

# The Division's Role in Breaching Operations

by MAJ John Chambers and MAJ Steven J. Saxion

The 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division crossed the berm into Iraq Feb. 24, 1991, and began its breach of Iraqi defenses to start the ground war of Operation Desert Storm (ODS). In the lead-up to "G-Day," 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division planned, resourced and executed division-level breaching operations in the absence of established doctrine and training to guide it.<sup>1</sup>

This is still the case today, as there is scant doctrine that outlines the division's role in breaching operations. One of these references is Army Technical Publication (ATP) 3-34.23, **Engineer Operations – Echelons Above Brigade Combat Team**, which discusses the role of engineers in offensive operations. It focuses on engineer reconnaissance and the division staff, ensuring brigade combat teams (BCTs) are properly task-organized for their assigned mission.<sup>2</sup>

Another reference is ATP 3-90.4, **Combined-Arms Mobility Operations**, which states, "Most combined-arms breaching is conducted by a [BCT]/regimental combat team or a battalion-size task force as a tactical mission, but higher echelons may also execute operational-level combined-arms breaching tasks."<sup>3</sup> However, ATP 3-90.4 doesn't talk in depth about the assets these higher echelons bring to the fight or how they should plan, resource and execute breaching operations. It addresses the role of the G-2/S-2 when outlining the intelligence tenet of breaching operations, but its remaining discussion of the breaching tenets are focused at battalion and BCT levels.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, given the shift back to the division as "the Army's primary tactical headquarters for decisive action,"<sup>5</sup> a significant gap exists in our breaching doctrine since it fails to address the division's role in these operations – a role that history has shown a division will absolutely undertake.

Some will argue that this gap is acceptable, as breaching is a brigade- or battalion-task-force operation. However, as the Army's primary tactical headquarters, there are instances in which the division should play a significant role in breaching operations. Recent historical examples of division and higher breaches include ODS, Egypt's Operation Badr (during the Yom Kippur War) and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Furthermore, with the employment of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies by U.S. adversaries, the likelihood of breaching operations at echelons higher than brigade to begin hostilities is exponentially increased.

Consequently, the division will be involved in future breaching operations, and doctrine should address the role of division and higher echelons in these operations to enhance the force's operational effectiveness. To that end, we will use the framework of the breaching tenets to fill this doctrinal gap and address the role the division headquarters should play in planning, resourcing and executing breaching operations.



**Figure 1. U.S. Army Reserve combat-engineer Soldiers from 350<sup>th</sup> Engineer Company from Bell, CA, work on a combined-arms breach during a combat-support training exercise (CSTX) at Fort Hunter Liggett, CA, July 22, 2018. This rotation of CSTX trained thousands of U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers from a variety of functions, including military police, medical, chemical, logistics and transportation. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by MSG Michel Sauret)**

## Current breaching doctrine

As we made clear, there is limited doctrine on how division and higher echelons should plan, resource and execute breaching operations. The closest available doctrinal framework is to apply the division's role in gap crossing to breaching operations. Gap crossing and breaching are similar tasks in the sense that they are both discrete operations complex enough to warrant more planning and resources at all echelons. Their execution involves suppression, obscuration, security, creation of a lane or crossing and seizure of far-side objectives. Furthermore, gap crossing and breaching operations are both means to begin and/or continue an attack.

However, the doctrinal reference for gap crossing in support of maneuver, ATP 3-90.4's Chapter 4, does not provide a holistic picture of integrating all available assets to complete a breach. Most of the chapter is focused on intelligence and mission command, with little discussion of protection or sustainment. There is some discussion of integrating fires, but it's not in depth. While it does an excellent job of outlining the role of the division main and tactical command posts (TACs), it doesn't discuss the unique assets the division has to support the gap crossing. Consequently, this framework is inadequate to fully describe the role of the division headquarters in breaching operations.

Similarly, applying BCT-level breaching doctrine at the division level is inadequate given the difference in assets available in a division compared to a BCT. For example, a division has a combat-aviation brigade, a division-artillery headquarters, a sustainment brigade, and (usually) a field-artillery brigade, plus a maneuver-enhancement or engineer brigade. Consequently, the processes are similar, but the difference in available assets – coupled with the ability to leverage higher-echelon intelligence-collection systems – makes the division's role in breaching operations different from that of the BCT. Finally, while a BCT often conducts hasty breaches, a division breach is almost always deliberate.

