

Clearing the Defile: A Doctrinal Discussion

by Captain John W. Miller III

SSG Hughes did not like what he was seeing. His infantry squad was pinned down, and he no longer had communications with the vehicles. The enemy small arms fire that kept his element suppressed was the least of SSG Hughes's worries. The BMP overwatching the trail was his biggest concern because he had no way to warn the approaching Bradleys of the danger — the company had changed frequencies and the RTO didn't have the new one. One more time, SSG Hughes swore at his element for leaving the antiarmor weapons on the Bradleys. If they had their Dragons, or even the AT-4s, that BMP would not be a threat to the rest of his platoon. His thoughts of improving the PCIs and rehearsals were interrupted by the all-too-familiar sound of an M-2 moving deeper into the defile and the sight of the BMP as it opened fire...

This event has not occurred in combat yet, but it does occur monthly at the National Training Center. Operational results indicate that there is a lack of understanding throughout the Army about how to execute this mission. This article provides the company/team commander with tactics, techniques, and procedures to successfully attack a defile defended by an enemy force. It is not the only way to accomplish this mission, but it will serve as a primer until you develop tactics and techniques you are comfortable with.

Defiles and their impact on company/team operations are often ignored unless the commander conducts a thorough mission analysis. Once this analysis is complete, and the commander determines he has the mission to clear a defile, he must accomplish several steps prior to crossing the line of departure. The first of these is the analysis of the situation.

Analyze the Situation

Few leaders would argue the importance of an intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) when planning an operation. An equal number will also tell you there is not enough time to do everything required. It does take time to do a detailed IPB, but it is time well spent. With practice and the use of field manuals, you can complete your analysis fairly quickly. Focus your effort on the terrain, weather, and enemy, emphasizing their effects on the operation.

Terrain and Weather

The defile drill is required because terrain has so limited your actions that you must completely change movement formations, techniques, battle drills — virtually all aspects of how you plan to fight. It only makes sense that a mission so dominated by terrain would focus on terrain analysis. When conducting your analysis, focus on the military aspects of terrain by using OCOKA, considering these things that are unique to defiles.

Observation and fields of fire favor the enemy. You must neutralize this advantage.

- Identify deadspace where the enemy cannot see or engage you with direct fire.
- Template overwatch positions where you can place forces to support maneuver (this is critical because reaction time is decreased and our weapons standoff is nullified in the defile).

Cover and concealment

- Cover and concealment are normally abundant for infantry but scarce for trail bound vehicles.



- Lack of vehicle cover makes them excellent ATGM targets.
- Available cover often precludes enemy engineer survivability effort. These assets can be used elsewhere.

Obstacles

- Both man-made and natural obstacles influence the maneuver of any element entering the defile.
- Obstacles will reduce your ability to maneuver, improve the enemy's ability to engage your element, and will assist any enemy withdrawal.



HARMON

- Defiles can be easily reinforced with wire, mines, and log cribs.
- Defiles occurring in ridges or rock formations may have bedrock floors, preventing effective use of ditches and craters.

Key terrain

- Terrain that dominates, controls, or influences avenues of approach.
- The defile you have been tasked to clear is higher headquarters key terrain.

- Focus on terrain that affects the fight in the defile.
- Consider terrain overlooking approaches to the defile and terrain that dominates the defile exit.

Avenues of approach

- Evaluate to determine degree of canalization, trafficability, and amount of maneuver space in the defile.
- Conduct an analysis of time and space factors, determine the length of the defile and how long it will take to clear.

- Determine slow-go and no-go terrain — this helps you determine what type of force leads and when (infantry vs. vehicles).

Detailed terrain analysis requires time to consider each of these factors and is essential to mission success. The commander suddenly issued a FRAGO to clear a defile may not have the time required to thoroughly analyze all aspects of the terrain. There are some aspects of OCOKA that are more pertinent when planning to clear a defile than others. It is criti-

cal that the commander have a detailed understanding of the avenues of approach leading to, through, and exiting the defile to ensure he properly sequences his forces into the fight.

