

Medium Gun System Platoons:

A First Look at a New Kind of Unit

by Second Lieutenant Brian P. Hurley

The Medium Gun System (MGS) platoon is a new unit dedicated to accomplishing the same mission as tanks were first called upon to carry out — supporting the infantry. In this case, the infantry units are part of the new Interim Brigade Combat Teams (IBCTs) now training at Fort Lewis, Washington.

Consider this article a progress report on the training, problems, and achievements of C Co, 1-23 IN's Medium Gun System platoon, which supports the Third Brigade Combat Team (BCT).

The company has conducted several raids, traffic checkpoints, presence patrols, and perimeter defenses since June 2000 and has taken initial strides toward maintaining 19K proficiency through the first Interim Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) Tank Crew Proficiency Course (TCPC). Company commanders have had the opportunity to execute numerous missions utilizing varied employment methods and task organizations for the MGS. This article will cover the training conducted, the various ways the MGS has been employed, the close infantry fight, MGS training, and some 19K-specific issues that have arisen in the MGS/IBCT concept.

Because the final version of the Medium Gun System is not yet available for training, we use eight-wheeled Italian Centauro armored cars, equipped with 105mm tank guns similar to those on the M60 and early M1-series tanks. These vehicles are on loan to the U.S. Army. The Infantry Assault Vehicles (IAVs) that our unit uses are also "loaners," from the Canadian Army, similar to Marine Corps Light Armored Vehicles (LAVs).

Task Organization

To date, MGS platoons have focused on three configurations: pure plus (three MGS vehicles plus one Infantry Assault Vehicle (IAV) and one dismounted infantry squad); another with two MGS vehicles, one IAV, and one

dismounted infantry squad (The other MGS vehicle was attached to the Main Effort Platoon.); and a third with one MGS vehicle per rifle platoon, under the rifle platoon leader's control. The first configuration, pure plus, is usually best for non-restrictive terrain, and in support/attack-by-fire positions. The dismounted infantry squad from the accompanying IAV conducts an occupation by force of the SBF/ABF position.



The IAV squad dismounts, clears the position, and secures the flanks and rear of the position. The MGS platoon then conducts deliberate occupation of the SBF/ABF. Dismounted infantry are aware of the "danger cone" of 105mm rounds and are well clear of the rear of the vehicle. The remaining IAV supports the dismounted infantry in security operations and can mount up and conduct quick reaction force (QRF) operations.

This task organization proved extremely effective. When the enemy tried to destroy the MGS SBF by flanking with dismounted AT weaponry,

close infantry support fire teams were able to identify the dismounted AT threat and destroy them before they could initiate firing. Conversely, when a company chose to leave the MGS without infantry security, they were completely destroyed. After the mission, the only units with surviving MGS vehicles were the units that utilized the deliberate occupation method with infantry.

The second task organization is usually the normal task organization for the company. Fort Lewis' restrictive terrain is not conducive to a pure MGS organization and the missions executed by IBCT infantry companies usually require MGS intervention in the close fight. MGS vehicles operate on the section/wingman concept, utilizing the infantry as local security, but this is not limited to static local security. Often, the MGS platoon leader will use active dismounted patrolling with one MGS overwatching the dismounted maneuver element. The remaining MGS and IAV operate on the wingman/section concept. One full rifle squad with one MGS in overwatch provides the lethality needed to deal with almost any contingency. If the threat is too great for the squad and MGS, the other MGS and IAV provide a quick reaction force to defeat the enemy. The third MGS vehicle is utilized by the main effort as the weapon system to sway the battle and enter the close infantry fight.

This task organization is also extremely effective. Organizing the company in this manner provides the commander one or two more maneuver elements (to make five) instead of three (just the rifle platoons). The armor platoon leader has his E-6 wingman and another infantry E-6 squad leader, while the MGS PSG is attached to the

While the U.S. version of the Medium Gun System is being re-engineered to reduce its height for C-130 deployment, troops of the Interim Brigade Combat Teams are training on Centauro armored cars borrowed from the Italian Army.



main effort. The PL and PSG must be proficient at all infantry tasks for this organization to work. Using this organization, the company commander can parcel out his elements to cover more area without sacrificing firepower. Also, he is able to spread senior leadership over a larger area, which translates to greater command and control. 11B platoon sergeants and new platoon leaders benefit from the attached 19K E-7 who aids in the troop leading procedures and from integrating armor into the close infantry fight.

