Fighting as a Tactical Combat Force at NTC

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As the saying goes, new things are old things happening to new people. This was the case in the summer of 2022 during the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team's (SBCT) recent National Training Center (NTC) rotation, where the brigade was tasked to organize a tactical combat force (TCF). The TCF concept has fallen out of the Army's lexicon in recent years, but with the flood of lessons learned from Ukraine, it is relevant again. The following article outlines Task Force (TF) Paxton's execution of the TCF mission during NTC Rotation 22-08 and provides some lessons learned from the experience.

What is a tactical combat force? The TCF has its roots in the creation of AirLand Battle (ALB) doctrine. In the days of ALB, the TCF was designated to defeat a Level III threat, and it still serves the same purpose today. The three levels of threat refer to increasing enemy combat capability, Level III being the most potent. Typically, a Level I threat consists of a small enemy force that can be defeated by units operating in the rear area. A Level II threat generally consists of enemy special operations teams, long-range reconnaissance teams, and attrited small combat units. This threat is an enemy force that is beyond the defense capability of base camps and clusters and any local reserve or response force.[1] During the development of ALB, doctrine writers analyzed the tactics of Warsaw Pact maneuver formations and realized NATO defenses in the rear area lacked the capability to counter a Level III threat, thus the TCF was born.[2]

As the Army reorients from a focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations to large-scale combat operations (LSCO), the need to address the Level III threat has returned. Lessons learned from the current war in Ukraine have identified the need to address security in the rear area. Commanders must now ensure their rear area combat forces have the capability to rapidly deploy a lethal combat element, in a sometimes vast area of operations, to

Soldiers from the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division maneuver their Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicles during National Training Center Rotation 22-08 at Fort Irwin, CA. (Photo by CPT Cory Johnson)

A team from Task Force Paxton scans the area for enemy targets during National Training Center Rotation 22-08 at Fort Irwin. (Photo by LTC Gordon R. Kinneer)

defeat a potential armor or mechanized threat that seeks to disrupt their logistical operations. Because of the area that must be covered, the TCF needs to be highly mobile and lethal enough to destroy a Level III threat. Having that criteria in mind, TF Paxton (2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment) was able to task organize into small mobile teams to rapidly maneuver and counter any Level III threat as it emerged in the brigade's rear area.

While not a typical task for a brigade NTC rotation, adding the TCF mission set enabled a training repetition for an additional battalion. Typically, an undermanned battalion formation is consumed by the parent brigade and its manpower redistributed to round out other battalions and the brigade staff. Assigning opposing force (OPFOR) elements to act as a Level III threat fundamentally changed how the brigade, the brigade support battalion (BSB), and the brigade engineer battalion (BEB) accounted for their security requirements in the rear area. TF Paxton deployed to NTC with overall reduced manning across the formation. It deployed without its scouts and mortar platoon and fielded a reduced battalion headquarters, headquarters company, forward support company (FSC), and a rifle company with its headquarters and two platoons. While light in terms of combat power, the task force organized into multiple combat and logistical elements to accomplish its TCF mission. These streamlined formations could cover enemy key avenues of approach as the brigade maneuvered out of Logistics Support Area (LSA) Santa Fe, through the Whale Gap, and ultimately west toward Razish and Ujen. Like most NTC rotations, TF Paxton quickly discovered what did and did not work and constantly refined its task organization in order to defeat the Level III threat, named "Desert Rat" by the OPFOR.

The leaders of TF Paxton understood their mission and the importance of operating dismounted Javelin teams to counter an armored formation. Because of the relatively small elements, command and control from the main command post (MCP) focused on battle tracking and information sharing up and out of the battalion MCP to the brigade MCP and laterally to adjacent units. The maneuver was largely left to the commander of Arrow Company and his platoon leaders, with guidance and direction provided by the battalion commander as needed. This also shaped how the MCP and combat trains command post (CTCP) were established. Because of the highly mobile nature of the TCF, and the size of the maneuver element, the battalion staff focused on the rapid decision-making process (RDSP). Prior to the brigade's first offensive operation, TF Paxton executed the military decision-making process (MDMP), followed by a battalion combined arms rehearsal (CAR) and multiple terrain model and technical rehearsals. During these events, the battalion staff quickly realized that RDSP would be the preferred method for quick planning and coordination due to the nature of the mission. Since the mission didn't really change and

only the terrain and locations varied, much of the concepts of sustainment and support remained the same, thus enabling RDSP to occur efficiently across the battalion.

During execution of the TCF mission, TF Paxton's scheme of maneuver remained constant. The initial concept of the operation was to fight as dismounted small elements supported by a Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicle (ICV). Two observation posts (OPs) would be supported by one ICV. The intent was to have a "slinky effect" where OPs would detect and engage the enemy, pulling the ICV forward to support as needed and then sending it back to a hide site that mutually supported both OPs. The element utilized the ICV in a multitude of ways: as a method to sustain the OPs, a non-standard casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) platform, a communication-relay platform, and a mounted weapons platform. TF Paxton had one Stinger team that protected the MCP and could be repositioned to one of the OPs based on the enemy air threat.

During the initial phase of the operation, the Level III threat (Desert Rat) penetrated deep into the brigade rear area through the Whale Gap and into No Name Valley. Fortunately, an intrepid Soldier destroyed two BMPs and one T90 in less than 10 minutes before the threat could mount an attack on the BSB. In subsequent phases, Desert Rat was able to use terrain to its advantage, slip by an OP, and conduct a spoiling attack against the BSB. This mistake served as a good lesson for TF Paxton in the importance of engagement area development (EA DEV) and covering all avenues of approach appropriately. TF Paxton continued to refine its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and mounted an effective fight against Desert Rat as the operation progressed.

