

# Platoon Leadership in the Offense

## Recognizing the Line Between Actions on Contact and Maneuver

by Captain Celestino Perez

In preparing platoons for mounted field training, trainers usually place importance on a platoon's ability to approach battlefield problems in terms of the seven forms of contact. Platoon leaders have learned that for each form of contact there exists a platoon battle drill. But there is danger in assuming that battle drills can always provide a sufficient response to enemy contact, particularly direct-fire contact.

My argument is that the defining responsibility of the tank platoon is not the battle drill, but instead closing with and destroying the enemy through maneuver. Furthermore, the relations between battle drills, actions on contact, and maneuver can benefit from some study. One way to reach clarity about these matters is to train companies and platoons to establish a phase line (or a probable line of deployment) that, when crossed, will cause leaders to think no longer in terms of movement formations and battle drills (namely action and contact drills), but maneuver.

Some discussion of maneuver is necessary. The recent material on maneuver is illuminating. My first exposure to the topic was a videotaped presentation entitled "Red Zone Brief," given by then-COL James Grazioplene, former chief of the Operations Group at the National Training Center. This tape was followed by an article from the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), entitled "Black 6, this is Red 6...Contact..." The article, written in two parts, can be found in *CTC QB No. 96-10*. This article was followed by a CALL Special Study entitled "Closing with the Enemy — Company Team Maneuver" (March 1998). Any armor or mechanized-infantry leader who has not become familiar with these materials owes it to his unit to do so.

In fact, Army doctrine has been a Johnny Come Lately to the importance of maneuver, at least in its publications. COL Grazioplene explained during his briefing that even the Army's doctrinal material was sorely deficient on the subject. I have found that since his lecture, the revised company-level doctrine (*FM 71-1*, 1998, and *ARTEP 71-*



Photo by Greg Stewart

*1-MTP, Final Draft* 1998) grants a central role to maneuver in the offense, as does the latest edition of *FM 17-15* (April 1996).

A summary of CALL's approach to maneuver is in order. To know maneuver is to understand that, in order to close with and destroy the enemy, forces must enter the enemy's battlespace not in formations, but using the bounding overwatch technique. Upon receiving fire, the overwatch element shifts into the suppression mode. The transition from bounding overwatch to suppression marks the transition from movement to maneuver.

In the offense, this applies not only to the destruction of the enemy's main effort, but it applies (arguably more so) to the destruction of such elements as single anti-tank positions arrayed in depth. The aim is not to run into the enemy's force, even a single anti-tank position, without proper overwatch and suppression, so that entire companies and task forces are not destroyed by what should be a negligible force.

### Contact and Action Drills Prior to the PLD

It is my contention that those instances when the use of contact and action drills are necessary are fewer than commonly thought. Prior to crossing a probable line of deployment, no direct-fire contact is expected. That is because the combined efforts of the task force S2, commanders, and pla-

toon leaders have capably conducted their intelligence preparation and determined that no direct-fire contact should be expected until the unit reaches the PLD. Since our business does not entail ideal conditions, contact and action drills, along with tactical formations, do serve their purpose. A formation is meant to enable the fastest movement possible toward the PLD, all the while recognizing the minimal threat of direct-fire contact. Indeed, if a platoon encounters direct-fire contact, e.g., a single AT system in the hills, then all soldiers in the unit — from the loader on D22 to the task force commander — should be properly surprised. After all, the unit is receiving direct-fire contact earlier than expected. A properly chosen formation enables a unit to respond satisfactorily to such surprises with an established weapons orientation. And, depending on the situation, a battle drill might be in order, which would fulfill the first step of actions on contact, i.e., return fire.

