

Enablers at Echelon: Scouts and Mortars Task-Organized to a Maneuver Company

by CPT Stephen J. Cumby

The recommendations in this article are based on personal experiences from National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 19-06, during which I commanded Company C (Tank), 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment. The “Black Knights” are part of the infantry combined-arms battalion (CAB) for 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) “Black Jack,” 1st Cavalry Division.

This was our first “no order” rotation. We (at echelon) received two base operations orders: one prior to our start point from the rotational-unit bivouac area and one prior to the live-fire. The rest of the orders came as fragmentary orders (FRAGOs) at varying degrees of “flash to bang” within the execution timeline.

Throughout the rotation, 1-5 Cav executed most of its operations in NTC’s Northern Corridor. The battalion conducted several movements-to-contact due to the consistent reapplication of combat power by the opposing force (OPFOR), allocation of collection assets to other brigade priorities and uncertainty of the enemy situation.

Initially my company found itself executing Black Jack 6’s (call sign for the battalion commander) intent as a brigade reserve in the defense, committing in and around the Matterhorn. Following, we resumed our role with 1-5 Cav, leading four offensive operations through the Northern Corridor with varied degrees of success.

However, by task-organizing the battalion scouts and mortars to my company, the battalion found success with our rapid ability to identify the enemy’s location, composition and disposition; to develop the situation; and to defeat the formation with maneuver and fire. For brevity, I’ll address the first and second operations only (the third and fourth operations’ task-organization was highly similar to their predecessors).

What doctrine says

Our doctrine currently defines movements-to-contact, their successful attributes and general tactical formation but overlooks potential task-organization (with the exception of combat engineers) to conduct the mission effectively.

The definitive purpose of establishing contact and developing the situation while maintaining freedom of action is highlighted by the executing unit’s ability to quickly react to the enemy situation. While tempo is not mentioned in the movement-to-contact section of Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-90.5, **Combined-Arms Battalion**, some form of speed is referenced several times in the discussion. For example, ATP 3-90.5 says that doctrine requires executing units to “quickly determine the size and activity of the enemy force” and place “fires on lead enemy forces. Speed of decision and execution is critical.” Also, the advance-guard “commander maintains pressure on the enemy by fire and maneuver. He (or she) probes and conducts a vigorous reconnaissance ... to determine the enemy’s exact location, composition and disposition. The advance guard immediately transmits this information to the CAB commander.”

The security force’s mission, similarly, focuses its reconnaissance on the enemy, the named areas of interest (NAIs), routes and terrain, while retaining priority of fires, to gain and maintain contact without becoming decisively engaged. However, while not specified, it’s generally assumed the security force’s analysis and reports (as well as requests for fires, sustainment, evacuation and commitment of more combat power) are strictly reported to the battalion (in a CAB movement-to-contact).

This task-organization faces the problems of communication equipment failure or degradation, time for a staff to process and disseminate information, and time to deconflict organic fires with the advance guard and adjacent units. This can slow the CAB’s reaction to and development of the situation. The following missions explore our refinement of the movement-to-contact task-organization to address those problems and best employ doctrine.

First mission

The first operation was an attack from Sadajan through Killer Escarpment and Echo Valley to establish a support-by-fire (SBF) oriented on Alpha and Bravo Passes, and then to pass an infantry company forward to seize key terrain. Ahead of the battalion was one troop from the cavalry squadron oriented on the objective and on Granite Pass; the battalion scouts were in the vicinity of Observation Post (OP) Hill to screen Refrigerator Gap. The company was “pure,” with the battalion mortar platoon following to preset mortar firing points (MFPs) to provide coverage. We had two priority 155mm howitzer targets on anticipated enemy defensive positions in and around both Alpha and Bravo Passes.

During this mission, the forward cavalry troop suffered heavy losses from actions with emplaced anti-tank (AT) teams and *boyevaya mashina pekhotys* – Russian-made infantry fighting vehicles – in defensive postures. The cavalry troop identified more AT locations but could not influence them with direct fire. The troop did not retain the combat power to reconnoiter enemy on our objective.

Upon crossing Killer Escarpment, I requested that the mortars establish an unplanned MFP to cover our movement to Echo Valley due to the troop’s limited capability to influence forward enemy positions. We took contact from AT teams, losing one tank, but eliminated the teams with the established mortars. Following that success, and with communication problems with battalion fires, the mortar platoon dropped to our net. In effect, the mortar platoon fell under us until we’d passed the infantry forward.

We confirmed the locations of the remaining cavalry troop and adjacent units. Then, we requested notification of assets entering our area of operations to deconflict fires. We then began a movement-to-contact toward our objective to re-establish contact with the enemy.

The company got very comfortable bounding platoons into overwatch positions and leading with a single platoon, covered within mortar range, then pulling forward the mortars into a new MFP and continuing the maneuver toward key terrain. As we approached Bravo Pass, we made contact with a mechanized-infantry company in the defense and suffered two casualties. Having previously deconflicted fires, our mortars fired smoke and high-explosive rounds within minutes, shaping my lead platoon’s and 3rd Platoon’s establishment of an SBF, and the subsequent maneuver by myself and my 2nd Platoon. We eliminated the OPFOR company, triggering enemy commitment of tanks and attack aviation to reinforce the pass.



