

Team Blade and Survivability Management

by Captain Pete Huie

As the task force began to consolidate on the objective, LTC Stone surveyed the broad expanse of land in front of him. Thirty minutes earlier, remnants of an enemy mechanized infantry company had retreated across this terrain. The task force commander knew they would return in the form of a brigade-sized counterattack, probably in less than 36 hours. To his right and left the land was void of any relief, with not even the slightest undulation. He'd need the support of the attached engineer company, or his task force would have no choice but to fight from above ground.

The good news was that the three surviving M9 Armored Combat Earthmovers (ACE) from his assault force were now beginning to scratch out fighting positions for his main effort. A fourth ACE had been damaged as it proofed a breach lane during the earlier attack. The remainder of the engineer company's ACEs were racing up to the battle position to begin digging in his company teams. These ACEs would help, but much of his task force would still be above ground when the enemy brigade counterattacked. The task force – and ultimately, the brigade's defense – would depend upon the successful execution of the engineer battalion's Team Blade.

During home station training and the most recent National Training Center rotation, the brigade had successfully adopted the Team Blade concept. However, this would be its first use with a full brigade and in combat.

Team Blade is a consolidation of all blade assets within the brigade, designed to rapidly construct both vehicle and dismounted fighting positions. The concept was developed in response to decreasing maintenance assets within mechanized engineer battalions and in an effort to streamline command and control of the brigade survivability mission. Team Blade is formed during the defense from organic and attached blade assets. The alternative was to use the ACEs in attached engineer companies to dig in their supported task force. This was a slower process, especially as ACEs experienced mechanical problems and the company's mechanics were unable to fix them with their minimal assets. Through the use of a forward unit maintenance collection point (UMCP) under control of Team Blade, the battalion's engineer mechanics are



able to provide immediate organizational and direct support to all blade assets.

As LTC Stone and his company team commanders conducted a reconnaissance of the engagement area, Team Blade began to consolidate behind his battle position. Consisting of the battalion's 21 M9 ACEs, 6 SEE tractors, attached D7/D8 bulldozers from the corps Combat Support Equipment Company or Combat Heavy engineer battalion, M88 recovery vehicle, the battalion shop equipment truck and welding trailer, and command and control vehicles, Team Blade provides the brigade combat team (BCT) a means to rapidly and efficiently prepare its defense. Led by the engineer HHC commander, the team establishes its UMCP Forward two to three kilometers behind the task force battle position. The Assault and Obstacle Platoon Leader (PL) from the engineer company supporting the task force in sector, controls the blades on and between company positions and serves as the point of contact for the company team commanders. While the UMCP Forward is being established (Figure 1), the attached bulldozers are brought forward, and the A&O PL moves to contact points on the task force boundaries to link up the remainder of the engineer battalion's ACE and SEE fleet. The task force has tasked a section of tanks to provide security for the lightly armed convoy.

Using the UMCP Forward as a rally point, the battalion's blades are consolidated and moved to the first company team battle position. By this point, the TF

engineer and TF commander have established a survivability timeline based on the brigade's timeline and guidance. The brigade order may also establish a priority of missions and vehicle fighting position standards. From this, the task force commander knows if blades can be used in his countermobility planning and the types of positions he has time to prepare. In this case, the BCT commander has directed that Team Blade be used for survivability only, and task forces will be limited to hull-down positions or modified two-tier positions. The brigade engineer has determined that there is not sufficient time to prepare turret-down positions. This guidance serves to prioritize the survivability effort and efficiently use the blade hours allocated to the task force. LTC Stone has tasked his operations sergeant major with the mission of enforcing the timeline. Other task forces in the BCT use their CSM or master gunner to accomplish this mission. The A&O PL performs the same mission for his battalion commander. The A&O PL moves his blades to the contact point behind the first company battle position and links up with the company executive officer. Before the engineers' arrival, the XO has ensured that the corners of all proposed vehicle fighting positions have been marked with long pickets and that vehicles are available to proof the positions as they are completed. The tank commander for each vehicle is also available to supervise the construction of the position he will fight from and to guide the incoming blade teams to the proposed position.