He must also understand which terrain is key, i.e., the terrain that controls or dominates the fight in the defile. This will provide terrain-oriented objectives for subordinate units to seize, facilitating clearance of the defile. Finally, focus your analysis on the identification of man-made and natural obstacles. This is vital information when developing your scheme of maneuver and establishing the conditions that must be set prior to breaching obstacles in the defile. When conducting the analysis of the situation, consider the effects of weather and its influence on your operation. Consider the trafficability along avenues of approach and in the defile itself, for both mounted and dismounted forces. Analyze visibility to determine how obscurants will perform and the effects on optics (i.e., binoculars, day sights, etc.). Will thermals be required for vehicles, and if so, what about night vision devices for soldiers and small arms? How long will NBC agents be effective? You must consider the effects on your soldiers. What will the temperature be? Will you need more water or a warming plan? What MOPP is required, and how long can troops fight in MOPP IV? Also consider the effects on equipment, especially in extreme conditions. Do weapons require special lubricants? What is the temperature and barometric pressure? And is there a plan for periodic updates? It is not enough to publish information on wind speed and light data without telling your units the effect of the weather on the operation.

Enemy Situation

Complete the analysis of the situation with a thorough study of the enemy forces, focusing on composition, strength, disposition, capabilities, and courses of action. Decide what the enemy can do to you and determine how you can best react to his actions. Use the task force S2's situational template, his analysis (paragraph 2 of the OPORD), and subsequent intelligence updates to accomplish this.

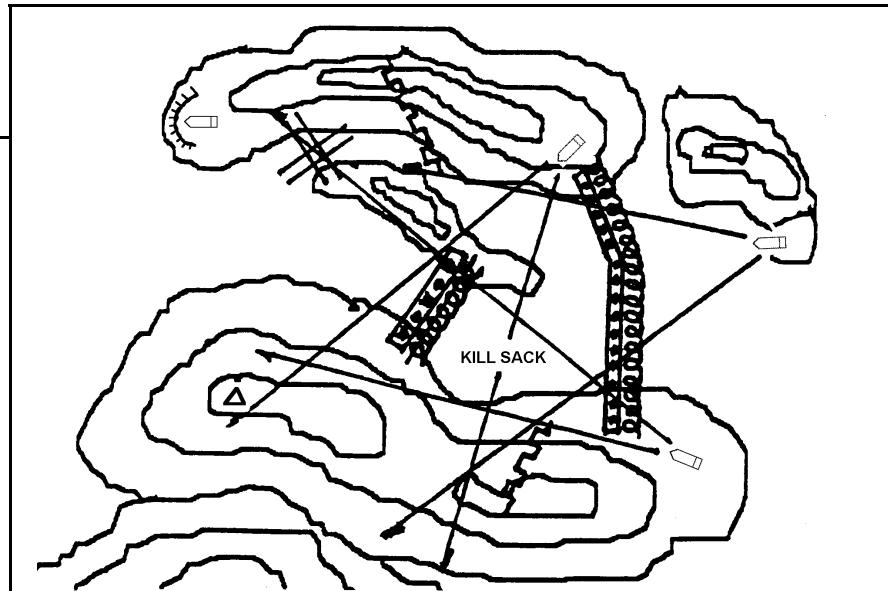


Figure 1. Example of a SITEMP for a defile clearing operation.

Composition and Strength

- Determine what type of force you are facing and what type of equipment they have.
- Determine the number and types of vehicles and personnel in your area of operation.
- Identify the type of reserve available.

Disposition

- Template enemy positions down to vehicle/key weapon level.
- Determine locations of kill sacks and subsequent positions.
- Identify type and location of OP/CSOP.

Capabilities

- How much artillery is in support and where will he employ it?
- Does the enemy have NBC, and will he use it?
- Can he reinforce his defense of the defile?

Now that you have answered these questions, you can start to figure out how the enemy will conduct the defense. Initially, focus your effort on what he will most likely do. Find out what the enemy wants to do and how he will accomplish it, given his doctrine. From this you can depict how he would position his forces without regard to terrain. Ask yourself what he is most likely to do, based on doctrinal norms. Where will he position his weapon systems, and why? Is he part of a security zone or the main belt, and how does this affect his actions? Once this thought process is

complete, you have essentially developed a doctrinal template. Modify this template, based on the enemy's strength and the terrain to develop a situational template that you can graphically depict and hand to your subordinate leaders (Fig. 1).

