Utilizing FOs in the Mounted Fight:
Lessons Learned and Recommendations

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Employing forward observers (FOs) in a mounted heavy weapons company at first appears no different than employing them in a standard light infantry company. Conducting an offensive gunnery lane, however, will quickly reveal many difficulties in planning fires and incorporating the FO. The unique struggles found in offensive operations also apply to defensive operations.

Before we address the main issues encountered while training in Grafenwoehr, Germany, it is important to understand the role of a heavy weapons company within a light infantry battalion. The company's role is to provide dismounts with enough fire power to destroy enemy up-armored vehicles while maintaining freedom of maneuver through large volumes of fire.

From the fire support side, the company organically has a fire support team (FIST) that has far fewer members than a standard line company. The FIST is responsible for running the company FIST headquarters (HQ), which leaves a shortage of FOs for the platoons to utilize.

The FIST organization leads to the largest challenge when incorporating FOs in the mounted fight, which is that there simply are not enough dedicated platoon FOs to fully support the platoons. Additionally, the mission could force some FOs to operate outside of the company.

Another difficulty when incorporating FOs is the ability to emplace them effectively. In the offense, it is not practical to establish an FO on an observation post (OP) because the mounted unit moves faster and farther than a traditional unit. This creates communications issues and limits the platoon leader's (PL's) ability to quickly and effectively incorporate fires.

In the defense, it is also not always practical to establish an OP because a mounted unit's engagement area relies on incorporating and massing all available assets. When the FO is separated from the PL, this becomes difficult. Also, it becomes difficult to quickly pick up and break contact if the FO is on an OP away from the PL's vehicle.

It is our goal in this article to identify effective solutions for incorporating fires in the mounted fight. We will also identify two courses of action for future consideration that will increase a FIST's ability to provide rapid fires.

An immediate solution we are working towards is to train the truck commanders (TCs) of each heavy weapons crew to be proficient in calling for and controlling fires. The intent behind this course of action is to give the FIST HQ more options when planning and assigning pre-planned targets for operations.

While the standard call for fire is a basic soldier skill, the training goal for TCs is to give them the confidence to use fires in the absence of an FO. This way if an FO is not available for a platoon's operation, the TC will have the capability to utilize pre-planned targets and call for fire on opportune targets.

Also, when the FO is with the platoon and located in the PL's vehicle during an offensive operation, the FO is no longer limited because of a lack of visibility due to sitting in a vehicle. The TC's advanced targeting equipment can gather and feed targeting data to the attached FO. This allows the FO to use the incoming data to advise the PL and also use the TCs as observers to help manage multiple missions and assets at once. Essentially, this allows the FO to act as a platoon-level FIST HQ.

The increased observation of this method effectively gives the unit a large increase in fires capability. It also allows the company FISTs to better incorporate fires into the maneuver plan and allows the FO to manage multiple targeting sensors through the TCs, versus sitting in the backseat where they have limited capability.

Although training the TCs to act as FOs when needed is effective in the short term, there are multiple long-term solutions that address the issue of utilizing FOs in a mounted company. One solution is to equip the PL with a vehicle that has a targeting sensor mounted on the turret. This would allow FOs to act as command vehicle gunners, give them better visibility of the area of operations, and allow them to quickly gather targeting data.

Additionally, the PL can easily maneuver his vehicle to the best vantage point for providing fires that support his maneuver plan. In the defense for instance, instead of establishing an OP with only the equipment the FO can carry, he can utilize the targeting system on the PL's vehicle to observe the engagement area. This is done with the FO near the PL, which increases the ability to effectively manage the fires plan and mass fires.

Another long-term solution is to equip the FIST HQ with a fire support vehicle with the capabilities necessary to support a mounted company. Armor companies do this as their FIST operates its own Bradley fire support vehicle which is equipped with advanced targeting systems. In mounted infantry companies, however, the FIST lacks this equipment and vehicle

platform. This prevents them from properly moving and effectively providing fires to support maneuver operations.

Rather than being an immediate asset to the heavy weapons company, the company ends up needing to help the FIST before it can support the company. Instead, we recommend equipping the heavy weapons FIST with a fire support vehicle and mounted targeting equipment. This would allow the FIST to travel with the main effort, rapidly employ fires using better targeting equipment, increase communications effectiveness, and maintain better command and control. This solution increases the number of assets the FIST can control simultaneously and ultimately provides better support to the company.

In closing, the training we have conducted as a company opened our eyes to many struggles when it comes to effectively incorporating FOs into mounted operations. One struggle was learning how to utilize an FO in offensive operations. Because they are required to be in the backseat of a vehicle, they cannot visualize the battlefield, and when they dismount to establish an OP, it ultimately slows down the tempo of the platoon. Additionally, the small size of the heavy weapons FIST restricts its ability to effectively support a company.

In response to these issues, an immediate step we have taken is training each crew's TC with the ability to feed targeting data to the FO. This allows the FO to communicate what the battlefield looks like to the PL, control multiple fire missions, and control multiple assets. This solution should not be a permanent fix because it takes TCs away from their main task; however, until a better system is in place, this allows each platoon to have an increased fires capability and greatly increases the amount of simultaneous fires a single FO can provide.

A future solution to consider is equipping the PL with a vehicle that has a mounted targeting system so the FO can better observe the battlespace and fires during operations. Also, the increased ability to view the battlespace could allow the FO to better advise the PL on incorporating fires.

Finally, providing the FIST with a fire support vehicle with targeting sensors — similar to that of an armored company FIST — would greatly increase the FIST's ability to provide and integrate fires into platoon and company operations. We believe this is the best long-term solution because it maximizes the capabilities of a small FIST by increasing communications and therefore command and control of fires assets. This solution ensures the FIST can either maneuver with the commander or to an ideal observation point. The added communications and mobility of the FIST greatly increases the level of fire support provided in offensive and defensive operations.

Although quite different from providing fire support to the standard light infantry company, by employing an effective method and SOP for utilizing FOs in a heavy weapons company, maximum fire power through integration of assets is provided at every point in the battle.

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