

7 More Breaching Habits of Highly Effective Units

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(Editor's note: The title refers to "7 Breaching Habits of Highly Effective Units" by LTC T.H. Magness, as published in Engineer magazine, October-December 2003 edition, <http://www.wood.army.mil/engrmag/PDFs%20for%20Oct-Dec%2003/Magness.pdf>. An earlier version of the article was published in the May 2002 edition of ARMOR.)

Before Sept. 11, 2001, Engineer Regiment training focused on providing mobility and countermobility to maneuver units and enabling our forces to project power via land, sea and air. We trained using offensive and defensive missions in a force-on-force environment; supplies and infrastructure were provided strictly from the rear, if at all.¹

The years following the 9-11 assault saw a shift in the attack methodology of these new enemy forces, causing the Engineer Regiment to largely focus on counterinsurgency operations (COIN) in Iraq and Afghanistan. The engineers' main effort during this period centered around providing support, such as route clearance or construction capabilities, from a generally static location (forward operating bases or combat outposts) with a great deal of infrastructure already established.² With most of our mission sets focusing on COIN, little time was spared to get back to our roots: providing mobility to maneuver forces.

Most of our leaders experienced with traditional force-on-force missions against near-peer enemy forces (armor and mechanized infantry) have by now left the Army or have been promoted to a level where their experience is available for setting training goals and standards at combat training centers (CTCs) and in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command doctrine, but they are not available to directly influence Soldiers at the company level and below. This poses a problem for the Engineer Regiment in the near future. The next enemy we fight will more than likely be in a land without an intermediate staging base (such as Kuwait) like we have enjoyed exploiting during operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom; instead, we will likely be forced to project our power directly from the United States, where we expect 99 percent of our troops to be stationed by 2020. We will have to establish a staging base, or lodgment, into our area of operations.³

Our enemy will also be different. Instead of facing a traditional enemy (blue vs. red) or guerrilla-like insurgents, we will face a hybrid threat in a very dynamic environment, much like Hamas. The enemy will pit us against aggressive anti-access and area-denial measures that include defenses in depth and complex layers of improvised explosive devices.⁴ Therefore, the Engineer Regiment must refocus its training to meet these future requirements. Now is the time to start as the U.S. Army transitions out of missions in Iraq and Afghanistan; we need to realign our training objectives and mission sets, and we need to train to this purpose with Armor Branch Soldiers.

Way ahead

The way ahead will require engineers to be part of the initial-entry force and set the conditions for the joint force commander. Engineers assist in the seizure and expansion of lodgments, and they set conditions for follow-on forces and the generation of combat power. After initial-entry operations, engineers support the maneuver force with several missions, most notably the establishment of tactical assembly areas and force-protection measures; route clearance and offensive breaching; lethal countermobility operations; and the construction of survivability positions against a hybrid threat.⁵

In an effort to evolve our mission-essential task list to focus on traditional engineer tasks in a hybrid environment (while maintaining proficiency in the COIN environment), 5th Engineer Battalion executed a combined-arms breach (CAB) field-training exercise (FTX) Jan. 26-30, 2015, at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. The FTX included more than 400 Soldiers from 5th Engineer Battalion, 988th Military Police Company/4th Maneuver-Enhancement Brigade and elements from 1st Infantry Division. The 1st Infantry Division sent five M1 Abrams tanks, two M2 Bradley fighting vehicles, three OH-58 Kiowa helicopters and five UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters.



Figure 1. LTC Sebastien Joly, commander of 5th Engineer Battalion; MG Leslie Smith, commanding general, Fort Leonard Wood; and BG Maria Gervais, commandant, U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear School, Fort Leonard Wood, discuss the integration of SOSRA during a combined-arms breach in the January 2015 FTX at Fort Leonard Wood.

The FTX's purpose was to certify the platoons of 515th Sapper Company for National Training Center (NTC) Rotation 15-06. In addition to breaching a complex obstacle (comprised of an anti-tank ditch, a 10-foot berm, anti-tank mines and protective obstacles), we evaluated 515th's ability to produce warning orders, operation orders and fragmentary orders. We also evaluated the troop-leading procedures of all units involved, the air-to-ground Integration of breaching elements and combined-arms rehearsals.