The situational template focuses your forces and graphically depicts where they should look for enemy positions while avoiding his kill sack. It provides the basis for your observation and direct fire plans and also provides requirements for indirect fire planning. Leaders at all levels must confirm or deny the situational template quickly in order to change or adjust the plan as required.

You must also determine the enemy's most dangerous course of action. This will depict your worst case scenario and will allow you to develop a plan in case the enemy is uncooperative and does not do what you expect. Ideally, your scheme of maneuver will be able to defeat both enemy courses of action. You must evaluate the chances of the enemy conducting what you consider to be the most dangerous course — the higher this percentage, the more your scheme of maneuver must focus on defeating this COA.

Normally, a comparison of own troops available with the enemy's composition and strength provides the commander with an accurate force ratio. But typical force ratios may not be as significant when fighting in the defile. You want a 3:1 force ratio dur-

ing attacks against a defending enemy, but terrain in the defile will limit the size of the force you can introduce at any given time. Terrain is neutral, however, and will also limit the defender from employing all of his assets against you.

Plan to utilize available combat multipliers to isolate enemy formations. Set conditions for assaults against portions of the defending force, ensuring that other enemy positions are isolated by effective suppression and/or obscuration, or masked by intervening terrain. Determining how you can obtain an advantageous force ratio brings us back to the importance of terrain analysis and detailed depiction of the enemy situation. These efforts will provide you with enough information to develop a scheme of maneuver that masses your combat power and destroys isolated enemy positions until he is forced to withdraw or die in the defile.

Fundamentals for Clearing a Defile

The actual business of clearing the defile is time-consuming and resource-intensive. There are certain fundamentals that optimize the chances of success. The three phases of the operation are shown below with the tasks to be accomplished and the conditions that should be set before starting the next phase.

Phase 1 - Approach

- Establish support-by-fire to suppress or destroy enemy forces.
- Position infantry to clear the defile.
- Secure a foothold, and begin clearing operation.

Phase 2 - Clear

- Infantry conducts movement to contact to make contact or seize objectives.
- Mounted/dismounted integration develops the situation.
- Clear defile of all enemy and bypass or create lanes through all obstacles.

Phase 3 - Secure

- Establish support-by-fire positions on far side to:
 - Defeat enemy counterattack.
 - Protect obstacle reduction effort.
 - Support continuation of TF attack.

- Hand over battle to task force.
- Continue the mission.

Phase 1 focuses on getting combat power into the defile and postured to begin clearing operations. The commander must first establish overwatch and destroy or suppress any known enemy positions to allow forces to approach the defile unimpeded. Artillery and smoke can be used with great effect to assist this effort. Determine what element will lead your movement, based on the enemy situation. Plan for dismount points, ensuring that your force is covered by direct fire as it moves to these points. Dismount the infantry and get them oriented to the ground as the Bradleys provide cover. This dismount point should be in a position that will secure a foothold for the company/team to continue the attack to seize the defile. The first phase of the operation is complete once the infantry is prepared to conduct the movement to contact.

The second phase of the operation, the actual clearing of the defile, begins as quickly as the first phase ends. The dismounted infantry moves forward on both sides of the defile high up on the walls. This provides them with excellent visibility and prevents the enemy from firing down on your infantry, and possibly pinning them down. It is also easier to clear from top to bottom than the other way around.

