

Crisis in Battle: The Conduct of the Assault

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“Crossing the hostile fire zone until our own fire can begin will always constitute a crisis in the engagement.”

— von Moltke¹

Closing with an enemy in a prepared position is a fundamental task that lies at the heart of our profession. This task is also, almost unquestionably, the most difficult and potentially dangerous of all combat missions. Surprisingly, however, despite its criticality, it is also one of the least practiced of all the tasks for which a mechanized unit trains. Institutional experience at the training centers further demonstrates that when units execute this task, they are rarely successful. As one senior observer/controller at the National Training Center put it, “It is almost as if mounted units are uncomfortable with the assault, so they avoid it in planning and rehearsal, as if subordinate leaders will inherently know how to execute.”²

Army doctrine is also “uncomfortable” with the assault. Several manuals address it under various guises: actions on the objective, attack to seize an objective, how to assault, etc. However, most manuals give only a cursory and incomplete outline of this difficult and essential task. There exists no single source that discusses this task in sufficient detail for a mechanized team commander to be able to adequately plan, prepare, and execute this mission. The following is an attempt to collate existing information from several, disparate sections of several manuals and then overlay historical experience and common sense to create a “fleshed-out” view of the planning, preparation, and execution of a combined-arms company-level assault of a prepared position.³

By way of definition (an essential starting point for any tactical discus-

sion), the term “assault of an objective” or simply the “assault” means the entry into and overrunning of an enemy position. “Attack” is a broader term that includes all activity from roughly the Line of Departure forward, including assaults along the way or possibly culminating in an assault and the subsequent, anticipated pursuit. “Actions on the objective” is a term that implies tasks accomplished after an objective is secured. What we are really discussing when we talk about the conduct of the assault is a tactical problem that is as old as projectile weapons — how to close with a defending enemy, under the fire of his weapons, to the point that the inherent advantages of the defense are obviated. The infantry community, borrowing a term from the pre-WWII German General Staff, refers to this problem as “the last 300 yards.”⁴ Given the increased range of weapons since WWII, the modern phrase should more likely be “the last 1000 meters.” Whatever the distance, the problem is fundamentally the same. Significantly, the German term for it from Clausewitz to the present has remained unchanged, they call it, “Krise im Gefecht” — the crisis in battle.

As a further introduction to this problem, a brief discussion of the terms “hasty” and “deliberate” is in order. In order to assault a prepared enemy position a certain amount of intelligence is always required. In optimal circumstances, a unit will have intelligence detailing such things as design of trench lines and fighting positions, vehicle and major weapons system positions, location and composition of protective obstacles, etc., in enough time for the assault force commander to rehearse the assault plan for those specific conditions. Further, he would have this information in enough time to task-organize at the lowest levels for specific actions on that particular objective. Command and control (C²) measures can be less restrictive in this instance because difficulties in C² during

execution will be compensated for through detailed rehearsals. This situation, where the assaulting force has the luxury of detailed preparation and task organization, can be termed a “deliberate” assault.

In many — possibly most — instances, this kind of time will not be available. The requisite intelligence on the enemy position may only be gained through binoculars from a support-by-fire position minutes before the assault must commence. In this case, the assault force commander must enhance command and control through relatively restrictive control measures and fight with existing or habitual task organizations. This situation may be termed a “hasty” assault. However, it is vital to understand that the fundamental methodology for the conduct of an assault is the same regardless of how long a unit has to prepare. Accompanying the necessity for an operation of this nature is the need for a requisite amount of intelligence. A unit cannot be sent against a prepared enemy defense with any expectation of success without some degree of knowledge of the enemy’s dispositions. Even with limited time, the methodical, coordinated use of the combined arms is fundamental to success. We do not assault “on line” as a method to make up for lack of intelligence. This desperate expedient, as history repeatedly demonstrates, leads to failure and exorbitant losses. Experience also shows that units must follow up this initial failure with something they should have done in the first place, a planned and coordinated assault. The following is an attempt to illustrate a routine methodology that is not dependent on preparation time, but solely on adequate intelligence.

