

THE STRYKER-TANK COMPANY TEAM

CPT RYAN KERTIS
CPT TOM IBARRA

The essence of the Army Operating Concept within unified land operations is to “win in a complex world.” To meet these complex challenges, the Stryker rifle company must be augmented to increase its lethality and survivability against a near-peer armor threat. Recently, Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCTs) experimented with armor attachments to combine their ability to mass dismounted infantry in an area of operations with armor firepower to better defeat enemy armor and anti-tank weapon systems.

This article explores the experiences of 3-2 SBCT, 7th Infantry Division during National Training Center (NTC) Decisive Action Rotation 15-08.5 at Fort Irwin, Calif. Here, 3-2 SBCT had the unique opportunity of task-organizing tank platoons to a Stryker rifle company within the 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment. The creation of Stryker-tank company teams provided the brigade commander with a more lethal strike force and created unique opportunities to experiment with maneuver tempo across restrictive terrain and during a combined arms breach. The addition of armor assets significantly increased the company’s sustainment requirements, specifically for Class III and IX, and also presented challenges for breaching operations.

U.S. Army Soldiers from 5th Brigade, 20th Infantry Regiment establish an overwatch position during NTC Decisive Action Rotation 15-08.5 at Fort Irwin on 21 July 2015.

Photo by SGT Matthew Minkema

The Hybrid Formation: The Stryker-Tank Company Team at NTC

FM 3-21.11, *Stryker Infantry Rifle Company*, states that “the SBCT combines the tactical mobility aspect of mechanized units while emphasizing and exploiting the infantry fight where decisive action occurs.” Similarly, it asserts that “the organic vehicles in the platoons are for moving infantry to the fight swiftly” and identifies the significant firepower shortcoming of the Stryker company. The purpose of the task organization during NTC 15-08.5 was to increase the lethality and survivability of the company team against a near-peer threat with significant anti-armor capabilities. As a result, the attached tank platoons provided significant increases in firepower and mobility across restrictive terrain at NTC.

Strykers in the Open

The challenge for a Stryker Infantry company at NTC is moving across open terrain quickly. Since the Stryker is lightly armored and does not have a mounted gun capable of destroying tanks and BMPs (*boyevaya mashina pekhotys* — infantry fighting vehicles), it has a significant disadvantage against enemy armor. One method of overcoming this disadvantage is to dismount Javelin teams in overwatch while bounding another element forward — the dismounted Javelin teams protect the Strykers as they bound. They also use the Fire Support Vehicle (FSV) with the Long-Range



Advance Scout Surveillance System in overwatch which has substantially better observation range.

To alleviate the time constraint of dismounting Javelin gunners, B/5-20 IN employed Javelins from the hatches of the Stryker against enemy armor. This helped offset the enemy's advantage in immediate firepower. This tactic does have its shortcomings though. The best solution continues to be having Javelin teams in overwatch at all times during the maneuver. This is effective but incredibly time-consuming because it requires dismounting Javelins at every intervisibility line.

The Stryker-Tank Company Team

B/5-20 found that the ideal method of moving Strykers safely through open terrain is through a task organization with armor. In this organization tanks provide the necessary firepower to counter the enemy armor threat. The Strykers were extremely beneficial to the tanks by providing infantry to clear restricted terrain and urban areas. The task organization for B/5-20 IN during NTC 15-08.5 included a Stryker rifle company headquarters, one Stryker rifle platoon, two M1A2 tank platoons, and a Stryker sapper platoon.

- The company headquarters consisted of two Infantry Carrier Variants (ICVs), two Mortar Carrier Variants (MCVs), one Medical Evacuation Variants (MEVs), two high mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), and two light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs).

- The rifle platoon consisted of four ICVs with three dismounted squads. The dismounted squads were two rifle squads and one weapons squad (at the time manning was insufficient to fill the third authorized rifle squad). The rifle platoon retained the ability to simultaneously employ three command launch units (CLUs).

- Both tank platoons consisted of four tanks each. To support the addition of eight M1A2 tanks, B/5-20 also received one M88A2 recovery vehicle and one team of tank mechanics.

- The sapper platoon consisted of three Engineer Support Variants (ESVs — including one mine clearing plow and one mine clearing roller), three dismounted sapper squads, one mine-clearing line charge (MICLIC), and one Volcano on a load-handling system.