Assign the dismounted element the task of seizing objectives at the far end of the defile. They then conduct a movement to contact to clear the defile, which should be cleared once the objectives are seized. The dismounts conduct the clearing operation, maintaining communications with the

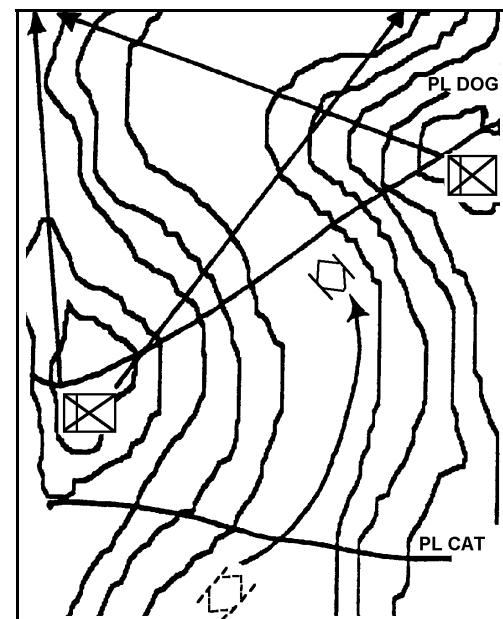
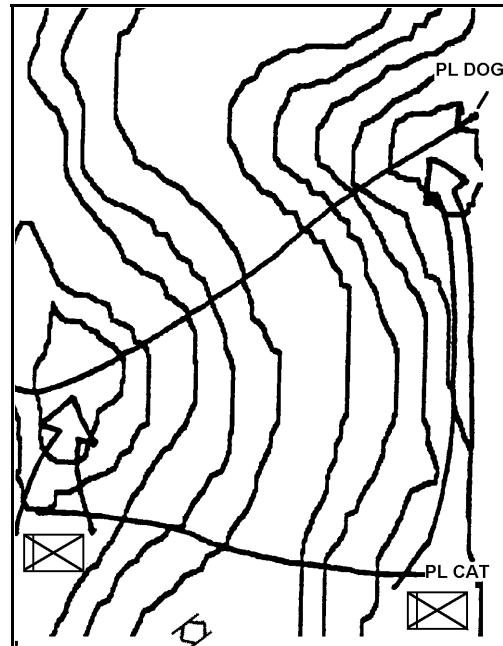


Figure 2. Dismount element clears pass for Bradleys.

Bradleys. As the infantry comes to a bend in the trail, or a terrain feature that would provide cover, they call the vehicles forward. This variation of bounding overwatch should continue until the defile is clear or contact is made (Fig. 2).

Phase lines can be used to control the movements. The key is to clear with infantry, the smallest element making contact first, and then bringing the Bradley into the fight as needed. Upon

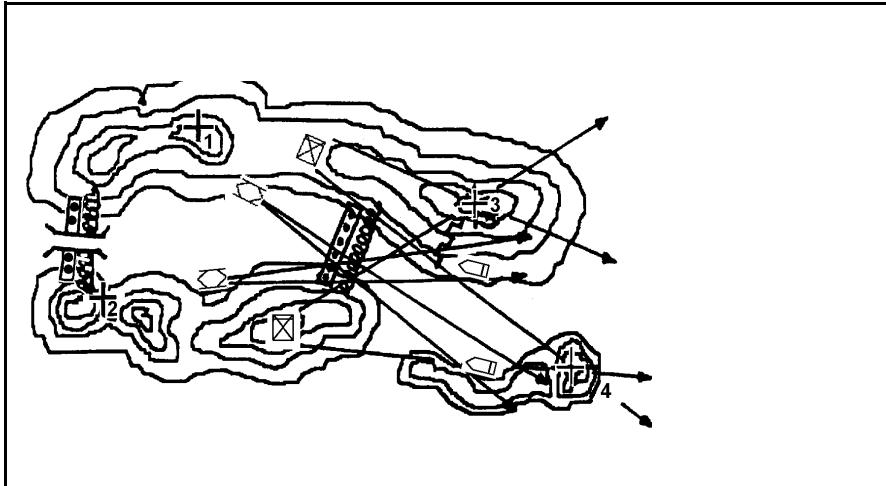


Figure 3. Dismounted Infantry and BFVs work together to clear the defile.

making contact, the dismounted leader must assess whether he can destroy or force the withdrawal of the enemy force. The commander must commit the Bradleys to support the clearing operation if he cannot. This requires crosstalk between mounted and dismounted elements.

The Bradley will be entering the fight without an exact location of the enemy and is relying on the dismounts to point them out. This must be done through spot reports based on planned graphic control measures or identifiable terrain features. The dismounted leader has to quickly orient the BFV because exposure increases vulnerability. The dismounts provide suppression as the BFV attempts to destroy the enemy position (Fig. 3).