The vehicle for this discussion of the assault will be a mechanized company-team with tank and armored (BFV) infantry platoons. The focus of the discussion is on how the commander of

this assault force plans for the coordinated use of tanks, BFVs, dismounted infantry, and indirect fires. The assault may be part of a larger, more complex task force breaching operation. In this situation, the assault must be coordinated with the actions of sister units breaching and supporting. Given an adequate combat power ratio, the assault is conducted against a company objective without external assistance.

In any case, a unit plans for the objective assault first, for several reasons. First, with limited planning time available, the unit must focus on the most critical tasks. By definition, if we are committing our assets to an assault, then it must be a critical task. Second, the way in which a unit will conduct its assault drives how the rest of the attack leading up to the assault occurs. If any activity during the attack is going to be “swagged,” it cannot be this one. The preceding phases of an attack should be designed to give the assault force the greatest positional advantage possible. These phases should also seek psychological advantage (often closely related to positional advantage) for the assaulting force. That is, to make the enemy commander think he cannot hold his position and attempt to withdraw, thus the attack would optimally transition to pursuit rather than assault.

The relationship between reconnaissance and planning for the assault is so critical that it requires further amplification. The assault force must have a thorough knowledge of the enemy’s disposition before committing to action. In the best circumstances, scouts or other dedicated reconnaissance assets have detailed the enemy position. The assault force commander and his leaders have also conducted a leaders’ recon of the objective in ample time for thorough preparation back in the assembly area. The assault force should, however, be prepared for considerably less than the best circumstances. In many situations, the recon elements will be relaying their reports to the assault force once the attack is under way, and the assault force commander will only get a visual recon through binoculars from a support-by-fire position. So, a unit gleans information from scouts early in the planning stage. In less than optimal circumstances, units get it from an advance guard once the attack is under way. In worst case, the

assault force must conduct its own reconnaissance just prior to execution of the assault. In all cases, the assault force has the requisite intelligence of the objective, even if a momentary, local pause in the overall attack is required. History shows that the momentum of an attack is slowed much more drastically by a failed assault than by a brief reconnaissance to ensure the assault’s success. The old adage that “time spent on reconnaissance is never time wasted,” is never more applicable. So, the real variable in the conduct of an assault is time for preparation. But, as we shall see, a thorough understanding of the tactical problems of the assault by combat leaders in peacetime can mitigate the lack of preparation time.

The assault force commander, now equipped with a mental — and, preferably, graphic — picture of the objective, must plan his assault. The first consideration is the decisive point of the objective. The decisive point is an enemy force or piece of terrain that, if controlled or destroyed, will greatly enhance the success of the operation.⁵ Since success is tied to achievement of the mission’s purpose, the commander must understand why he is conducting the assault. Given the intrinsic risk of such an operation, a commander should commit to an assault only if it is required for success. Generally, the commander will be told the effect he is to achieve on the enemy force or the terrain on his objective. “Seize” and “clear” are typical terrain-oriented missions that require occupation of terrain. Therefore, an assault must be planned if the enemy desires to retain that terrain. The missions “destroy” and “fix” may require an assault if the terrain and situation will not allow these effects to be achieved by fire only. Given the above, the commander can specify the decisive point on the objective.

The commander develops a scheme of maneuver that masses his combat power at the decisive point as early in the assault as possible. By definition, mass at the decisive point will lead to early success and possibly considerable damage to the enemy’s will. This psychological edge, in the best case, will drive the enemy to consider the position untenable and attempt withdrawal. Even in the worst case, if the assault force masses combat power at the deci-

sive point and the enemy does not withdraw or give up, the positional advantage the assault force gains by control of the decisive point will make the remainder of the assault considerably easier. In any situation, the ultimate goal of mass at the decisive point during the assault is to eliminate the need for further assaulting and the associated loss of time and resources.

Planning backward from the decisive point, the commander assesses the overall enemy situation. He must determine if a mounted assault is possible or if a dismounted assault is necessary. By “mounted” or “dismounted” we simply mean whether the assault force can enter the enemy position initially with armored vehicles or must penetrate with dismounted infantry. The exigencies of the situation could cause the assault force to dismount or remount anytime during the assault because the commander is always looking for an opportunity to get armored vehicles behind the enemy position. Whether these vehicles go through or around the objective is less important than that they attain the advantages associated with being between the enemy and his withdrawal route. “Positions are seldom lost because they have been destroyed, but almost invariably because the leader has decided in his own mind that the position cannot be held.”⁶ This aside for the moment, the following set of factors will determine the unit’s initial posture for the assault.