The battle drill deserves closer attention. Battle drills enable a platoon to react "when contact is made with small arms fire or when the platoon sights the enemy without being engaged and does not want to stop or slow its movement" (*FM 17-15*, p. 3-33). I contend this enemy situation — and hence the need for the contact drill — will seldom arise prior to the PLD. No rational, lone machine-gunner would engage even one tank with small-arms fire. Furthermore, the enemy holding the machine

gun, after observing an approaching formation of tanks, would most likely remain hidden and call for indirect fire. Since the contact drill allows the platoon to “engage the enemy without changing its direction or speed of movement along an axis of advance,” the platoon would best be advised to either destroy the machine-gunner by using maneuver or maintain contact until handing off the target to another unit. In either case, the platoon leader who continues to move without altering direction or speed should be fired.

The action drill, as distinguished from the contact drill, is more useful, but it is seldom employed effectively. Upon enemy contact, the action drill is meant to “orient the...platoon’s frontal armor toward the antitank fire while moving to cover and concealment. If the platoon cannot reach a covered and concealed position or achieve weapon standoff, the platoon leader directs the platoon to assault the enemy” (*FM 17-15*, p. 3-36). For this condition to arise, the IPB of the S2, the commander, and the platoon leader must have failed, since it did not correctly depict the enemy’s main or forward-deployed battlespace. Sadly, this scenario occurs fairly regularly at the National Training Center. To make matters worse, the action drill, which should have worked, fails for two reasons. Either the platoon leader failed, in his map reconnaissance or while on the move, to orient sectors of observation towards danger areas where an antitank system might lurk, or a crewman failed to observe his sector. The antitank gunner will be able to fire off two or three rounds without being detected, inevitably finding grille doors. And the antitank gunner’s work is just beginning, because the possibility of his destroying an entire company team or task force is likely.

For this reason, it is critical that the PLD be accurate and a soldier’s concern for 360-degree security become instinctive. I stated earlier that the action drill is seldom employed because, in order for the drill to occur, someone must locate the antitank system in order to orient his platoon’s frontal armor in its direction. But few platoons seem able to determine the general direction from which the fires come. Also, assuming the enemy system is found, one also has to assume it is not alone. Just as we try to establish a tactical “L” to force the enemy to fight in two directions, so does the enemy. If a platoon or — what is more likely — an entire company conducts an action drill, all

eyes (that is, those of every TC, gunner, loader, and driver in the company) will be on the supposed location of the antitank system. With all eyes on the menacing system, a second antitank system will undoubtedly exploit the company’s failure to maintain 360-degree security and will commence the slaughter. The upshot is that if the action drill is necessary prior to the PLD, we are in bad shape. So, our objective must be to minimize the instances when action drills prior to the PLD are necessary and focus on those things (IPB, security, sector discipline) that will negate the chance of a pre-PLD slaughter.

### **Contact and Action Drills After the PLD**

The use of a contact drill after the PLD is unlikely for the same reasons as prior to crossing the PLD. That is, few rational machine-gunners would take on a tank, and no rational platoon leader would bypass even an unarmed enemy without orders, for even this enemy has the ability to report or call for indirect fire. In most instances, the use of the action drill after the PLD is both unnecessary and inadvisable because the platoon will be conducting either bounding overwatch or maneuver, both of which require the element to provide 360-degree security for a moving element with the ability to fire upon every single area from which an antitank system might fire. The proper response to enemy contact, which is now expected since the platoon has crossed the PLD, is to issue a fire command and recommend a course of action, all the while maintaining 360-degree security to avoid a successful L-shaped ambush or main defense. The platoon leader who proceeds after crossing the PLD must expect contact at every minute and perhaps be a little disappointed when it has not yet appeared.

One instance, however, that might require an action drill is if a platoon is engaged from an area that is covered only by visual scanning. In this instance, it might be advisable to conduct an action drill to orient the platoon’s frontal slopes toward the enemy. However, a better trained platoon might instead suppress the offending enemy with one or two tanks. This course of action would decrease the possibility of an L-shaped ambush by not requiring all four tanks to re-orient frontal armor in unison, thus leaving the maneuver element holding the bag without overwatch or suppression.

