

Mortar Support In the Korean Defile

by First Lieutenant Brian Pedersen

“Never depend completely on the strength of the terrain and consequently never be enticed into passive defense by a strong terrain.”

-General Carl von Clausewitz

Providing mortar support for an armor task force on today's fast-paced battlefield is a very difficult mission. The mission gets more complicated when fighting in defiles¹ such as in the restricted terrain of Korea. There, providing mortar support requires a high degree of coordination and a flexible tactical approach to provide effective responsive or preemptive fires.

This article will explain how 2-72 Armor, the Dragon Force, evaluated the unique conditions of warfare on the Korean peninsula using METT-T analysis and formulated a plan to better use the mortar platoon to support the task force in the defile.

METT-T Analysis

Maybe the most important mission that a tank-heavy task force could execute in a war in Korea is to counterattack against an nKPA hasty defense. Focusing on the offense — for example a movement to contact — will exemplify the greatest need for flexibility in tactics and the modification of doctrine. In our unit, this first offensive engagement is the ‘attack from the march.’ The task force, presumably in its 7.5 km long column,² makes contact with the enemy at the entrance to a defile, attacks to gain a foothold within the defile, then fights through to exit the defile, and either establishes a defense or reinforces its success and maintains its momentum.

The North Korean threat that an armor task force could expect in the de-

file would consist of some of the following forces and weapons systems: VTT-323s, T-55s, T-62s, light amphibious tanks, truck-mobile infantry units, dismounted RPG and antitank weapon teams, artillery groups of various sizes, and SOF teams. An important fact to remember is that the North Koreans do not have any thermal sight capabilities for their tank and antitank weapon systems and precious few night-fighting systems and observation devices.

The armor task force has six organic 120mm track-mounted heavy mortar systems, with a maximum effective range of about 7000m. The tracks are manned by approximately 35 soldiers (MOS 11C). The most important planning factors to consider in this area are survivability³ and required supply rate.⁴

Restrictive terrain is what makes Korea such a difficult place in which to fight and, in executing tactics, is at least as large a factor as enemy or friendly troop dispositions. Mountainous terrain dominates the Korean peninsula, with fewer and fewer trafficable roads toward the north. Mobility corridors are often reduced to a single-lane road, and battlesight ranges drop to less than 400m for the M1A1 tank. Numerous rivers and streams, combined with sprawling urbanization and swamp-like rice paddies, make the terrain difficult to impassable during the rainy season and canalizing during most other times. The broken, mountainous topography helps the enemy find keyhole⁵ positions to counter the superior technology of allied weapons systems.

Evaluating time is the most difficult planning factor for warfare in Korea. Time works against the armored task force attacking into the defile. The faster it can muster its forces and mount an attack, the less time the defenders have to counter the technologi-

cal advantages of the Abrams- and Bradley-equipped task force. In an artillery-dominated army such as the nKPA, the counter they hope to employ against us is indirect fire. Our speed in execution prevents them from accurately and effectively employing it. The paradox here is that the longer the task force has to prepare for its attack, the more combined arms assets it can employ, and the better coordination it can make for the conduct of operations. Finding the best balance between preparation and violent execution is the trick.

Building a Plan

Using these assessments, as well as other considerations, the Dragon Force formulated a method for maximizing the indirect fire support it receives from its mortar platoon. The plan first takes into account the terrain and its movement constraints on the task force. With the task force in column on a single lane road, the mortar platoon might never be in range to provide supporting fires if it is placed too far back in the road march order, so the mortars move immediately behind the lead company of the task force. To account for the mortars' logistical requirements, the mortar platoon's Class V follows closely behind the trail section, and prepositioned ammunition stores are used if possible. For survivability, the mortars will operate in split section. Despite their separation, both sections will be able to quickly mass as a platoon on targets along the length of the defile, due to the defile's narrowness. Next, taking into account the enemy's lack of thermal capability, the mortars utilize an equal number of smoke (WP) and HE in order to blind the enemy in the defile. To increase responsiveness, all potential keyhole positions will be

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templated within the defile. As the lead elements of the task force (scouts or combat patrol) move toward these keyhole positions, the commander determines whether to fire smoke, HE, or allow the tanks to clear with direct fire. The normal procedure is for the mortars to suppress all likely keyhole positions sequentially in front of the lead tank. Using bounding sections will allow coverage of all priority targets continuously.