As a mechanized force, we prefer to assault mounted and should look for every opportunity to do so. The protection afforded by the armor on the M1A1 and the BFV is infinitely preferable to BDUs and Kevlar. Additionally, as discussed earlier, we are trying to get our vehicles and their combat potential behind the enemy as soon as possible. So, the mechanized commander should look first to see if a mounted assault is possible and only assault dismounted, risking his few and highly-prized infantry, if the situation dictates such a difficult venture.

When making this decision, the assault force commander must first consider the terrain. The enemy entrenchments, protective obstacles, and close terrain (e.g. heavy vegetation and built-up areas) may prevent armored vehi-

cles from traversing the objective. Un-suppressed antitank weapons are an obvious deterrent to mounted assault; however, the commander probably will not be able to assess this factor until the operation is under way. Smaller antitank weapons such as RPGs, however, may not deter an assault by heavily armored M1A1s. It is important to understand here that, if the initial entry is to be mounted, then tanks will lead. They may be followed by BFVs, but because of their superior survivability if the enemy gets off the first shot, tanks must be in the van.

The presence of antitank weapons notwithstanding, the commander may still elect to assault mounted if the enemy defense has lost its coherence. Evaluating the coherence of the enemy defense is one of the assault force commander's critical tasks throughout the operation. The "coherence" of a defense is the defender's ability to shift, focus, and redistribute fire where needed, as well as reposition assets to cope with new threats. It is this coherence that generally precludes a mounted assault and makes it necessary to assault dismounted, in an effort to disrupt that coherence. Once the combined effects of dismounted maneuver and supporting fire defeat the enemy's ability to defend in this coordinated manner, the assault force commander should be ready to send his armor instantly through or around to the rear of the position.

The final point on the question of mounted or dismounted assault is that the nature of the mission may require dismounted clearing of the enemy position regardless of the previously discussed factors. Alternately, the initial assault to the far side of the enemy's position may not eliminate the relevance of that position. In these situations, an initial assault by tanks should be followed by BFVs. The infantry then dismounts behind the enemy and assaults his entrenchments from the rear or an undefended flank. The advantages of assaulting from this direction are obvious; however, the commander must be circumspect in how and when he sends the thinly armored BFVs across those "last 300 yards."

For either assault, but especially for a dismounted one, the commander must

find a point on the ground to "enter" the enemy position. In the case of a dismounted assault, the basis for the rest of our discussion, this point is literally the point that the infantry will enter the trenchline. Backward planning from the decisive point, the commander looks for a weakness in the enemy defense that is as close as possible to the decisive point, since it generally follows that the less fighting and expenditure of resources prior to the attack on the decisive point, the better. A weakness in the enemy defense may be a point at which the terrain affords a covered or concealed route up to the enemy position, or a point at which the enemy can only bring a limited amount of fire to bear. Common sense tells us that a well prepared enemy defense probably does not have an obvious weak point or not, at least, one that can be determined without extensive, detailed reconnaissance.

The assault force commander should always look for some means to enter the enemy position through stealth or infiltration. Failing this, he will in many, if not most, situations have to create a weak point, even if the weakness is only temporary. He creates this weak point by isolating a small enemy sub-unit or position from the rest of the enemy defense. The chief means for effecting this isolation is, of course, through direct and indirect fire suppression. The assault force commander must plan for adequate suppressive fires to prevent other enemy elements from interfering or otherwise influencing the assault force's combat power superiority at the entry point and from the dismounted or mounted approach to the entry point. Indirect fires and smoke, when properly adjusted, further suppress the enemy and isolate the entry point and its approaches from observation by the enemy as well as from his fires.