The commander will normally have some form of indirect fire at his disposal but must consider the effects of these systems in constricted terrain.

Dismounted and mounted infantry must be mutually supporting and should have, as much as possible, equal capabilities. Dismounted soldiers should have antitank weapons and sufficient class V to sustain the fight and provide suppression to allow the mounted element to acquire and engage enemy vehicles. They should have a forward observer and the ability to breach wire and mine obstacles.

It is a good technique to dismount an engineer squad with sufficient demolitions to clear several obstacles, using the infantry to provide suppression, obscuration, and security as the engineers breach and reduce the obstacle.

The commander has to ensure that he can defeat an enemy counterattack and support the continuation of the task force attack while preparing to follow on in support of the task force, as required (Fig. 4).

Tactics and Techniques

The defile drill requires a great deal of centralized planning and execution. The commander should determine his critical tasks and assign these to each subordinate element. Determine the critical event, and assign this as the primary task and purpose to the platoon that will be your main effort. Once this is decided, it is relatively easy to determine the primary task and purpose for the other elements to support the main effort's mission.

As a general rule of thumb, tanks should initially provide overwatch to allow infantry to enter the defiles. They should also be prepared to assault an objective on the far side to secure the defile or defeat an enemy counterattack. Infantry should always be considered as two distinct maneuver elements, one mounted, the other dismounted. Dismounted infantry is best while on the ground, clearing the defile to allow unimpeded movement for vehicles. Bradleys provide greater firepower and protection against small arms and indirect fires in the defile and are better equipped to continue the fight on the far side. They should be used to support the dismounted

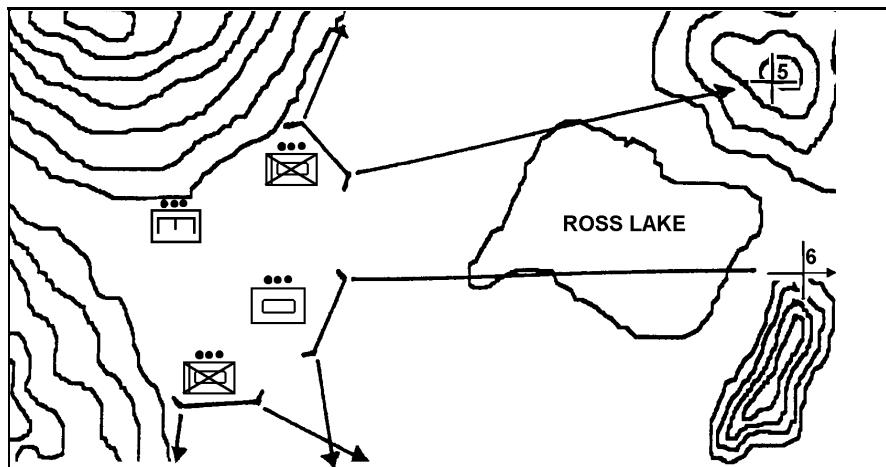


Figure 4. The defile is clear and the co/tm is postured to continue the mission.

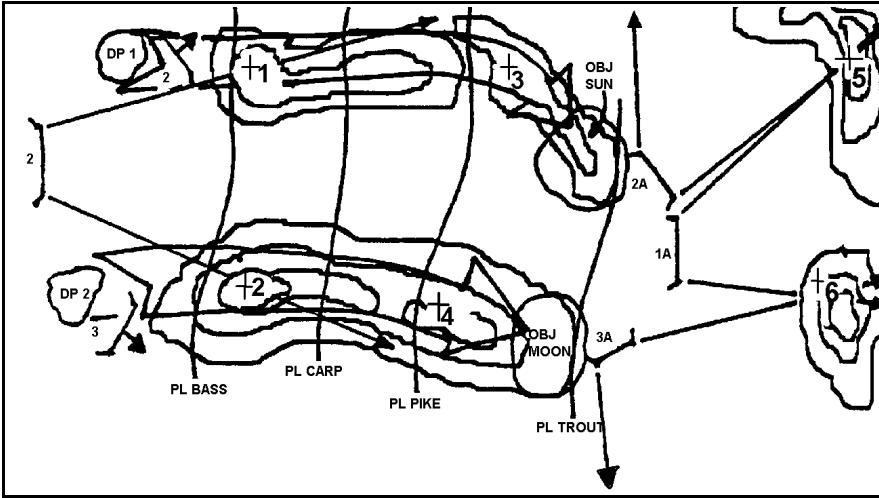


Figure 5. Graphics illustrate the plan and aid understanding during all phases of the operation.