The 5th Engineer Battalion staff planned and resourced the CAB FTX to force both the maneuver and engineer commanders to address issues at the company level that LTC T.H. Magness, the "Sidewinder" S-3 at NTC, observed in 2002 after several CTC rotations and CABs. Following is a summary of his thoughts, but the article in its entirety is available on the Internet.⁶

Planning

- In terms of planning, the staff most poorly analyzed the terrain. The military decision-making process (MDMP) is not enough for a good terrain analysis; the engineers needed to answer the "so what" question and identify information that could prove detrimental or advantageous to both the enemy and friendly units.
- While resourcing and planning the mission, units failed to conduct reverse-breach planning, which created less than favorable conditions for the breach on the battlefield.

Preparation

- The maneuver scouts did not provide detailed obstacle intelligence to the maneuver commander. Scouts identified the location of the obstacle and the obstacle's basic construction but failed to provide any real detail that would allow the maneuver commander to reallocate resources during the breach, if required.
- Maneuver elements tended to focus on preparation for offensive operations only and did not consider missions to interdict enemy engineer defensive preparations.
- Most units conducted inadequate rehearsals before missions and did not prioritize breaching rehearsals. Units typically excel at rehearsing the reduction of an obstacle; instead, they need to focus on the suppression, obscuration, securing and assaulting (SOSRA) through the obstacle. These portions of the breach are where the most friction occurs.

Execution

- In most cases, the breach was unsynchronized. The friendly forces lacked mass at the point of breach, and when they did breach, they did so only in pieces. Also, when the conditions for the breach were set, the engineers were usually not in position.
- After the breach, most of the units failed to consider employment of the military police (MPs) for traffic control once the breach was secured.
- Units were so worried about moving forward in the operation that they did not consider expanding the breach once the site was secure.

After the FTX, 5th Engineer Battalion conducted an after-action review (AAR) with all participating elements. From that AAR, the participants identified the following seven habits and the resulting tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that, in addition to the original seven habits Magness created, will greatly increase the probability of successful breaches when training at NTC and while fighting in a decisive-action environment in the future.

1. Engineers are not a one-trick pony. Enemy engineers rarely lie; if you encounter enemy engineers constructing a defense, observe 1,200-2,000 meters into enemy territory, and you will find the enemy's battle positions. The same can be said for the engineers in offensive operations. Engineer equipment and assets are rare enough that their use or presence on the battlefield anywhere indicates evidence of the enemy's main effort. At the CTCs and in combat, the opposing force will likely assume the same thing about our engineers.

TTP: Include engineer assets with scouts. Engineers will recognize complexities of obstacles that scouts will not. Reporting size, composition and location may seem enough, but take it one step further: a seasoned engineer will recognize the enemy engineer's intent, will be able to tell where the obstacle is the strongest and the weakest, and most importantly, if the obstacle is even worth breaching. This will save time and resources, not to mention lives, in the long run.

TTP: Lie with your engineers/main effort. In other words, hide your intent with your breach force like Roman general Cornelius Scipio Africanus (236-183 BC) did during his siege of Cartagena, when he used his main body (including his sappers) to feint an attack against the main gates of the city. After the enemy was decisively fixed and facing toward their greatest (perceived) threat, Scipio lead a small assault force of 500 men and breached the walls of the city from a seemingly impassable swamp to the rear and destroyed the enemy from behind as they faced his main body to the front. Use your engineers the same way. Find a way to tell a deceptive story without losing the ability to mass effects at the point of penetration. Take it one step further: don't just feint with your armor and infantry, sell it with your engineers. The opfor, assuming you are predictable, will focus its attention toward your engineers. Use this knowledge to your advantage.

2. Tactics are useless without sustainment. When we rehearse, we rarely consider the follow-on forces and supply trains. Usually, we make only enough time to rehearse actions on the objective but leave the sustainment portion to chance, or say "we'll figure that out when we get there." Unfortunately, future operations will more than likely not have Kuwait or the port of Karachi to push our supplies through to Iraq or Afghanistan. It is imperative we address our sustainment issues and synch with our sustainment leaders, especially during initial entry.

TTP: Plan for traffic control. This TTP was listed in the original "seven habits," but it is worth further development. Identify a trigger or decision point to bring the MPs forward and rehearse this in both the combined-arms rehearsal and sustainment briefs. Use the MPs to control traffic through the breach. Give them this control point as soon as possible. This will ensure the continued flow of supplies forward behind the main body and free up maneuver assets to fight at future points of friction instead of pulling security in the unopposed rear.