After mission analysis, the assault force commander develops his scheme of maneuver. He has at hand, from this analysis, the enemy's disposition on the objective, the nature of the terrain leading up to and on the objective, the decisive point for the mission, a designated entry point, and whether or not a dismounted assault is necessary. As repeatedly emphasized earlier, the commander must have this information prior to execution. The variable in the

operation is the length of time available to prepare for the assault. With ample time for training and rehearsal, the assault force can task organize to platoon and even section/squad level so that each subordinate element is precisely organized for its tasks during the assault. Subsequent rehearsal together will overcome the unfamiliarity of such a detailed task organization and the consequent command and control difficulties. If the assault element has little or no time for preparation, then it must employ existing and familiar task organizations and not create units whose ad hoc nature will exacerbate an already difficult C² problem.

The other element of the scheme of maneuver that is driven by available preparation time is command and control, specifically the level of centralization. Simplistically, command and control is a sliding scale of centralization with emphasis on unity of effort at one end and emphasis on subordinate initiative on the other. The commander starts the operation at some point on the scale. This starting point depends on a set of factors. During the operation, the level of centralization of command and control will move up or down the scale based on changes in those same factors. Those factors include knowledge of the enemy, the nature of the operation and its complexity, the time available to plan and prepare for the operation, and the friendly-to-enemy combat power ratio. Command and control, in most cases — regardless of what point on the scale it is when the operation starts — will eventually move toward unity of effort. The prime goal of combat is superior concentration at the decisive point, and, unless one has an initially overwhelming combat power ratio, unity of effort of multiple sub-units will ultimately be required to achieve that superiority.

Clearly, the assault of a prepared enemy position by mounted and dismounted elements is a very complex operation; therefore, it will be initially more centralized than most. If the assault force can thoroughly rehearse all its actions, then the commander can reduce his direct control of subordinate elements. Further, he can maximize his use of smoke and obscurants since rehearsals will compensate for the smoke's degrading effect on C². With little or no preparation time, the assault

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force commander will have to be very directive in order to unify the efforts of all his subordinates. He will also have to be judicious in his use of smoke. In any case, the nature of the assault requires close and constant coordination of the above- and below-ground battles, especially during the time when the infantry is closing on the objective.

The assault force commander may start the operation at a point that is well on the "subordinate initiative" side of the scale. If he has inadequate knowledge of the enemy situation, he must give some subordinate elements freedom of action to conduct reconnaissance until the situation clarifies, then shift back toward the "unity of effort" side of the scale to conduct the assault. This assumes, of course, that the friendly-to-enemy combat power ratio is such that one properly organized subordinate element cannot conduct the assault alone, in which case the commander remains on the subordinate initiative side and continues to keep the reins loose.

When planning the scheme of maneuver, the commander must plan for the "above-ground" and the "below-ground" battles. The below-ground battle is the clearing of the enemy trenches, bunkers, and fighting positions. It is fought by dismounted infantry and engineers. Squad automatic weapons, demolitions, grenades, and bayonets are the primary weapons employed. To reiterate a point made earlier, the most critical phase of this battle (if below-ground fighting is necessary at all) is the crossing of the last "300 yards" to begin the below-ground battle. This battle is fought in a one-directional, systematic manner. The infantry can clear the trench to envelop the decisive point from a flank, clear directly to the decisive point from the entry point, then clear the remainder of the trench, or clear from front-to-rear or rear-to-front, attacking the decisive point as it occurs geographically. (Each enemy trench system will have to be evaluated for the most advantageous method.) The infantry must clear along the trench, in one direction, in a "leap-frog" fashion, marking intersections as they go in order to ensure their "rear" is always secure and to prevent fratricide by converging friendly units. Squad-level trench clearing techniques are adequately covered in several manuals,⁷ so, suffice to say that trench

clearing is a physically-exhausting, ammunition-intensive operation. Despite this fact, however, fewer infantrymen in the trench line is often better, as FM 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, states, "Often, a small assault element supported by a large volume of suppressive fires is effective..."⁸ This apparent dichotomy is not surprising if one remembers that the width of a well constructed trench will accommodate only one man at a time. So, the trench clearing drills revolve around this lead man and his volume of fire. The rest of the element is essentially in support of this one man, rotating forward as needed, and providing rear security, demolition teams, grenade throwers, evacuation teams, ammo bearers, etc.