troops, as required, and to provide the basis for the initial support-by-fire positions as the company/team exits the defile. The company/team commander will have a command and control nightmare if he does not plan the operation adequately and redundantly. This type of operation is best executed when centrally controlled. There are many systems moving and shooting in a small area. Additionally, there will probably be engineers with demolitions or a Combat Engineer Vehicle that can further complicate the operation. The fratricide risk is high, and only increases if the operation is not controlled by one person. Assigning task and purpose goes a long way towards clear understanding of commander's intent. The commander should receive briefbacks from subordinates upon completion of the operations order to show they understand the plan and their responsibilities. He should periodically check on the development of platoon orders to ensure his intent is being met. Another effective C² tool is a set of complete and detailed graphics that are drawn and issued as part of the order. Each leader should enter every fight with a set of maneuver graphics, enemy situation template, fire support overlay, and CSS graphics. These graphics should extend down to the Bradley commander and dismounted squad leader level. A properly prepared set of graphics provides guidance and illustrates the commander's plan better than words in an operations order standing alone (Fig. 5). The graphic control measures will vary by operation, but should include whatever will ensure execution of the plan as intended. Ensure that support-by-fire

positions are established throughout the zone of attack. These may move once the position is occupied or observed. Subordinate units must understand that the intent is to put effective suppressive fire on the enemy. Subordinate leaders must understand they can move to accomplish this, if required. Phase lines are used to control movement and fires. Fratricide risks are decreased if the dismounts understand that they are to clear up to PL Carp and the FSO knows that artillery fires cannot land short of PL Pike.

Dismount points designate where the dismounting infantry will get off the vehicles and start to lead the movement. This is developed using the situation template and terrain analysis, and obviously does not prevent the infantry from dismounting sooner. The commander can also establish objectives and an axis of advance to orient and direct the infantry clearing operation. He must also develop direct fire control measures that will allow him to lift, shift, distribute, and mass direct fires throughout the zone of attack.

No discussion on command and control would be complete without talking about communications. Every element must be able to talk to the other. The commander must ensure all systems are operating either secure or non-secure, but not a mixture of both. Every leader and RTO should have complete SOI information for the current and subsequent time periods. The company/team is operating in a pass, and the topography may affect radio operations. The commander must plan for redundant communications, the most common method being the use

of pyrotechnic signals. A colored star or parachute flare can signal that a lane is established as easily as a radio transmission. In fact, the pyro signal can inform everyone of a specific event if they know what the signals mean. Colored smoke and VS-17 panels are other methods of communication; you are limited only by what is available.

PCIs and Rehearsals

The importance of proper pre-combat inspections (PCIs) is illustrated over and over again at the NTC. It is critical that leaders check soldiers and equipment. This sounds rational, and most leaders would agree, but one of the first events to go out the window during a time crunch is the PCI. The commander must provide guidance for the PCI by establishing what should be inspected, who will inspect, and when inspections will be complete. A prioritized, comprehensive list will assist the conduct of a PCI and standardize what is checked for each mission. PCI checks should include, but are not limited to, some of the following items:

- Dismounted breach kits (ensure kits are man-packable and include smoke pots)
- Radio checks and SOI data
- Boresights/zeros on all weapon systems
- Uniform common to all
- Graphics and maps
- Demolitions and engineer equipment
- Night observation devices
- Vehicle tow hooks, pintles, pins, tow bars, and cables