TTP: Plan for the progression of the combat trains. These are our lifeline, especially in a decisive-action engagement. Do not be like GEN George S. Patton Jr. (World War II) and outrun your supplies. As the great tactician said himself, "At the present time, our chief difficulty is not the Germans but gasoline. If they would give me enough gas, I could go all the way to Berlin!" Do not neglect the supply trains and sustainment functions in your planning; it may not be essential for the first breach, but it will become instrumental in the follow-on offensive operations. Do not forget what the "A" in SOSRA represents: assault. This is key because it means to continue the mission, and that "the breach is enroute to a larger objective, and never an objective unto itself." Therefore, we need to remember to plan for our troops to get to that objective.

3. Plans should be more water and less stone (don't be set in your ways). While we insist that our Army should train innovative Soldiers and leaders who can think critically, we often prove otherwise, especially when conducting training. The breach assets used during our FTX took more than 90 minutes to breach two lanes through the berm. During the AAR, the senior leadership asked the company commanders several questions, including "What assets for berm reduction do you have at your disposal?"

TTP: Have a primary, alternate, contingency and emergency plan for "reducing" with clearly identified triggers.

The Armored Combat Earthmover (ACE) is designed to breach a typical berm in 20-25 minutes. We know that more often than not, the ACE will take much longer (provided it is still operational). Ask yourself what assets do you have available that could otherwise (even if unconventionally) accomplish the mission. Have you planned for an additional plow to breach the berm if the ACE fails? How about a platoon of sappers with mattocks and spades? There are many ways to reduce a berm besides an ACE; the point is to have a plan with a decision point or trigger identified during reverse planning so you do not have to make that plan under fire. Be creative and do not be stuck to your plan. The best plans are flexible and allow for rapid change in any direction.



Figure 2. The ACE is a vulnerable asset on the battlefield. Reverse-plan in case of failure.

4. Prepare to fight "Murphy" in the breach. "Murphy" was ever-present at our FTX. The snow and ice on top of the training area melted three days before the breach and the clay retained all that water, increasing its weight and decreasing the traction of our vehicles. For example, in one of the breach lanes, a tank stopped all traffic (and momentum) when the chain securing its plow snapped and required 45 minutes to repair. These are all events that are impossible to predict but can cause a breach to come to a halt just as quickly as a well-dug-in enemy.



Figure 3. Muddy terrain decreased tanks' traction; one's broken chain stopped all traffic for 45 minutes.

TTP: Identify the worst things that could happen in the breach ... and mitigate them. When we conduct MDMP, we emphasize planning against the enemy's most likely course of action and most dangerous course of action. These are of utmost importance in the breach and should always be considered. However, we do not typically plan for the "Black Swan" event: an event that is an outlier and a surprise, having a major effect or impact on the operation and is rationalized in hindsight as being both explainable and predictable, and thus avoidable. This event could be both of your tank-plows throwing their tracks in their lanes, or a mine-clearing line charge misfiring. Murphy's Law will complicate the battle as much for the Blue Forces as the opfor will; plan for the show-stoppers. We cannot mitigate all risk, but we can moderate the events that will cause us failure that do not necessarily relate to the enemy. We **must** have redundant capabilities of all kinds at every breach lane to be sure of success.

5. A successful breach requires empowered troops (i.e., mission command). During rehearsals, the maneuver force planned to identify the launch point for the Armored Vehicle-Launched Bridge (AVLB) with a smoke grenade for the breach. During the operation, the smoke grenade bounced off a rock and landed in an ineffectual spot. The operator deployed the AVLB to the marker anyway because "that was the plan" and he "didn't want to mess things up." Knowing it was likely going to fail, he still deployed the AVLB to that spot. Ultimately, he was forced to redeploy the AVLB to a location 30 feet adjacent, which took an extra 15 minutes – time that could have been saved if he had felt comfortable and empowered enough to make that decision to move of his own accord.

TTP: Use mission command properly: empower your Soldiers! Empower your operators, especially your special-engineer-equipment operators, to make decisions based on their knowledge, training and expertise. Ensure they have the ability and permission to make decisions at a moment's notice to allow the momentum to continue. Confirm your operators have the ability to talk directly to the breach-force commander during the operation to relay changes in conditions or limitations of their capabilities. Finally, ensure their knowledge and expertise is not squashed by "the plan." Common sense is just as important as tactics in the breach.