The below-ground battle, as indicated, is the exclusive realm of the infantry platoon leader and his subordinate squad and team leaders. This battle is fought on a very intense and personal level, with little margin for error. The above-ground battle, on the other hand, is the commander's battle. This battle sets the terms for the below-ground fight and, if executed properly, greatly reduces its difficulty. In the best circumstance, a successful above-ground battle obviates the need for further below-ground fighting by forcing an enemy withdrawal or pushing tanks to the rear of the position. The above-ground battle is also concerned with isolation of the objective and securing the whole from enemy reserves or other repositioning forces. In this battle, the commander plans for the coordination of the below-ground battle with tank and BFV platoons, mortar and artillery fires, and direct fire support from sister units. The above-ground activity is the "fire" of the "fire and movement" that is the assault and, as such, has as its chief aim — suppression.

The criticality of suppressive fire, especially direct fire, cannot be understated. Once the necessity for an assault is determined, especially an initially dismounted assault, the mission hinges on the commander's planning for and execution of direct fire suppression from good support-by-fire positions. At its simplest, suppressive fire is the "fire" of the fire and maneuver of a fire team. In the context of a mechanized assault, suppressive fire is the means to solve the "crisis in battle." As stated,

rarely does the terrain or the nature of the enemy's defensive position allow a "covered" crossing of the terrain from the assault position to the entry point. Therefore, the element that physically closes this distance will be exposed to enemy fire. If the assaulting element is dismounted, as we have seen it often must be, the success or failure of the entire operation depends on getting the infantry across these "last 300 yards." Once they are in the trenches, their battle is on much more even terms. Therefore, the scheme of maneuver must ensure that, not only are the tanks and BFVs in position, but that indeed the enemy is not returning fire before the dismounted infantry begins its move from the assault position or across the probable line of deployment (PLD).

A word on the nature of suppression is in order. S.L.A. Marshall, in *Men Against Fire*, says that the relationship between fire and movement is so interwoven that "to fire is to move."⁹ That is, good suppressive fire allows freedom of movement and, conversely, soldiers and units move to get better firing positions. Suppression is a psychological phenomenon whose effect is temporary. Soldiers, either dismounted or mounted, will not expose themselves to what they think is deadly fire. So, as Rommel and others have pointed out, the accuracy of the fire is less important than the volume.¹⁰ The rounds do not have to hit the enemy, but he must think he is going to be hit. The fear of death and maiming is the essence of suppressive fire. The soldier is convinced that getting up or moving out of defilade to fire himself is not worth the risk of death.

The fact that MILES lasers do not kill or harm is the reason that the primacy of suppressive fire is lost in training. Fire directed in the vicinity of the enemy will achieve suppression for the simple reason that he does not know that you do not know where he is exactly located. He only knows that he is being shot at with potentially deadly effect. Whether or not we choose to acknowledge it, indirect fire's greatest value is not in its destructive effect but in its ability to suppress, a fundamental truth lost in training. The explosions of mortar and artillery rounds will suppress armored forces because of the psychological impact of the detonations themselves. Even 25-mm high explo-

sive rounds, while not tank-killing rounds, can also suppress armored forces until the enemy determines the type munitions being fired at him and realizes it is not too threatening. As realization dawns, fear diminishes, and so does the suppressive effect. For this reason, veteran units are harder to suppress because they will more quickly identify what type of fire is threatening to them and what is not.

When planning for direct fire suppression of the enemy in the above-ground battle, the commander must consider first the positioning of his tank and BFV platoons. In general, the line from these support-by-fire positions to the enemy position should be at as great an angle as possible from the line the infantry will move along from assault position to the entry point. There are two reasons for this separation: one, the enemy's attention will be focused on the mounted elements and not on the relatively vulnerable infantry; thus, the infantry may achieve local surprise; two, once the infantry enters the trench, the enemy will be caught on those ever-sought-after "horns of a dilemma." That is, every action he takes to avoid the direct fire from tanks and BFVs, such as stay in defilade or down in his bunkers, makes him vulnerable to attack from infantry moving down the trench line. Conversely, actions he takes to avoid the attacking infantry and indirect fire, such as repositioning or withdrawing, leaves him vulnerable to the fires from the support-by-fire positions. Finally, the commander must give as much latitude as necessary to tank and BFV platoon leaders so that they can reposition and "jockey around" to ensure they have the requisite line of sight to their portions of the objective. These leaders must understand that this line of sight is essential and it is their duty to find a position from which to achieve the desired effect on the enemy.