At its heart, breaching is a combined-arms operation. It is not a tactical task that can be handed off to an engineer officer to plan in isolation; it must successfully integrate all warfighting functions to achieve success. Highlighting the combined-arms nature of breaching is the fact that the Army's doctrinal reference for breaching, ATP 3-90.4, is a 90-series manual as opposed to an engineer-specific 34-series manual, thus reinforcing the combined-arms aspect of breaching operations. It is in this vein that we approach the role of the division headquarters in breaching operations – integrating and synchronizing all warfighting functions to set conditions for a successful breaching operation at brigade and battalion level.

Successful breaching operations must adhere to the tenets of breaching:

- Intelligence;
- Fundamentals;
- Breaching organization;
- Mass; and
- Synchronization.<sup>6</sup>

These tenets are integrated into the planning process and applied throughout execution of the breach. While these tenets, especially the fundamentals of breaching, are generally thought of as applied at lower echelons, we found they could successfully be applied to division-level breaching operations.

## Division's breaching role

As the tenets of breaching lead to successful breaching operations, we will outline the role of the division in breaching operations using the breaching tenets. While some may argue that an approach to this problem using the framework of warfighting functions might be better suited to synchronizing a staff during the planning process, using the tenets of breaching highlights how each warfighting function integrates into the framework for successful combined-arms breaching operations, and it ensures all the tenets are integrated into the planning process.

**Intelligence.** During mission analysis, the division staff must ensure it develops appropriate intelligence requirements (IRs) in support of the breach. These IRs may include the composition, disposition and strength of enemy obstacles, location of enemy lanes through the obstacles, location of enemy observation posts and fires assets. The IRs may also include the location of enemy assets like chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and

high-yield explosives that can affect the breach area. These IRs, when tied into the division collection plan, will facilitate a better understanding of enemy obstacles as well as the targeting of enemy assets, which can mass effects on the breach area during breaching operations – for example, the use of chemical munitions or rocket artillery to close breach lanes. Further, IR development drives the integration of engineer reconnaissance capabilities into the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance plan.

Once IRs to support the breach are developed, the division G-2 has the ability to not only synchronize division internal assets to answer the IRs, but to request and integrate joint and corps intelligence assets into the division collection plan. These assets provide significant capabilities to identify enemy assets that can affect breaching operations. These enemy assets can then be entered into the division targeting cycle to be destroyed during shaping operations prior to the breach.

**Fundamentals.** The fundamentals – suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, assault – are generally what comes to mind when people think of breaching operations. At face value, the fundamentals seem tactically oriented and executed at echelons well below the division headquarters. However, the division has significant capabilities it can use to execute the breaching fundamentals and shape the battlefield before the breach.

- **Suppress** – The division – especially the division artillery and the combat-aviation brigade – provides significant assets to suppress enemy long-range artillery between the coordinated fire line (CFL) and the fire-support coordination line, a space that is normally outside the range of a BCT's organic-fires assets. Enemy long-range artillery poses a significant threat to breaching operations because it can be used to mass effects on the breach area to destroy friendly breaching assets, or it can close breaching lanes with chemical munitions or the sheer volume of massed effects. Often these enemy assets must be targeted using rocket artillery or attack aviation, assets available at the division level, to reduce the enemy's effect on breaching operations. In addition to artillery and aviation, the division has the ability to coordinate and integrate cyber-electromagnetic activities (CEMA) assets into the targeting process. These assets can be used to disrupt the enemy's sensor-to-shooter links and, in effect, suppress their ability to mass effects on the breach.
- **Obscure** – Tube artillery and mortars are the only means of delivering obscuration to the far side of the breach. The division may retain some tubed artillery under the control of the division artillery; however, these assets are usually dedicated to engaging targets identified in the division collection plan or given general-support-reinforcing relationships with combined-arms battalions (CABs). Consequently, the division's role in visual obscuration is indirect – it uses its fires assets to shape the far side of the breach area, which frees up the BCT's fires assets to provide obscuration.