Figure 1. An M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle provides security for 2nd ABCT, 1st Cav’s tactical-operations center during the brigade’s 19-06 decisive-action rotation at NTC, Fort Irwin, CA. (U.S. Army photo by MAJ Carson Petry, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs)

Unable to identify the OPFOR tanks' positions, we awaited resupply of mortar ammunition while we kept busy shooting down helicopters. We also awaited our priority 155m howitzer targets to shape our maneuver against the tanks. The lull cost us tempo as the OPFOR's tanks established an SBF and the 155 missions were reallocated to another battalion.

Despite destroying a few tanks and helicopters, we took significant losses and were unable to successfully pass the infantry onto the objective. The takeaways during this operation were 1) our limitations with no element forward to establish contact with the enemy and 2) shaping maneuver with fires at the company without having to deconflict through battalion and brigade (timely and personal).

Immediately following reconstitution of my company, we received a FRAGO to extend the battalion's security posture by 10 kilometers to OP Hill to hold gains made in previous operations while the battalion executed a hasty-planning cycle. Again we were tasked to lead the operation, which I briefed to my leaders as a movement-to-contact given the uncertain enemy situation.

Given the operational tempo and battalion planning cycle, the scouts weren't currently employed following displacement from OP Hill due to enemy counteractions. Knight 6 and Knight 3 agreed to let me "borrow" the scout platoon for our mission, and we were also task-organized with the mortars after our success employing them in the previous operation.

Following aggressive troop-leading procedures, we departed as a robust company team of a scout platoon (still 5x3 with Long-Range Acquisition System trucks and M2s), three degraded armor platoons (Slant 11 during this fight due to maintenance and our executive officer's absence to meet other requirements) and a mortar platoon. The scouts' reconnaissance guidance for this mission was enemy-focused, rapid and forceful, and oriented on NAIs in which I presumed the enemy had hastily emplaced weapon systems and platforms during our reconstitution.

Our scheme of maneuver was simple. The mortars immediately established an MFP to cover the scouts in their initial five kilometers of reconnaissance. (The scouts would set in OPs oriented on my NAIs.) We then bounded our platoons by fightable terrain features and pulled forward the mortars to the next MFP to deploy the scouts and repeat the process. This task-organization allowed us to organically identify enemy positions and maintain contact with them, and to deploy my tanks under the cover of mortar fires and obscurity to eliminate the enemy formation. It was simple, quick-reacting, synchronized and extremely effective.

Further, it gave us the capability to seize and exploit the initiative. After eliminating the enemy security element and owning OP Hill, we continued the same maneuvers through Refrigerator Gap down to the east side of Alpha and Bravo Passes. We destroyed another mechanized company that was holding the terrain, and we passed our infantry forward to clear the passes, ultimately meeting our commander's intent of owning the passes to prevent envelopment as we extended our lines of communication through Refrigerator Gap.

Second mission

The task-organization of the second mission allowed our company team to meet all requirements of both the security force and the advance guard in a movement-to-contact while rapidly leveraging fires, deploying the formation and developing the situation.

Our scout platoon in later missions proved capable of still answering battalion's priority information requirements while task-organized under us. Further, the task-organization let the scouts gain, maintain and hand over contact at an accelerated rate directly to the advance guard it impacted. We in turn provided the scouts with responsive mortar fires, sustainment, communication relay and security.

Similarly, by cutting out the multiple-echelon coordination for and deconfliction of the battalion mortars, our fire missions impacted the fight within minutes or shifted within seconds. The significant reduction in processing times for fires missions facilitated an aggressive tempo well suited to the movement-to-contact. Also, it synchronized sustainment efforts with mission timeframes since we owned their operational reach, as we did our tanks.

The net architecture admittedly was cluttered at times. The company command net became home to scouts passing targets directly to platoon leaders, platoons calling for mortar fires and myself issuing orders to two more elements. However, simple radio etiquette and discipline prevented clutter on all but a couple of occasions.

Generally, scouts would lose frequency-modulation communications with battalion quickly into the mission. In response, the scout-platoon leader monitored our company command and his platoon nets, but provided his analysis to battalion through Joint Capabilities Release or relayed through me if the message required articulation. Our mortars also monitored the company command and platoon nets, and, when necessary, the mortar crews processed missions digitally or through relay with our Bradley Fire-Support Team (BFIST) given the distance from battalion fires.



Figure 2. U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to 2nd ABCT, 1st Cav Division, patrol an area beside a mountain during Decisive-Action Rotation 19-06 at NTC April 6, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Carlos Cameron, Operations Group, NTC)

Despite the additional mission-command requirements, owning the assets allowed us to own the tempo of the fight and apply combat power at the right place and at the right time. The result was evident in the second mission, when we faced nearly the same enemy situation but only suffered a single casualty (the BFIST got too excited observing fires).

Future CABS conducting a movement-to-contact and leading with a single company should consider a similar task-organization. Providing the lead company the organic ability to aggressively gain contact, deploy its formation, develop the situation and rapidly cover maneuver with swift and accurate fires offers the CAB potential to quickly win the initial contact, maintain combat power and exploit the initiative.

The follow-on phases of the operation after the meeting engagement will likely require adjustment of the task-organization to support follow-on operations. As Knight 6, LTC Timothy P. Meadors, stated, "Getting the task-org right is a simple solution to a complex problem."

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

AT – anti-tank

ATP – Army techniques publication

BFIST – Bradley Fire-Support Team

CAB – combined-arms battalion

FRAGO – fragmentary order

MFP – mortar firing point

NAI – named area of interest

NTC – National Training Center

OP – observation post

OPFOR – opposing force

SBF – support-by-fire