The second consideration for direct fire suppression is volume of fire. The commander must estimate for how long the enemy must be suppressed and then take steps to ensure proper fire distribution and appropriate rate of fire throughout this time period. He does this primarily by designating the critical events during the assault and ensuring that the highest rate of fire is available then. He may also direct

other techniques for ensuring continuous direct fire suppression. For example, he may specify rounds fired per minute, per vehicle, or specify fire by alternate sections, or specify certain elements to provide a base of fire and others to provide overwatch.

More than any other event, the infantry's entry into the objective requires maximum direct fire suppression. During this critical period, the commander must specify that the tank and BFV platoons are providing support by fire as a "base of fire" in accordance with FM 71-1.¹¹ These elements are not waiting to identify enemy vehicles or positions, but are firing into the general vicinity of the enemy; volume over accuracy. Remember, he does not know they do not know where he is. The mission to support by fire as "overwatch" should only be assigned to individual vehicles and sections to conserve ammunition during less critical times during the assault, and then only after the infantry has entered the trench. The commander should also consider positioning ammunition resupply vehicles within reach of the tank and BFV platoons to speed up the reload process. Maintaining continuous fire is essential, but as the assault progresses, less fire will be necessary to maintain suppression as enemy elements are destroyed or withdraw. During the inevitable lulls in the direct fire suppression caused by the necessity to reload, the commander should redouble his use of indirect fire to maintain the suppressive effect. In the conduct of the dismounted assault, there is no substitute for establishing and keeping fire superiority, especially until the infantry has entered the trench. As Nathan Bedford Forrest so eloquently phrased it, "It's the first blow that counts; and if you keep it up hot enough, you can whip 'em as fast as they come up."

The commander and his fire support officer (FSO) develop the indirect fire plan to support the above- and below-ground battles. They also plan for the rigid control of indirect fires for the duration of the assault. Known or suspected enemy positions are targeted as are routes in and out of the enemy position. Again, the commander must estimate the duration of the assault and, specifically, the length of time it will take the infantry to get from assault position to entry point. This will ensure

indirect fire suppression and obscuration when the infantry is most vulnerable. In general, indirect fire suppression should begin simultaneously with the direct fire from support-by-fire positions. This initial phase, while the infantry is moving to its PLD or dismount point and making final preparations, should make maximum use of field artillery fires, with delay fuzing, for the purpose of actually destroying (the ultimate suppression) the enemy in position. Fires should initially concentrate on the enemy influencing the entry point, then as the infantry gets close, shifting to other enemy positions to increase the isolation of the entry point as discussed earlier. "Danger close" to dismounted infantry is 600 meters for 155-mm artillery and 107-mm mortars. Terrain depending, this planning factor may be increased or decreased to ensure the safety of the infantry from its own indirect fires, while still maintaining the suppressive effect on the enemy. When shifting indirect fires away from the infantry, the commander should step up the direct fire suppression on the enemy at or influencing the entry point. The best judge of when to shift both direct and indirect fires away from the entry point will be the leader of the dismounted element approaching it. On his order or signal the fire should shift, and the infantry will fire and maneuver this last short distance using their own small arms and possibly their supporting BFVs for suppression of the entry point.

Once the infantry is in the trench line, the FSO, with the XO as back-up, will adjust the indirect fire from an overwatch position, ensuring it stays forward of the progress of the below-ground battle. The purpose of fires at this point is suppression of enemy elements to prevent them from interfering with the infantry in the trench. Since the whole objective may be 600 meters or less in width, the whole assault may be done "danger close." Partially compensating for this risk to the infantry is the fact that they are fighting in a trench designed to protect infantry from artillery. Nonetheless, indirect fire suppression should be maintained in these subsequent phases using primarily mortars (with fuzing set to detonate on or above the ground) on the objective itself and artillery fires behind or

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beyond the objective to prevent reinforcement. The situation may require the actual lifting of indirect fires or shifting of them off the objective altogether if our own infantry are endangered. In this case, the onus is on the tanks and BFVs to maintain suppression. To ensure the efficacy of both direct and indirect fires during execution, the commander must be in a position to judge the fires' effects throughout the objective area and be in constant communication with the FSO and the infantry fighting the below-ground battle.