6. When expanding, go for breadth before depth. During our breach, both lanes closed at one point for at least 45 minutes due to equipment failures/malfunctions or conditions of the terrain. In a training environment, these are great learning events. However, while under fire, these failures to even a single lane could cause the destruction of the entire company.

TTP: Expand horizontally before you expand vertically. Certainly, in a company-sized breach, we need to breach completely through the obstacle to destroy the enemy and secure the area before we can expand the breach. The suggestion is focused at the battalion or brigade level: expanding horizontally prior to expanding vertically allows us to project power much more effectively. The Roman army led by Titus executed this TTP during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Titus besieged the city and breached through two of the ancient city's walls before breaching

the Fortress of Antonia. Once he had all three positions secured, he used the fortress to provide indirect fire on the Jewish stronghold in the temple, while soldiers used the other two breach lanes to skirmish through the city and surround the temple, thus securing victory.

7. Know thyself ... and make sure your commander does too. The breach is not the place for your commander to find out what you realistically can do. Planning based solely on factors in our doctrine often leads to disappointing results. During our FTX, the commanders planned for the ACEs to breach the berm in 20-25 minutes. Instead, one ACE took well over an hour to breach through the berm and the other ACE got stuck. Thus, the breach took far longer than we originally planned (90 minutes longer). This, in turn, had a drastic effect on the amount of fuel left in the support force and assault force, as well as the amount of ammunition unexpended in each vehicle. It also limited the unit's capability to conduct follow-on missions after the breach.

TTP: Ensure your capabilities are understood two levels up and two levels down. Your leadership needs to understand the capabilities of the equipment (deadlines, faults, repairs) as well as the capability of your individual Soldiers. The 515th Sapper Company solved this problem by creating a capabilities card that succinctly demonstrates what the company is capable of providing on the battlefield, including its special-weapons systems. Also, they created a sustainment card to take with them to NTC. This card clearly described the various classes of supply, Department of Defense Ammunition Codes, National Stock Numbers, etc., needed to conduct the unit's mission effectively. This eliminated all guessing by our supporting units who were unfamiliar with our equipment.



Figure 4. CPT Pete Blades, commander of Company C, 1-18 Infantry, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, discusses the role of the armor company during the combined-arms rehearsal with BG Maria Gervais, commandant of the U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear School, Fort Leonard Wood, at the FTX in January 2015.

The challenge for most units is how to translate these habits into executable tasks. The only way to develop these habits is to constantly practice them and expose Soldiers to as much repetition as possible. Conduct leader professional-development classes with your Soldiers and leaders on how to breach in a dynamic environment. Do not just brief them but discuss it with them. They probably have an idea you have not considered. Incorporate their thoughts and ideas into your training.

Conclusion

Make sure to use mission command when you train. It's critical to empower your leaders to be creative and decisive in the training environment, especially those special-equipment operators. The time to make mistakes (and learn from them) is back in garrison in the training environment, not on a battlefield. Encourage them to try new things and to learn from their failures.

You should also take time to do some research, read vignettes and publications about previous rotations (and their successes and shortfalls). Fort Riley, KS, recently published "Training for Decisive Action – Stories of Mission Command" (2014). It has several vignettes from NTC written by battalion and brigade commanders. Use this source of recorded knowledge to your advantage; emulate their successes and account for their mistakes.

These habits alone will not guarantee success at NTC or on our Army's next decisive-action battlefield. What they do is provide guidelines and reminders for maneuver commanders and their engineer supporters. Transitioning from a COIN to a decisive-action mindset will not be easy for our forces. However, practicing these habits with our Soldiers and continually exercising our staff with the relevant MDMP will make us once again ready to breach obstacles anywhere in the world.

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Notes

¹ COL Adam S. Roth (assistant commandant of the U.S. Army Engineer School-Reserve), discussions with the author, March 2012-May 2013.

² Roth, "Initial Entry Capability for the Engineer Regiment in Support of Army 2020," *Engineer*, April 2013.

³ BG Duke DeLuca (commandant of the U.S. Army Engineer School), discussions with the author, March 2012-May 2013.

⁴ Roth, "Initial Entry Capability for the Engineer Regiment in Support of Army 2020."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Link to the original seven habits article, <http://www.wood.army.mil/engrmag/PDFs%20for%20Oct-Dec%2003/Magness.pdf>.