### **Maneuver**

Once units cross the PLD, formations cease and set-move drills begin in the form of bounding overwatch. To begin with, if task force commanders heed the Red Zone Brief, they will never order company teams to execute bounding overwatch with another company (i.e., Alpha Team set, Bravo Company bound) because from such a scheme it is geometrically impossible for one company to provide effective overwatch for another. Since our company commander is not doing a set-move drill with another company, he has options. He can array his platoons so all are conducting set-move drills within the platoon (Alpha section set, Bravo bound), or he may elect to have two platoons conducting set-move drills with each other (Red set, Blue bound) while one platoon is kept back to respond to contact as an enveloping force. Furthermore, the commander can give or withhold from his platoon leaders whether to bound by sections. Regardless of the levels at which bounding overwatch is occurring, all overwatch elements must realize that they are their partner’s keeper. That is, a section or platoon that is providing overwatch must not allow the bounding element to take direct fire and suffer loss. The Grazioplene approach was to assign a grade to the overwatching element’s performance. An “A” goes to the overwatch element whose partner proceeds unscathed. An “F” goes to the overwatch element whose partner loses two vehicles.

The platoon leader and commander at this point should no longer be thinking in terms of contact and action drills to react to surprise conditions (which is the case prior to the PLD), but of overwatch. His section or platoon will be either the beneficiary of an overwatch or will be the element overwatching. During the overwatch, the platoon leader must think about the next phase of the offensive engagement, which is the transitional event that will trigger actions on contact and, as soon as a course of action is set, maneuver. This transitional event is the first (and expected) direct-fire enemy contact.

Stated differently, once an overwatch element fires a round in order to maintain its “A” average in relation to the bounding element, actions on contact have begun. We are now in an adventure that will at some point lead to the execution of a course of action. Once actions on contact lead to a course of

action, all lessons on maneuver will have ensured that the foremost thought in leaders' heads should be the race to establish the "L," i.e., a course of action that will cause the enemy to fight in two directions. This concept is nothing new. A familiar quotation from Patton's *War As I Knew It* states:

*Whenever possible, beginning with the squad, use a base of fire and maneuvering element. The maneuvering element should be the larger of the two forces, and should start its attack well back from the point of contact of the base of fire. The attacking force must proceed sufficiently far beyond the hostile flank to attack from the rear. As soon as the enveloping attack, or better the rear attack, has progressed sufficiently to cause the enemy to react, the base of fire transforms itself into a direct attack along the original axis of advance.*

In summary, prior to the PLD, formations are the proper approach, along with the necessity of thinking in terms of contact and action drills (although those are unlikely if good IPB and 360-degree security occur). After crossing the PLD, the unit shifts from formations to bounding overwatch, during which time platoon leaders must eagerly anticipate that first contact which will initiate actions on contact. The ideal result of actions on contact should be a course of action that uses maneuver, i.e., set-move drills, to establish an "L".

### **What Might a Platoon Leader Be Asked To Do?**

Sometime during the race to develop an L, the platoon leader and commander will have to close with and destroy the enemy. Ask a platoon leader to imagine his role in the destruction of the enemy. Chances are he probably envisions an assault, whereby his or his buddy's platoon, with tanks on line, charges across the objective with guns blazing in an attempt to run over the enemy. I believe the literature on maneuver should do much to dispel this notion. Indeed, not only should most offensive engagements *not* end with a platoon-level assault, very few should. The reason is that maneuver enables us to find, fix, and destroy the enemy by attacking him from two directions without having to run him over.

I should like to emphasize the options available to the platoon during an offensive engagement while conducting

maneuver. Depending on the mission, a platoon may be asked:

- To destroy the enemy by maneuver (as described above) through set-move drills by section or crew
- Conduct a support by fire (SBF) with all four tanks for another maneuver element
- Assault (on line) as part of the company assault or by itself (with or without overwatch/SBF)
- Conduct an assault in column (non-doctrinal, but useful) to penetrate the enemy's defense or bypass enemy contact
- Conduct an attack by fire.