The normal mechanized companion to the tank is a Bradley Fighting Vehicle. In comparison, Strykers carry more Infantrymen than Bradleys, making them even more effective at clearance operations. However, Strykers have less armor, lack the armor-killing weapons, and are wheeled instead of tracked. This caused the B/5-20 commander to modify his maneuver by keeping the Strykers less exposed than he would Bradleys. He also could not use the Stryker itself as an armor-killing system. Lastly, a Stryker cannot maneuver over rough terrain as well as tracked vehicles so the commander chose Stryker routes carefully. Once Strykers arrived to the dismount point, they were able to provide more dismounted infantry and were, therefore, an enormous advantage because they could fight in areas where armor could not.

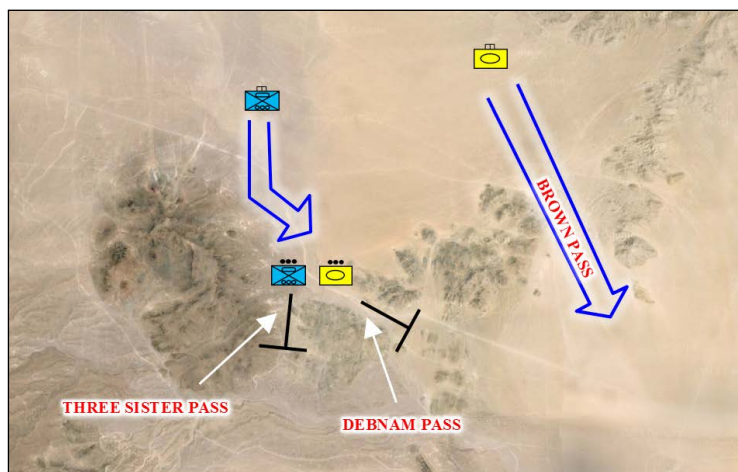


Figure 1 — Blocking at Three Sisters and Debnam

Employment at NTC

Most offensive operations executed during the rotation were movements to contact. To best develop a simple and bold plan to defeat the enemy, 5-20 IN used a fighting style rooted in a hockey-play concept: fluid maneuver that quickly adjusts to the location of the hockey puck and seamlessly transitions between offense and defense. For 5-20 IN, it enabled the battalion to maneuver in such a fashion that the first company to make contact with the enemy would immediately attempt to fix while the other companies maneuvered to flank and destroy. This flexibility was critical to 5-20 IN serving as the brigade decisive operation and prevented the battalion from becoming mired in rigid plans.

For example, during Battle Period One, 5-20 IN had to be prepared to attack the enemy through one of three different passes: Brown's Pass, Debnam Pass, or Three Sister's Pass. B/5-20 was tasked to secure and/or block Debnam and Three Sister's Passes. All three of these passes are canalizing with high ground on each side of the pass. The task force leveraged its task organization by deploying its armor capability to the widest pass and employing dismounted infantry and javelin teams in the most restrictive pass to maximize each unit's capabilities. This was effective at preventing the enemy from committing combat power to each pass and forced them to bypass to the south. In contrast, a Stryker pure company would need to seize the restrictive terrain before enemy armor was committed to maximize the effectiveness of their javelins. Still, a rifle company has only a certain number of javelin missiles available to adequately delay or destroy a mechanized infantry battalion.

Leaders with 5-20 IN employed the Stryker-tank company team where it was best able to use the open terrain to rapidly move to advantageous positions and employ dismounted infantry. Specifically, during Battle Period Two, 5-20 IN attacked through Brown's Pass to meet the enemy east of Junction City near Hill 876 and the peanut (this area is open terrain with a few hills in the center). While two separate Stryker-tank company teams maneuvered south of Junction City to attack east, B/5-20 maneuvered along the northern wall near

