications within alliance members. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Justin De Hoyos)

CPT Taylor Lee is the engineer observer/controller/trainer assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), JMRC's Operations Group, Hohenfels, Germany. His previous assignments include commander, Company A, 554th Engineer Battalion, Fort Leonard Wood, MO; scout platoon leader, HHC, 3-69th Armor Battalion, Fort Stewart, GA; and rifle-platoon leader, Company B, 3-69th Armor Battalion, Fort Stewart. His military education includes the Basic Officer Leader's Course II, Engineer Basic Officer Leader's Course III, Engineer Captain's Career Course, Engineer Explosive Ordnance Clearing Agent Course and Ranger and Airborne schools. He holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from the University of North Georgia.