The MGS platoon can now operate traffic control points, conduct screen line operations, be prepared for reserve/quick reaction force (QRF) missions, conduct active reconnaissance and presence patrol operations, and secure a section of a mobile defense in depth. The other MGS vehicle in the main effort can be used in a SBF/ABF, or switch to precision coax and provide close machine gun support. Another option for the lone MGS is to operate as the breach element when the main effort is attempting to gain a foothold in an urban environment. After extensive rehearsals, the grappling hook method was used to clear concertina wire in an urban raid.

The dismounted infantry set the conditions for the MGS to maneuver, under smoke, to execute the breach. Setting the conditions translates to neutralizing the immediate AT threat while continuously applying suppressive fire and smoke on the enemy. The MGS vehicle exposure time was limited to about 15 seconds and, in that time, the vehicle was concealed under a wall of smoke. After the breach, the infantry penetrated the enemy perimeter and seized the foothold. Upon occupation of a second building, the MGS vehicle maneuvered, under cover of suppressive fire and building obscuration, to enter the close infantry fight. The MGS began to turn the tide of the battle and allow the infantry freedom of maneuver.

The third task organization is used when each rifle platoon is expected to fight in limited terrain under heavy enemy opposition. Each rifle platoon leader employs his MGS according to his own judgment. Usually, the MGS role is limited to a support by fire role or is used to help establish the machine gun teams. Effects are limited in this method since the terrain and enemy threat can drastically affect MGS combat power. This task organization is the least effective of the three. It is best suited to perimeter defenses, presence patrols, or assembly area operations; the scenarios depend on the threat template. MGS vehicles can be split to provide evenly distributed firepower to each section of the perimeter defense. Obviously, this type of organization does not lend itself to massing fires.

During a presence patrol, each platoon can cover a specific area and use the MGS as an intimidating force as well as a QRF if the platoon is overwhelmed. Utilizing this task organization for raids or deliberate attacks limits the commander to three maneuver units, instead of a potential five, and limits the firepower of mass and maneuverability benefits that the MGS offers. Also, two key leaders (the PL and PSG) are simply reduced to tank commanders. This proposed organization has as many limitations as the platoon file does in dismounted operations.

Battlefield Examples of Task Organizations

Task Organization 2: While conducting area presence operations, insurgent forces were entering and leaving the occupied areas. Company commanders needed to maintain surveillance and provide a quick reaction force should the presence patrols meet resistance. The task organization for this mission utilized two MGS vehicles, one IAV, and one dismounted infantry squad. They were to conduct screen line operations and, on order, provide a QRF to the nearby village to reinforce.

During the screening operation, the MGS platoon was ordered to stop a specific vehicle to search and detain suspects. Maintaining covered and concealed positions, the MGS utilized its optics to track and identify vehicles. Upon identification, the MGS radioed to the dismounted element while the MGS maneuvered to block the road. The suspect vehicle was trapped on the road between one MGS and one IAV. Dismounted infantry conducted a search of vehicle and personnel, detained suspects and radioed for EPW pick up. The second MGS vehicle provided overwatch and eyes on the road network.

Organizing the MGS platoon in this manner did not reduce the combat power of the platoons conducting the presence patrols and it enabled the MGS to maximize its optics and maneuverability advantages over the enemy.

Screen operations/hunter-killer teams were employed during the perimeter defense using the same organization. The platoon had two MGS vehicles plus one IAV and squad. The other MGS was attached to a full rifle platoon charged with active security patrolling. The rifle platoon leader organized a hunter-killer team with two IAVs, two squads, and one MGS. IAVs patrolled for the enemy, and once the enemy was found, would dismount and further evaluate/develop the situation. MGS would then be deployed into the fight once the hunter team set the conditions for MGS intervention.

The MGS platoon conducted stationary screen line operations with an on-order mission to reinforce the perimeter. The dismount squad was the QRF for the perimeter defense and also the designated EPW team and vehicle search team.

The hunter-killer team executed flawlessly. The MGS truly swayed the fight with precision coax and APERS rounds. However, this tactic relies heavily upon the infantry's adjustment for the MGS danger cone, which is an



An MGS approaches a wire entanglement as troops rehearse a MOUT raid in cooperation with infantry.

integral part of setting the conditions for MGS intervention.

The screen line worked as well as before, deterring several vehicles from entering the perimeter and preventing reinforcements from the high speed avenues of approach. When OPFOR breached the perimeter from the rear and began clearing the perimeter, MGS moved into the perimeter and again swayed the battle, pushing the OPFOR back into the woodline and allowing BLUFOR to consolidate and reorganize the perimeter.