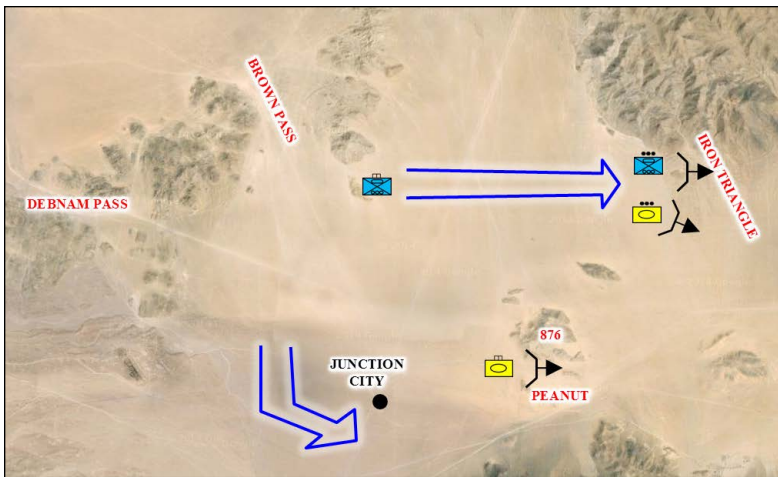


Figure 2 — Overwatch at the Iron Triangle

the iron triangle to establish an attack-by-fire position oriented east-southeast. To maximize its lethality, it deployed its armor capability first, allowing them to lead the company through Brown's Pass north of Junction City (taking care to avoid anti-tank systems) and into the severely restrictive terrain near the Iron Triangle. Here, the tanks assumed a defensive posture at turret defilade while the infantry deployed javelin teams and the FSV established overwatch. From this position, the company team achieved a point of domination with direct and indirect fires over the northern sector of the central corridor.

The Stryker-tank company team also operated effectively in the defense. Task Force Regular occupied battle positions (BPs) in the restrictive terrain north of Siberia, a vast open area with restrictive terrain to its west, north, and east, with the intent of destroying the enemy in an engagement area east of the John Wayne Foothills. The restrictive terrain of the BP did not facilitate tank movement or maneuver, and this was confirmed during both mounted reconnaissance and rehearsals. As a result, it employed the Stryker platoon forward to maximize its ability to conceal itself in the restrictive terrain and employ javelins. The tank platoons were employed to the rear where they could occupy positions that provided natural turret defilade and maximize observations and fields of fire that would provide overwatch for the Stryker platoon during the initial occupation of the BP as well as during the withdrawal to alternate BPs. After withdrawal to alternate BPs, B/5-20 assumed the role as the task force reserve. The tanks allowed the company to become a more effective reserve than a rifle company because it could be committed in a variety of situations, to include supporting adjacent battalions. During the defense, the reserve was committed to block the northern section of Porta Potti Wadi, the eastern border of 5-20 IN's battle position. Here, dismounted infantry seized the restrictive terrain and oriented anti-tank systems south into the wadi as the tanks oriented east to engage enemy armor forces as they moved north from Red Lake Pass.

Raven UAS Employment

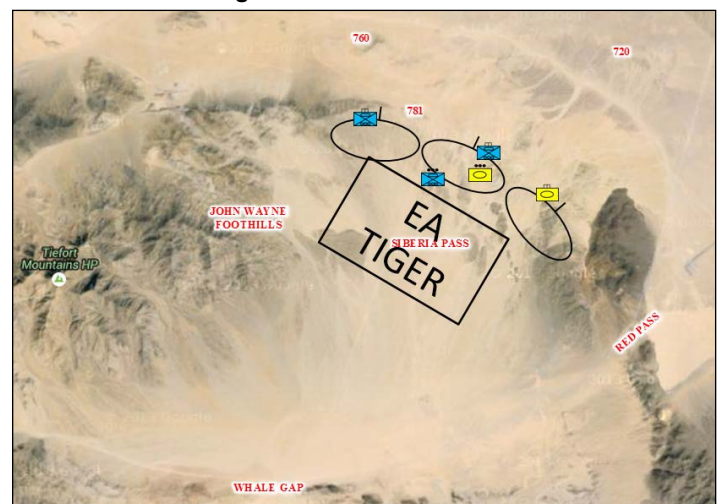
The Stryker company is authorized a Raven unmanned aerial system (UAS), and B/5-20 uses the Raven as often as possible. However, the rapid movement of the Stryker-tank

company team reduced the ability and necessity to employ the Raven. Unlike sister companies throughout the brigade that relied heavily on the Raven during more static operations, the speed of the company team was faster than the approval time of an immediate restricted operating zone, and the area the company team can cover with a combination of mounted and dismounted forces did not facilitate employing the Raven. Similar to dismounted clearance, the employment of the Raven is a time-consuming process that is not well suited for armored warfare. For example, during the brigade attack, B/5-20 rapidly moved through Red Lake Pass, avoiding indirect fire and chemical attacks to quickly occupy positions in a wadi system east of the whale. Stopping to deploy the Raven would have forced the company to become static for too long and become susceptible to indirect fire, family of scatterable mines (FASCAM), and chemical attacks. In fact, the contemporary operating force employed a FASCAM in Red Lake Pass that was unsuccessful in blocking B/5-20's movement. This does not mean that the Raven cannot be useful for a unit moving quickly, however. Dismounted infantry still benefit from using a UAS in severely restrictive terrain as well as employing it as a security enabler during assembly area and defensive operations. If the company had been tasked to move through a defile, it could have launched the Raven in conjunction with dismounted infantry.