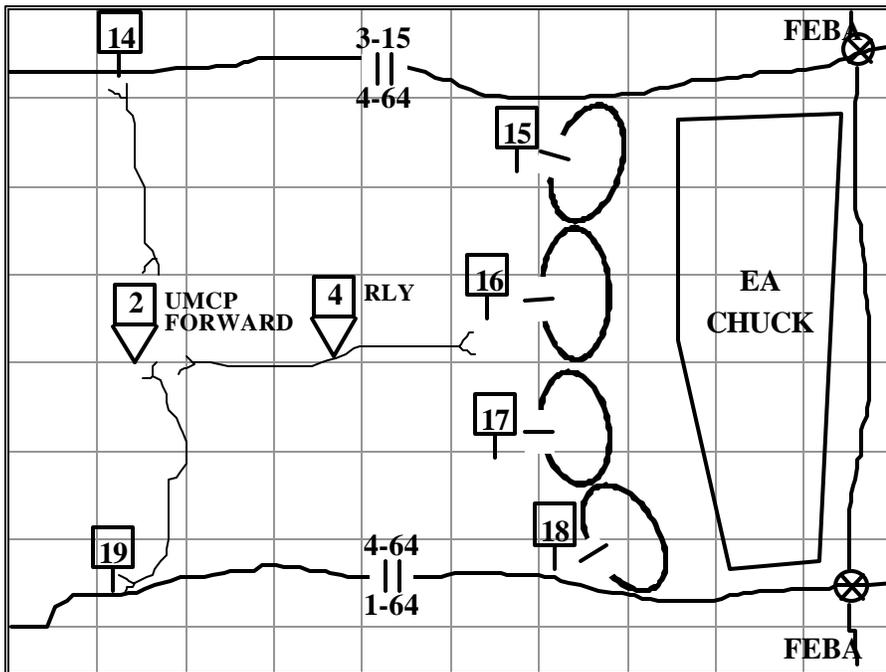


Figure 1. TF 4-64, the center TF in the BCT defense, with Team Blade graphic control measures

As the blades enter the company battle position, the A&O PL releases the SEEs to the infantry platoon leader to construct his dismounted fighting positions. If the company is armor pure and does not require individual fighting positions, the SEEs are moved to the next company team that does. The infantry PL understands the task force survivability timeline and a linkup time is agreed upon before the SEEs are released. The blade teams are assigned to the marked positions and digging begins. The A&O PL remains on the battle position to supervise the dig effort. He is responsible for the correct use of the blade assets, the conduct of hourly maintenance by his crews, survivability and maintenance status reporting, and adherence to the brigade and task force survivability timelines. His platoon sergeant performs these functions in his absence and is also responsible for feeding the crews on the battle position and escorting damaged vehicles back to the UMCP Forward. The Team Blade commander will typically escort a repaired vehicle from the UMCP Forward back to the dig site. The Team Blade commander is also responsible for all logistical support to the team. This includes feeding, fueling, fixing, and moving the team. The task force may be required to supplement this support, especially with fuel. The ACE requires fuel every five to six hours when digging, and this can stretch the capabilities of the engineer battalion's support platoon.

Paramount to the success of the team is the maintenance section. Organized with the battalion's engineer mechanics, a welder, at least one direct support me-

chanic, and maintenance team chief, the maintenance team uses one of the two M88 recovery vehicles in the battalion, the only battalion shop equipment truck and welding trailer, and one or two AVLB bridges as maintenance platforms. In some cases, the battalion will push forward an ULLS computer and clerk and a larger PLL inventory to better sustain the team. Even under the best of conditions, one or more M9 ACEs will be found in the UMCP forward. Designed as a breaching vehicle capable of keeping pace with the M1 and M2, the ACE requires constant maintenance attention when digging. As it was not designed to dig, this type of work places tremendous pressure on the vehicle's hydraulic and suspension system. ACE operators must actually stop digging and perform a series of preventive checks on the vehicle once an hour. Separate engineer company maintenance teams are not capable of providing this attention with the limited assets they have available. Separate engineer company dig efforts lead to higher deadline rates among the ACEs and thus slower completion time for company team defensive positions. A mechanized engineer battalion simply does not have the organic maintenance personnel, recovery assets, or specialized equipment to support three separate, simultaneous survivability missions.

As LTC Stone and his commanders return from their reconnaissance, his staff informs him that the survivability effort is now 25 percent complete. With three ACEs deadlined at the UMCP Forward, Team Dig has 18 ACEs and four attached D7 bulldozers operational. These vehicles

have been paired up to create blade teams. While one vehicle digs the fighting position, the other spreads the spoil across the battle position to prevent the fighting position from being easily spotted.

As the blade teams dig, enemy artillery begins to impact less than three hundred meters to the front of the BP. Following a rehearsed battle drill, the blades occupy positions that are deep enough to cover them, and the rest move to a rally point designated by the A&O PL. In this case, he has chosen a point halfway between the BP and the UMCP Forward. If an enemy attack is imminent, all blades will withdraw to the rally point. Despite the massing of the brigade's blade assets on one BP, there is not a significant risk of the team being destroyed in a single artillery attack. With vehicle fighting positions spread across the BP, blade teams are never closer than a hundred meters from one another and in most cases they are at least two hundred meters apart.

With the first company's battle position complete, the A&O PL moves his team to the next company contact point and the process begins again. Hours later, as the task force's survivability window comes to a close, Team Blade moves to the contact point at the task force boundary. Under the watchful eyes of the tank section providing security, the team is met by the CSM of the new task force and the Assault and Obstacle PL from the engineer company in sector.

LTC Stone again surveys his battle position. With vehicles, dismounts, and ammunition caches dug in, he is able to focus on the destruction of the coming counterattack. In the engagement area to his front, sappers continue to emplace obstacles. His company team commanders rehearse the occupation of their newly constructed fighting positions. Team Blade has been a success.

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