The Close Infantry Fight

On more than one occasion, getting the MGS into the fight immediately turned the battle in BLUFOR's favor. The MGS can close with the enemy and destroy him, but must have the conditions set for such intervention. Surprise and shock effect absolutely stunned the enemy and enabled the infantry to maneuver while MGS influenced the battle.

Utilizing the MGS solely in a support-by-fire role wastes valuable lethality and firepower. The infantry is the main effort in almost every fight — especially the MOUT fight. MGS firepower and maneuverability must be involved in the fight to ensure limited losses of infantry and secure victory; in fact, lives depend on it. Commanders need to understand the effects of each 105-mm round, as does the infantry soldier.

Commanders also need to make an assessment based on the risk of loss. Most tankers feel they should be in the SBF role and used sparingly, if at all, in the close infantry fight, because they cause the most damage and they are far too valuable an asset. But commanders and tankers need to realize that, given the situation, they may have to accept the possibility of losing a vehicle. What may result in reducing the combat ef-

fectiveness of the MGS platoon — a tactical move that is high risk for one of the vehicles — may improve the overall combat effectiveness of the company.

One example of such a scenario is the breach. Many infantry soldiers may die in the breach. One company during training lost an entire platoon while breaching two sets of wire, and after the breach, that company was rendered combat ineffective because of additional losses incurred while clearing the village. However, if a commander can employ an MGS with one infantry squad supporting a breaching effort, a platoon can be saved, a foothold secured, and the mission becomes a success even though an MGS vehicle might be lost. Understand that MOUT can be costly in terms of losses in soldiers and vehicles, and the MGS is also part of that cost equation. But a tactically proficient commander knows how to set the conditions for successful MGS intervention and rarely will an MGS vehicle be sacrificed for the whole. The key to success in the close infantry fight is frequent integration of infantry and MGS training.

MGS Training

Since MGS operates under the Blue Guidon, they often train like infantry. PT, in the IBCT, is a battle-focus consolidated targeting task list (CTTL) task which is closely monitored. As a result, MGS soldiers are extremely fit. 19Ks in 1-23 IN know the jobs of their infantry brethren and can execute most dismounted tasks. All MGS soldiers are close quarters marksmanship certified; they all train the nine basic moves of Brazilian Jujitsu; they can all enter and clear a room, and know the process of clearing a street. Also, MGS soldiers are masters of several different vehicles. All MGS soldiers are certified to drive the Centauro, LAV III IAV,

HMMWV, and M113. Ultimately, MGS soldiers have become the model for mounted and dismounted maneuvering. MGS soldiers lead the way on company command maintenance and mounted weapons employment since most of the company is comprised of 11Bs.

Considering the unique training focus for MGS troopers, they obviously are not conventional tankers, but a new breed of soldier. Training the platoon for such a high OPTEMPO, training to think while fighting, increasing situational awareness, and executing initiative within the commander's intent are the hallmark of the MGS. MGS soldiers have the same base skill set as tankers, but possess a myriad of additional skills as well.

NCOs and soldiers who come to MGS platoons are not, and must not be, "third-class soldiers." Units with MGS platoons conduct missions that require only the best 19Ks in the Army. Occupying any position within the MGS platoon requires absolute competence, self-motivation, and a desire to be the best. MGS platoons are pushed far beyond the limit of conventional 19K units and must be the best mounted maneuver warfare experts in the Army. Considering the caliber of soldier needed in the MGS platoons, 1-23 IN has procured Ranger School slots for any 19K, E-4 or above. MGS soldiers lead the way for the IBCT and the future of the Army.

A paradigm shift in "tanking" is occurring and needs to occur in MGS platoons. Clinging to past ways of tanking, which involved only limited close fighting, and generally away from urban environments, may be dangerous, as evidenced by several historical battles. Each time — in Aachen, Hue, Suez City, and Panama, for example — the Army learned at great price how to

This Centauro is being used as a command and control vehicle during an M1A1 gunnery.



integrate infantry and tanks into battles, and in each case, tankers and infantrymen had to rediscover how to fight because of old training paradigms. Tankers in the IBCT must continue to reach beyond MOS stereotypes. MGS platoon leaders must train their commanders on the capabilities and limitations of the MGS and “tankers” must abandon their traditional ways of “tanking,” think outside the box, and get into the fight.