Challenges

While the Stryker-tank partnership was a good fit in maneuver, the company team experienced challenges with mission command systems. First, the tank platoons were equipped with Blue Force Tracker (BFT) and the Stryker units were equipped with Joint Capabilities Release (JCR). The battalion attempted to build a "bridge" between the systems that would allow FIPR (flash, immediate, priority, routine) messages and graphics sharing but was unsuccessful. This hindered mission command because the battalion relies heavily on JCR graphics for mission planning. The ability for adjacent units to share graphics, plot obstacles and enemy

Figure 3 — Southern Corridor



locations, and use movement control measures is essential for fluid movement and maneuver.

Second, the Stryker company commander does not have survivability to lead and fight with his tank platoons as compared to a tank or Bradley company commander. Thus, he must remain in a covered and concealed position while directing a tank battle. Conversely, a tank company with Stryker platoons attached does not have this challenge, though the JCR/BFT interoperability still remains a mission command shortcoming.

The 5-20 IN anticipated sustainment of the company team being a problem. Stryker rifle companies are intended to be self-sustaining for up to 96 hours while an armor company relies heavily on Class III and IX. Certainly, these requirements can vary based on the mission variables, but many of the constraints associated with armored forces were transparent at the company level for the Stryker-tank company team. The battalion provided a logistics package twice daily. At the battalion level, there were challenges with getting Class IX shop stock and organizing recovery assets, but these difficulties did not affect company operations.

Mobility Support

SBCT engineers have robust mobility assets for Strykers but have difficulty supporting armored forces. The SBCT engineer company consists of combat engineer platoons and one mobility support platoon. Given the significance of tactical mobility to successful attacks, each engineer company is comprised with the ESV. The ESV is designed to neutralize obstacles and mark lanes using their mine-clearing plow, straight blade plow, mine-clearing rollers, and towing a trailer with MICLIC. SBCT engineers' most distinctive capability is that during the combined arms breach, they can reduce, proof, and mark a lane for the width of the Stryker vehicle.

During the NTC Rotation 15-08.5, 5-20 IN was challenged with supporting armor companies with Stryker engineers. Given the differences between the Stryker wheel base and the M1 track base, the SBCT requires force tailoring in order to adequately support the armor formation's base during the breach.

The combat earthmover is a mounted system that mitigates the use of dismounted sappers, but it does not provide the speed required to maintain momentum and lethality during the point of penetration.

With augmentation, the SBCT is a full participant in armor division combat operations. Contingencies requiring armor formations will require that the SBCT be augmented with additional engineer assets such as the following:

- M1 Assault Breacher Vehicle (ABV) is based on a modified M1 chassis and equipped with two MICLIC launchers.
- M1 Mine Clearing Blade is attached to the M1 Abrams.
- M1 Mine Clearing Roller is attached to the M1 Abrams.

Another possible tactic that engineers can use is augmenting the armor formation with two Stryker engineer platoons. By doing this, two ESVs with the mine clearing plows can overlap their lane, creating a wider lane. The risk: if this tactic is used, the maneuver commander then loses mobility capabilities with another maneuver company because two Stryker engineer platoons are already committed to support the armor formation.

Conclusion

The experimentation with this form of hybrid doctrine is beneficial to the Armor, Infantry, and Engineer communities. Rifle company commanders who have the opportunity to lead a unique task organization must learn the capabilities and limitations of attachments and expand their vision of the battlefield. They must pay particular attention to the differences in weapons ranges and the mobility of the systems. For the Stryker-tank company team, the commander must be prepared to use the wide range of capabilities to clear restricted terrain and move quickly in open terrain. Most importantly, however, the toughest challenge is overcoming the lack of communications interoperability. The Stryker company commander must be prepared to radically modify his method of mission command if both units are not JCR.

CPT Tom Ibarra currently serves as the commander, A Company, 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion, Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), Wash. He earned a master's degree in geological engineering from Missouri University of Science and Technology

CPT Ryan Kertis currently serves as commander of B Company, 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, JBLM. He earned a bachelor's degree in kinesiology from Washington State University.

U.S. Army Soldiers maneuver M1A2 Abrams tanks to engage enemy forces during NTC Rotation 15-08.5 at Fort Irwin on 18 July 2015.

Photo by SGT Richard W. Jones Jr.