A good discussion awaits those leaders who sit down to determine those conditions that merit one of the five options more than the others. Nevertheless, it is the company team commander's responsibility to assign his platoons their tasks (hence the emphasis on the use of doctrinally correct terms), while recognizing the need to maintain flexibility and perspective in the planning and execution phase of the engagement. Just as COL Grazioplene described that the ideal graphic for a company team in the offense is the simple axis of advance (i.e., not a series of SBF graphics), so should the company team commander structure his plan to accommodate simple fragmentary orders and flexibility.

His plan must be simple. There is a notion that the loss of communication equates to a loss of control, and a loss of control equates to the loss of command. I do not know whether I agree. I shall posit, albeit not insistently, that a commander must make his plan with the assumption that communication will diminish as a mission continues. In fact, there are some who write, and experience confirms, that in many instances once an engagement is joined, a commander will be able to affect the battle not by constant decisions based on near-perfect or good information, but at only a few points with partial information. For instance, with training, he may be able to order effectively the shifting of his main effort (perhaps by moving his tank to the front of a platoon, which has become the new main effort) or a change to the company team's mission (shouted repeatedly, to be sure, in bits and pieces into his helmet until all acknowledge). The commander's job is most important during the designation and shifting of the main effort and the writing and de-

livery of his operations order, during which he can expect to get as much communication and control as he is ever going to get.

One method that facilitates simple plans is the company SOP, which determines the spatial relations between the platoons, and company "plays" that establish those platoons that will set, those platoons that will envelop, and the spatial relations between these actions.

### **Support By Fire**

The task of support by fire deserves some attention. The Red Zone Brief did everyone a service by teaching that the SBF force, prior to the friendly maneuvering element's getting into the picture, must have some enemy force as a partner. In other words, an element cannot be in a support by fire until enemy vehicles are in a gunner's reticle. Otherwise, the platoon or company given the support-by-fire mission, despite the mission statement, remains in a *de facto* movement to contact.

A couple of implications arise. First, a company team commander or platoon leader given the task of establishing a support by fire must ask the following: Sir, suppose I get to the general location of the SBF intent graphic and I find it an adequate place from which to support, but there is no enemy — do I have permission to continue until I encounter enemy, even if I must move two, or five, or ten kilometers farther? The answer will certainly depend upon, among other things, whether the objective relates to an enemy- or terrain-based mission. For example, it may be determined that the objective in question is a good place from which to provide the task force with security during refueling operations, a necessity that may or may not have been determined prior to crossing the line of departure. Since the element given the SBF task determines that the maneuvering force is not necessary to secure the objective, the SBF task transitions to an overwatch task while the original maneuver force occupies the objective to protect the refueling operation.

Another option is that the original SBF element occupy the objective and provide the requisite security while the original maneuver force does something else. The point is not to issue or accept the SBF task without putting to rest any lingering doubts in the precise meaning of the leader's intent.

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The second implication that arises is whether the SBF element is allowed to establish an "L" during the execution of the SBF task. The company team commander may ask: Sir, if my platoon gets to the general location of the SBF intent graphic and I find it an adequate place from which to support, and I encounter enemy — do I have permission to maneuver (remember, set-move drills to establish an "L") in the general location of my SBF position until the maneuvering force arrives? Furthermore, may I recommend that I destroy the enemy with company-level maneuver if I discover the enemy is not as robust as we think it is now? The point here is to envision units executing support by fire while not in a straight line. Leaders in SBF must be able to take the initiative and recommend limited maneuver to better support the maneuver force or, perhaps, to proceed with closing with and destroying the enemy on his own, thereby relieving the original maneuver force of its mission.

## **Conclusion**

The preceding comments are meant to raise interest in the employment of company teams in the offense. Although I have written nothing that is above argument, I do insist that discussions on such topics as battle drills, actions on contact, and maneuver will be fruitful and will help clarify questions and stir imagination, particularly in the methods by which we train platoons and companies. I also contend that those training techniques that bring to the forefront the criticality of intelligence preparation and maneuver will pay enormous dividends. To be sure, dismounted training enables leaders to complete their brain-work and soldiers to hone proper habits prior to the first mounting of a tank.

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