In planning the assault, the commander must designate a reserve. The purpose of the reserve is, of course, for the commander to influence the battle with combat power once execution is under way. He influences the battle, in the best circumstances, by having a fresh force available to pursue a withdrawing enemy. In most circumstances, the commander needs to influence the battle when the untoward or unexpected occurs. In these cases, the reserve provides redundancy and uncommitted combat power. Factors that influence the make-up of the reserve are: knowledge of the enemy disposition and intentions and, simply, the number of things that can go wrong in the operation, the "what if's," if you will. Additionally, the commander, when designing his reserve, must have an armored force available — if not uncommitted, then at least alerted — to pursue. Enemy withdrawal from a position in actual combat is more frequent than in the defend-to-the-last-ATWESS training events, where death is not the result of "last stands."

We have established that an assault requires detailed knowledge of the enemy dispositions before it can be executed. We might conclude, based on the factors listed above, that a reserve is not necessary in this case. However, the enemy's intentions — that is, what he will do with his forces — are much harder to establish. Some type of reserve must be formed even in the clearest of enemy situations, for as the great von Moltke tells us: "The enemy usually has three courses of action open to him, and of these three he will choose the fourth." The inevitable unpredictable events in any battle, let alone one as inherently risky as an assault of a prepared position, require the com-

mander to build redundancy in his plan through designation of a reserve.

We have further established that the most critical event in a dismounted assault is getting the infantry from the assault position across the "last 300 yards." This event is also the most likely to go wrong. Therefore, part of the reserve for a dismounted assault should be infantry. The commander of an armor-heavy company/team may, for example hold one of his two infantry squads in reserve in the assault position so that if the assault fails at the entry point, he has not also lost all his infantry and can try again. However with the paucity of infantry available to him, he cannot afford to keep this squad uncommitted for long. So, as the rule goes, he will commit his reserves to the appropriate place on the battlefield as the situation clarifies. That is, once the lead squad enters the trench and the time for the potential crisis that would require an infantry reserve has passed, the commander can hand control of this squad back to the infantry platoon leader for use in his scheme of maneuver.

The commander may further designate one of his tank platoons as an additional reserve with an eye toward assaulting with tanks to a point beyond the objective as the opportunity presents itself. Given the situation, he may keep that platoon or a section of it uncommitted to ensure its availability when needed. The commander may also assume some risk by using a committed force as a reserve. If he feels he needs their firepower for suppression, the commander may commit those tanks to supporting by fire with the additional mission to be prepared for the mounted assault. This same element may be the pursuit force if that situation arises. The commander must always be aware of the risk of having a committed force also be the reserve. That is, even in a support-by-fire role, such a reserve may not be able to extricate itself when called upon.

An example scenario, albeit oversimplified, will serve to illustrate the concepts discussed previously and demonstrate control measures necessary for executing the assault. The use of a sketch is an essential technique for amplifying the scheme of maneuver to

platoon and squad leaders who need more detail than 1/50K scale provides. So, referring to the accompanying sketch, our assaulting force commander's mission is to seize Objective Orange in order to subsequently support by fire from the vicinity of the objective to assist an attack by a sister company on another objective to the northeast. So, the commander will look for the opportunity to establish tank and BFV support-by-fire positions for this supporting task as early in the operation as possible. His decisive point is tied to the purpose of his assault. In this instance it is to control the terrain on Objective Orange to provide supporting fire. The enemy force itself, in this case, is only relevant in its ability to interfere with the assault force commander's establishing support-by-fire positions.