Also, the division is responsible for deconflicting the use of aviation and indirect fires. In this role, the division must ensure that aviation missions are conducted on the far side of the CFL to allow the BCT to use its fires assets for obscuration and shaping within the breach area. The division also has the ability and resources to obscure the breaching main effort by using information operations, deception operations and/or CEMA assets. By running information and deception operations, the division can obscure the preferred point of breach and influence the commitment of the enemy reserve.

Furthermore, CEMA assets can be used to prevent the enemy from achieving an accurate understanding of the division's composition, disposition, strength and the location of engineer assets. This will, in effect, obscure the division's intent and preferred point of breach and increase the main effort's chance of success.

- **Secure** – To secure the breach site, the division must plan for critical friendly zones (CFZs) over the breach lanes themselves or the entire breach area. Also, the division must dedicate air-defense assets to protect forces as they conduct the breach and move through the breach once it's complete. Breach lanes are significant chokepoints for the division as it pushes its attack forward after conducting breach operations. Consequently, the enemy will attempt to close breach lanes by massing fires on the lanes, using chemical munitions, artillery-delivered scatterable mines or attack aviation. By establishing CFZs and assigning air-defense assets to protect the breach lanes, the division can help secure these critical chokepoints. This can ensure a continuous flow of forces and supplies to the far side of the breach.

- **Reduce/assault** – During the reduction and assault portions of breaching operations, there is not much the division can do outside of shaping the fight for the operation’s next phase (after the breach). However, the division does play a role in the success of this phase prior to starting the operation – the division headquarters must ensure that BCTs have enough engineer assets to accomplish their breach and then have enough maneuver forces available to seize the far-side objective.

**Breaching organization.** In its current form, the brigade-engineer battalion (BEB) does not have enough engineer assets to support all the CABs in an armored brigade combat team (ABCT). Furthermore, the engineer companies within the BEB do not have the same number of sapper platoons. While the companies have the same number of assault breaching vehicles, their breaching capabilities differ when conducting reverse breach planning based on the different number of sapper platoons. Consequently, division planners must ensure that additional enablers from echelons above BEBs (for example, mobility-augmentation companies and sapper companies) are assigned to BCTs to augment their organic breaching capabilities. This analysis must take into account the composition, disposition and strength of the obstacles identified through the collection plan. It must also account for the number of breach lanes each BCT is assigned to create. These factors will drive the amount of additional engineers the BCTs need to accomplish their missions.

**Mass.** The division’s ability to mass on the far side of the breach, conduct a forward-passage-of-lines (FPoL) and conduct follow-on offensive operations is critical to the success of the overall operation. Where this manifests itself in breaching operations is the planning of an adequate number of breach lanes to enable the rapid buildup of combat power. For example, during 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division’s breach to start ODS, division planners determined that each brigade would need to breach eight lanes through the enemy defenses.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to ensuring that an adequate number of lanes exist to rapidly build combat power, the division must control the movement of units through the breach lanes to ensure they are able to mass on the far side of the breach to conduct follow-on operations. To accomplish this, the division must ensure military-police units are assigned to the BCTs to facilitate the orderly movement of units through the breach. Furthermore, the division must coordinate and establish criteria for a battle handover between the breaching BCT and a follow-on support unit (such as a maneuver-enhancement or engineer brigade) to free the BCT conducting the breach for follow-on offensive operations.

Finally, the division can help its breaching BCTs achieve mass at the point of breach by conducting deception operations. Divisions possess the combat power to conduct deception operations that influence the enemy commander to shift forces away from the breach area or delay commitment of the enemy reserve to the breach area. If successful, these operations allow the BCTs to mass forces at the weakest point of the enemy defenses.

**Synchronization.** In division-level breaching operations, the division must provide effective mission command and synchronize all elements of the breach. Synchronization starts with the effective use of appropriate graphic-control measures to define unit boundaries, attack positions, the reduction area, the breach area, objectives, the battle-handover line and the CFL. Also, the division must identify conditions and/or triggers to execute the breach as well as the transition to different phases of the operation. These must be included in an execution synchronization matrix. The division must also facilitate combined-arms rehearsals at the appropriate level to synchronize the breach and follow-on operations to include the FPOL and attack.