Rehearsals are based on the time available. There is no substitute for a rehearsal, especially if units are not used to working with each other (newly attached engineers, for example). Focus the rehearsal on key events and tasks, consider the enemy's course of action, and incorporate combat multipliers that are available to you. The commander will have to determine what type of rehearsal he will be able to conduct, but he should use an actions and orders format. This format develops the situation and enables leaders to issue their orders based on that development. Rehearse the criti-

cal event, even if that is all you have time for. It is detrimental to mission success to have the movement to the L/D well rehearsed but not the actions on the objective. Never assume that the enemy will do what you have planned, and rehearse contingencies to increase your flexibility to respond to a new development. Leaders at the platoon level should rehearse "full-up" as much as possible to discover problems early on. Commanders can facilitate this by setting out a priority of work in the warning order that focuses the dismounts in the proper direction. Dismounted infantry can practice movement techniques, actions on contact, and breach drills. FM 7-7J has several battle drills that are applicable to actions that platoons can expect to execute in a defile. Dismounted leaders ensure each soldier rehearses dismounting with required equipment and weapons. Bradleys rehearse, as a minimum, dismounted/mounted integration (for example, dismounts calling forward vehicles and orienting them to a specific target), direct fire control, actions in support-by-fire positions, and actions on contact.

Logistic Considerations

There are some unique considerations when planning to support a defile-clearing operation that may require additional assets from higher headquarters. Identify these early, and submit requests so the affected agencies can respond in time. A chief concern in a defile is medical evacuation of wounded soldiers, a problem compounded by inaccessibility and the fact that traffic is one-way until the task force has cleared the restricted terrain. Logistics planners have to develop an evacuation plan. A good technique is to request additional ambulance support from the task force and establish a casualty collection point (CCP) as close to the mouth of the pass as possible, while still allowing vehicular movement to the rear. Provide lead elements with medics and litters, establish litter teams, and evacuate casualties that require immediate evacuation back to the CCP. Combat lifesavers must be trained and

equipped with their bags to provide immediate attention, and the medics should stay forward as long as possible to sustain medical support. If possible, organize litter teams from sources other than dismounted infantry or vehicle crewmen.

Recovery is another concern based on trafficability. You don't really want to recover for maintenance reasons, but you do want to be able to pull a vehicle blocking the lane out of the way. It is not feasible to bring an M-88 up to recover a disabled or damaged vehicle, so you have to plan for

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like-vehicle recovery. Ensure that each vehicle has toe pintles and hooks mounted prior to the operation and has tow cables readily accessible. Crews have to be proficient in hooking vehicles up and quickly pulling them out of the way. These vehicles, once out of the way, can later be recovered by maintenance assets. They also make a good covered position to place less critically wounded personnel awaited evacuation. Plan as well for emergency resupply of both Class III and V. The dismounts may require resupply while in the pass, while the Bradleys probably won't need it until they are through the pass. Depending on the time it takes to clear the pass, tanks will probably only require fuel.

Small arms resupply should be configured for use, not given to dismounts while still in the shipping crates. Plan to cross-level ammunition as soon as possible to continue the mission on the far side of the pass. This will sustain your operation if the fuel and cargo HEMTTs are bumped by combat vehicles coming through the pass.

Bradleys will require an HE-IT heavy mix of 25mm Class V when conducting defile clearing operations. Dismounted infantry will need addi-

tional hand grenades, M203 rounds, and plenty of SAW/M60 ammunition. One way to resupply infantry forward is to use empty litters to transport Class V. Two men bearing a litter can carry more ammo than two men with their hands and this gets two needed assets forward, the Class V and the litter.

Conclusion

Understanding the terrain and enemy situation and applying the fundamentals of defile clearing will go a long way towards ensuring your unit doesn't end up like SSG Hughes's. This mission, like any other, requires focused planning and detailed preparation. Company/team commanders must ensure they enter a defile with a well-thought-out plan, supported by graphic control measures. The integration between infantry and infantry fighting vehicles is not something that can be achieved the day prior to leaving the L/D.

Commanders must fully develop this critical cohesion as soon as possible. The proper employment of the correct tactics, techniques, and procedures during planning, preparation, and execution will maximize your ability to defeat the enemy while protecting your men and equipment. They are the keys to mission accomplishment.

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