The TF sustained multiple OP locations across the brigade's large rear area by using a logistics release point (LRP) model. With the field trains command post (FTCP) co-located with the BSB, the CTCP coordinated replenishment of all classes of supply and conducted field maintenance at their location. Located at the FTCP, the Arrow Company supply sergeant shaped the makeup of logistics packages (LOGPACs) based on the logistics status (LOGSTAT) of the OPs. At the OP locations, the supporting ICV moved to the nearest LRP location to receive LOGPAC and then ferried supplies to its supported OP locations. Because of the dispersed nature of OPs across the TCF operational environment, a modified system of tailgate resupply, in conjunction with the use of LRPs, provided the necessary logistical support to sustain the battalion. The distribution platoon was most likely to inadvertently gain contact with the Desert Rat element as it executed its LOGPAC mission. Because of this, a Javelin team was sometimes added to the platoon as it ran between the CTCP, MCP, LRPs, and FTCP.

Five primary lessons emerged from execution of the TCF mission during NTC Rotation 22-08. The first lesson learned was that adjacent unit coordination between the TCF, BSB, BEB, and brigade MCP is vital to having a clear friendly common operating picture (COP) during operations. Frequent communication between the TCF,

In the distance, the 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment (Paxton) establishes its main command post prior to an attack on the notional city of Ujen on 4 July 2022 during National Training Center Rotation 22-08. (Photo by LTC Gordon R. Kinneer)

A Stryker reconnaissance vehicle from the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team moves out to occupy an observation post in the early morning hours of 29 June during NTC Rotation 22-08. (Photo by LTC Gordon R. Kinneer)

BSB, BEB commanders and their respective staffs proved to be essential. At the battalion MCP, the COP needed to be friendly focused rather than enemy focused. Analog graphics should focus more attention to blue icons than red icons; knowing what was coming and going in and out of the rear area was critical to avoiding fratricide and understanding what may come into contact with the Level III threat along any given ground line of communication (GLOC).

Second, TF Paxton lacked the ability to effectively combine arms as the TCF without indirect fires. Without its mortar platoon and sections and low priority of fires, TF leaders could not shape their engagement areas and engage the enemy at a distance. Clearance of fires is complex in the rear area due to the amount of friendly elements moving within the TCF area of operations (AO). Fire support coordination measures (FSCMs) must be universally known and coordinated across the brigade rear area in order to provide the TCF accurate and timely fires when the Level III threat is located. Because of the low priority of fires for the TCF and the location of the position area of artillery (PAA), battalion and company mortars are the best indirect fires asset for any TCF commander.

Third, the brigade must clearly delineate who is responsible for what in the rear area. In order for the TCF to be successful, the brigade must clearly articulate who is responsible for the various security tasks required in the rear area to avoid duplication of effort and squandering combat power. Assigning the TCF sole responsibility for countering the Level III threat and the BEB responsibility for countering the Level I and II threats allows each element to better utilize their combat power effectively. The BEB's attached MPs are more than capable of defeating Level I and II threats; however, they would become quickly overwhelmed when attempting to maneuver against a Level III threat. Conversely, if the TCF has to counter all levels of threat, its response to the appearance of armor or mechanized forces in the rear area will not be effective.

Fourth, the TCF MCP must be lean, agile, and rapidly deployable. Use of camouflage netting and vehicle-mounted command and control (C2) systems in place of tents enabled TF Paxton to rapidly shift its MCP as needed. The reliance on computer systems to create digital products and execute briefings was almost nonexistent due to the time required for set up. The TF established a hybrid analog and digital COP using the Joint Battle Command Platform (JBCP) and traditional map boards and acetate. Leaders completed operation order (OPORD) briefings and RDSP mostly in person over terrain models and over the radio when necessary. Once TF Paxton established a battle rhythm and executed set up and tear down of the MCP a few times, it was able to occupy a new MCP location, establish upper tactical internet (TI), and transition C2 of the fight from the tactical command post to the MCP within about an hour of arrival to a new location.

Lastly, incorporating the use of a TCF into the NTC Operations Group's scenario enables a fourth maneuver battalion the opportunity to participate in the world-class training that only NTC can offer. As a true crucible in any

service member's career, there is nothing that can replicate this experience. Participation in the TCF role at NTC is best suited for a battalion with reduced manning or a National Guard battalion that is in its Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernizations Model (ReARMM) training year and not sourced for a Global Force Management Allocation Plan (GFMAP) requirement. The TCF mission may appear simplistic, but it still exercises a battalion's systems and processes, requires commanders to maneuver their forces, and gives battalion commanders exposure to their peers as they execute combined arms maneuver.

As the Army continues to train in the LSCO training environment against a near-peer threat at Combat Training Centers (CTCs), more refined TTPs associated with fighting as a TCF will emerge. Ultimately, the force package a brigade is able to commit as a TCF will shape how it fights. There are many ways to employ a unit in the TCF role, and only time will tell how it is incorporated into future operational designs. Our hope is that the hard lessons learned during TF Paxton's NTC rotation will spur conversation and provide future CTC rotation participants a good starting point for planning and resourcing their version of the TCF.

Notes

[1] Field Manual (FM) 3-81, *Maneuver Enhancement Brigade*, November 2021, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34192-FM_3-81-000-WEB-1.pdf.

[2] LTC (Retired) Michael T. Chychota and LTC (Retired) Edwin L. Kennedy Jr., "Who You Gonna Call? Deciphering the Difference Between Reserve, Quick Reaction, Striking, and Tactical Combat Forces," *Infantry* (July-September 2014): 16-19, accessed from https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2014/Jul-Sep/Chychota.html.

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