At the point in the entrance battle⁶ when the scouts or combat patrol have found the enemy element they need to destroy in order to gain a foothold into the defile, they send a code word call over the task force net. This code word call gives the composition and location of the enemy force and is the task force priority target. All mortar tubes at this time will converge on this target, suppressing and smoking it until it can be engaged by direct fire. If bounding to a new firing position when this call for fire comes, a section will conduct a ‘hipshot’⁷ and converge its fires with the stationary section onto the enemy location.

Throughout the defile battle, the mortars must remain flexible, as they may be required to provide support for the scouts, the combat patrol, the lead company/team of the task force, the breach company/team, the assault company/team, or the reserve company/team. They might be required to suppress dismounts, disrupt lightly armored vehicle formations, smoke enemy tanks or antitank assets, or smoke suspected enemy observation points or keyhole positions.

Once the task force has its foothold in the defile, the lead team continues to move through the center of the defile. Enemy antitank ambush will be the primary targets of the mortar platoon. The mortars will conduct the ‘hipshot’ and converge platoon fires onto known enemy positions, keyhole positions, and observation points, attempting to blind, confuse, and destroy the enemy in place while the breach team conducts its breach.

The final element in the attack through the defile is the exit battle.⁸ This is the point where the enemy will have both depth and width since he is no longer in the defile, while the task force will have a minimum frontage. For the mortars, this is possibly the most critical point in the battle. The lead element of the task force once again will determine the enemy element it must destroy in order to exit the defile. The code word call again goes out on the task force net, where the mortars immediately converge with smoke and HE onto this enemy position. However, once the direct fire weapon systems have converged on the enemy, the mortars must shift with smoke onto each successive enemy element in order for the maneuvering teams to bypass the fixing team (the lead element) and destroy the remaining enemy elements. Once all friendly elements have exited the defile and suppressed/destroyed all remaining opposition, the task force will set into an L-shaped ambush, in anticipation of a counterattack, and consolidate/reorganize.

Summary

This scenario is just one of many ways to approach the unique problems of fighting in the Korean defile. It represents a methodology that can be taught rapidly, utilizes commonly trained combat skills, and embraces current doctrine while introducing some innovative ideas to approach combat situations in Korea.

Notes

¹In restrictive terrain, an area in which the mobility corridor can be reduced to a single lane the width of one vehicle and engagement ranges are under 400m.

²Due to terrain and infrastructure constraints in Korea, most task force-level movements will be tactical road marches in closed column, the length of which is 7.5 km.

³The carrier is from the M113 family of vehicles, lightly armored, and armed with a .50 cal MG.

⁴The M1064A3 carrier (120mm) carries only 69 rounds.

⁵A position in which the defender cannot be seen until after the enemy passes in front of him and presents his flank; usually gives defender only a 3-6 second window of opportunity to fire.

⁶There are three parts to the defile battle: Entrance battle, center battle, and exit battle. The entrance begins with the task force scouts making contact at the entrance to the defile. They will call for indirect fire and then hand off the battle to the combat patrol of the lead company/team.

⁷Mortar firing technique in which a track is aligned on a direction of fire using a hand-held compass rather than a ground-mounted aiming circle; advantage is a firing time standard of two minutes; the drawback is accuracy of initial fire for effect.

⁸The exit battle begins once the breach company/team has cleared the obstacle for the task force. At this point, the lead element in the defile calls for heavy smoke to mask its departure from the defile. Once he has contact with the enemy element, which he needs to destroy to clear the defile, he will call smoke and suppressive fires onto that position. The assault element will attempt to flank the enemy and make space for the rest of the task force to clear the defile and enter the fight.

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