In many ways, a division-level breach should be treated as a gap-crossing operation, and the division TAC should be forward-deployed to control the discrete operation. Specifically, the TAC should be employed to coordinate the movement of BCTs into and out of the breach area, including the FPoL at the battle-handover line. After completion of the breach and establishment of breach lanes, the division TAC should gain and maintain control of BCTs as they enter the breach area to conduct an FPoL at the battle-handover line.

Once the FPoL is complete and the BCTs move out to conduct an attack, control of their movement transitions to the division main command post. This type of coordination and synchronization is comparatively easy when a single BCT from the division conducts the breach and the division conducts an FPoL with its remaining BCTs. However, it becomes more complicated when the division controls multiple breaching BCTs and the FPoLs are happening simultaneously across the division’s front. In these cases, division planners will have to closely evaluate the placement of the division TAC and division main to best exercise mission command over the

operation. Also, if the breaching division is conducting an FPoL with another division, division planners will have to plan in parallel with corps for the possible employment of the corps TAC.



**Figure 2. U.S. Army Reserve combat-engineer Soldiers from 374<sup>th</sup> Engineer Company of Concord, CA, ride through a berm in an M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier on a combined-arms breach during a CSTX at Fort Hunter Liggett, CA, July 22, 2018. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by MSG Michel Sauret)**

## Way ahead

During ODS 28 years ago, the U.S. Army conducted a division-level breach without the appropriate doctrine and training to provide a foundation for the operation. That lack of doctrine is still the case today as the Army shifts its focus back to decisive action in unified land operations. Today, as in the past, divisions must be prepared to serve as a tactical headquarters and conduct combat actions against near-peer militaries. History has shown us that conflict with near-peer enemies often begins with a breach at division and higher echelons. Furthermore, the employment of A2/AD strategies by U.S. adversaries increases the likelihood of breaching operations at echelons higher than brigade. Consequently, the U.S. Army needs to prepare its divisions to conduct breaching operations.

We recommend the Army update its doctrine to codify the division's roles and responsibilities in breaching operations at the division and higher level. Also, we recommend the Army continue to include division- and corps-level breaching operations in warfighter and command-post exercises to force division staffs to work through this problem set and gain proficiency.

Waiting until the Army is involved in large-scale combat is too late to address the lack of breaching doctrine and proficiency at division level. As the "the Army's primary tactical headquarters for decisive action,"<sup>8</sup> divisions must be prepared to conduct operations across the full spectrum of combat operations before the next crisis.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> LTC David Gross, *The Breach of Saddam's Defensive Line: Recollections of a Desert Storm Armor Task Force Commander*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, April 1993.

<sup>2</sup> ATP 3-34.23, *Engineer Operations – Echelons Above Brigade Combat Team*, June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> ATP 3-90.4, *Combined-Arms Mobility*, March 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-94, *Theater Army, Corps, and Division Operations*, April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> ATP 3-90.4.

<sup>7</sup> Gross.

<sup>8</sup> FM 3-94.

## Acronym Quick-Scan

**A2/AD** – anti-access/area denial

**ABCT** – armored brigade combat team

**ATP** – Army technical publication

**BEB** – brigade-engineer battalion

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**CAB** – combined-arms battalion

**CEMA** – cyber-electromagnetic activities

**CFL** – coordinated fire line

**CFZ** – critical friendly zone

**CSTX** – combat-support training exercise

**FM** – field manual

**FPoL** – forward-passage-of-lines

**IR** – intelligence requirement

**ODS** – Operation Desert Storm

**TAC** – tactical-command post

**USMA** – U.S. Military Academy



**Figure 3. U.S. Army Reserve combat-engineer Soldiers use an M-9 Armored Combat Earthmover to clear dirt for a combined-arms breach during a CSTX at Fort Hunter Liggett, CA, July 22, 2018. (U.S. Army Reserve photo by MSG Michel Sauret)**