19K Personnel Issues

Fort Lewis had two active armor units. One unit, 1-32 AR, was reclassified as 1-14 Cavalry, the new Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition (RSTA) Squadron, and turned in their tanks. The other armor unit is 1-33 AR, which still has M1A1 Abrams tanks. Since maintenance costs are so great with heavy tanks, it's impossible to cross train 1-23 IN MGS 19Ks on 1-33 Armor's tanks. So, 19K training — specifically on M1A1-series tanks — is extremely limited. Questions regarding sustainment training have been raised, but once again, budget and resources cause a shortfall in M1A1 tank training for young soldiers, and this means they do not get to do what they signed up for. Also, the limited focus on “tanking” reduces reenlistment numbers. Young soldiers want to shoot tanks and be tankers, but IBCT units are ill equipped to handle the costs associated with tanking.

More importantly, senior E-5s or E-6s who are approaching promotable status and need points for promotion require a good NCOER evaluated fairly with the rest of the 19Ks. E-5s and E-6s will not shoot gunnery for at least two years here at Fort Lewis, so there are no gunnery scores in their NCOERs. Also, the tasks asked of platoon NCO leaders in this unit are significantly different than those asked of tank platoon leaders. MGS NCOs are asked to lead infantry fire teams through room clearing, and rifle squads through street clearing. Gunnery and tank commanders have to become small arms masters because they are asked to NCOIC small arms static ranges and act as range safety officers (RSO) during live fire infantry

maneuver ranges. Our 19K NCOs are leader-certified in infantry demolition breaches, infantry MOU maneuver tactics, and dismounted infantry patrolling. The 19Ks in 1-23 IN have gone to Ranger School and new ones are encouraged to attend. Ultimately, 19Ks in MGS units have a broader skill set and greater responsibility than the average tank platoon NCO, and Armor Branch needs to recognize that and reward them through the NCOER process.

Currently, most 19K NCOs and soldiers are offered the choice of staying or going to another tank unit. Many chose to stay here for the challenges this unit offers tankers, and then discovered they would have to learn and adapt to infantry ways while abandoning tanker ways. Whatever the interpretation, some soldiers were unfairly assigned and are excelling regardless. Armor Branch should recognize the sacrifice these soldiers make and reward them for their dedication to country and mission.

The CSM of the Armor Branch recently visited Fort Lewis and spoke with the senior NCO leadership of MGS platoons, many of whom felt that Armor Branch was leaving the 19Ks to the infantry wolves. But in fairness to the infantry, they are trying incredibly hard to accommodate the MGS platoons and facilitate 19K professional development, although they are not yet equipped to support 19K development.

NCOs and soldiers need Armor Branch support. Armor Branch can get involved in training aspects by obtaining resources for MGS platoons. Branch command emphasis in MTOE development can provide 1-23 IN and other IBCT units with MCOFTs, UCOFTs, or other resources that will enhance 19K sustainment training. Also, Armor Branch should evaluate current MGS doctrine and suggest or begin to develop the training skills needed for follow-on tank units that are slotted for transformation. Utilizing a gunnery scenario, Armor Branch needs to tell IBCT units that they must provide a TCGST once yearly, CCTT training at Fort Knox once yearly, and perhaps shoot a gunnery once yearly. Right

now, the infantry budget — based on a light (11B) unit — is too small to accommodate that kind of training. If the Armor Branch demanded certain 19K sustainment tasks, then the infantry, IBCT units, would have to budget for them, and this would set 19K soldiers up for success in their next unit, while improving the reenlistment situation.

Ultimately, Armor Branch should demonstrate more concern for MGS soldiers. Young IBCT soldiers are learning more about leadership and possess more combat skills than their tank platoon counterparts. The IBCT produces extremely physically fit armor soldiers who understand mission and initiative within an intent. Armor Branch cannot allow these soldiers to be left behind; they deserve more involvement and better support from the branch they are honored to serve.

Summary

1-23 IN is the “Tip of the Spear” for the IBCT and Objective Force 2030 Concept. 1-23 IN is training at an exceptionally high OPTEMPO to establish doctrine and prepare soldiers for urban warfare. Individual companies are thinking outside the box and truly executing the combined arms fight. MGS platoons are leading the transformation from conventional warfighting to true combined arms integration — “Fighting As One.” During the transformation process, 19K soldiers are enthusiastic and professional and set the example for the Army and the Armor community. Maintaining training focus and developing doctrine will only continue if 19K soldiers get the support they need from the Armor Branch.

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