After considering all of the previous, the commander concludes that control of the high ground on the northeast portion of the objective will allow him freedom of maneuver to support his sister unit's attack. Reconnaissance by the scouts and his own visual reconnaissance from an overwatching position allows the commander to determine the details of the enemy disposition. He sketches them as shown. He notes that the enemy's command post and reinforcing tank are also on the high ground. Massing combat power at this point, then, will result in control of the high ground and destruction or withdrawal of enemy assets critical to the defense's coherence. The commander determines this point to be the decisive one and designates the terrain encompassing the high ground, CP, and the tank position as Objective White.

The situation is such, with broken terrain on the objective, criss-crossing trenchworks and multiple, active anti-tank weapons, that the commander decides that an initially dismounted assault is necessary. He also determines that moving tanks around the objective is not immediately possible. Looking for a weak point at which to enter the enemy position, the commander notes that the enemy squad on the western side of Objective Orange cannot be supported by fire from the other two squads if the objective is assaulted from the west. Additionally, the woodline to the west of the objective provides a covered approach up to a point

closer to the objective than any other approach from any other direction. So, the commander decides to enter the objective at this western side and designates that enemy squad position as Objective Red. He further designates the remaining two enemy squads' positions as Objectives Green and Blue. Note that he includes in each objective those enemy elements and positions likely to be controlled by a common leader. Visual recon also helps the commander define the geographical parameters of each objective by terrain features recognizable on the ground. This delineation is more important to the supporting elements and less to the assaulting, because the supporting elements will be assigned responsibility for specific objectives in the above-ground battle, while the infantry in the below-ground fight have responsibility for the whole. In the below-ground battle, these objectives are more for common reference with the above-ground battle than they are for division of responsibility. This is so because the below-ground battle is a series of fluid drills that vary, based on known enemy locations (bunkers, vehicles, machine guns, etc.) and exigencies, not on artificial and possibly unrecognizable (to those in the trench) boundaries.

Our assault force commander has two M1A1 tank platoons (1st and 2nd), a BFV-equipped infantry platoon (3rd), and his own headquarters element, consisting of his tank, his XO's tank, and the FSO in a fire support vehicle. He now must allocate these assets to accomplish the mission. Given his knowledge of the enemy situation, the proportional range of unpredictable events, and the possible branches to the current situation, the commander designates two reserves. The first is one section of BFVs and its associated squad which will remain in the infantry platoon's assault position until released by the commander. This reserve exists for two reasons: one, if the initial assault to the entry point fails, or two, if the opportunity arises to move mounted around or behind the objective, this force can follow the tanks and complete the trench line assault from the rear. The second reserve is a tank section from 1st platoon to remain with the commander and be used to move quickly to bring additional suppressive firepower against

any enemy force on or beyond the objective as needed and to be prepared to move through or around Objective Orange.

Our commander also determines, through information gleaned from the scouts, that the high ground along Highway 22 affords excellent observation and fields of fire onto the objective. Accordingly, he plans his support-by-fire positions in the vicinity of Checkpoints (CPs) 1 and 2. He plans a company Assault Position on the reverse slope of the high ground south of Highway 22. He further plans an Assault Position for 3rd platoon west of Highway 10 in the woodline in the vicinity of CP 9. The commander plans positions for his subsequent support-by-fire mission at CPs 4, 6 and 7, north of Objective Orange. He also determines the line formed by these last three checkpoints as the limit of advance for his platoons. For emergencies, he plans an Objective Rally Point at the company Assault Position.

To control his all-important direct fire plan, the commander employs several direct fire control techniques and their associated control measures. First, he puts target reference points (TRPs) on each enemy position, or close to the position on a recognizable feature. It is essential that the commander ensure that each of his subordinates confirm that they can identify each TRP on the ground, either during a leaders' reconnaissance or once in support-by-fire positions. A small number of readily identifiable TRPs, combined with a thorough incorporation of the "quadrant" or similar technique in the company SOP, is a much more flexible and subtly redundant means of fire control than is a myriad of TRPs and sectors of fire.¹²

Regardless of specific technique, the optimal purpose of direct fire control measures is to ensure clear assignment of responsibility for all known or potential enemy positions and the rapid and accurate shifting, focusing, and redistribution of fires during execution. Our assault force commander has placed five TRPs on the objective, plotted on bunkers or berms that all leaders and gunners can recognize. Not shown on our sketch are other, similarly planned direct fire control meas-

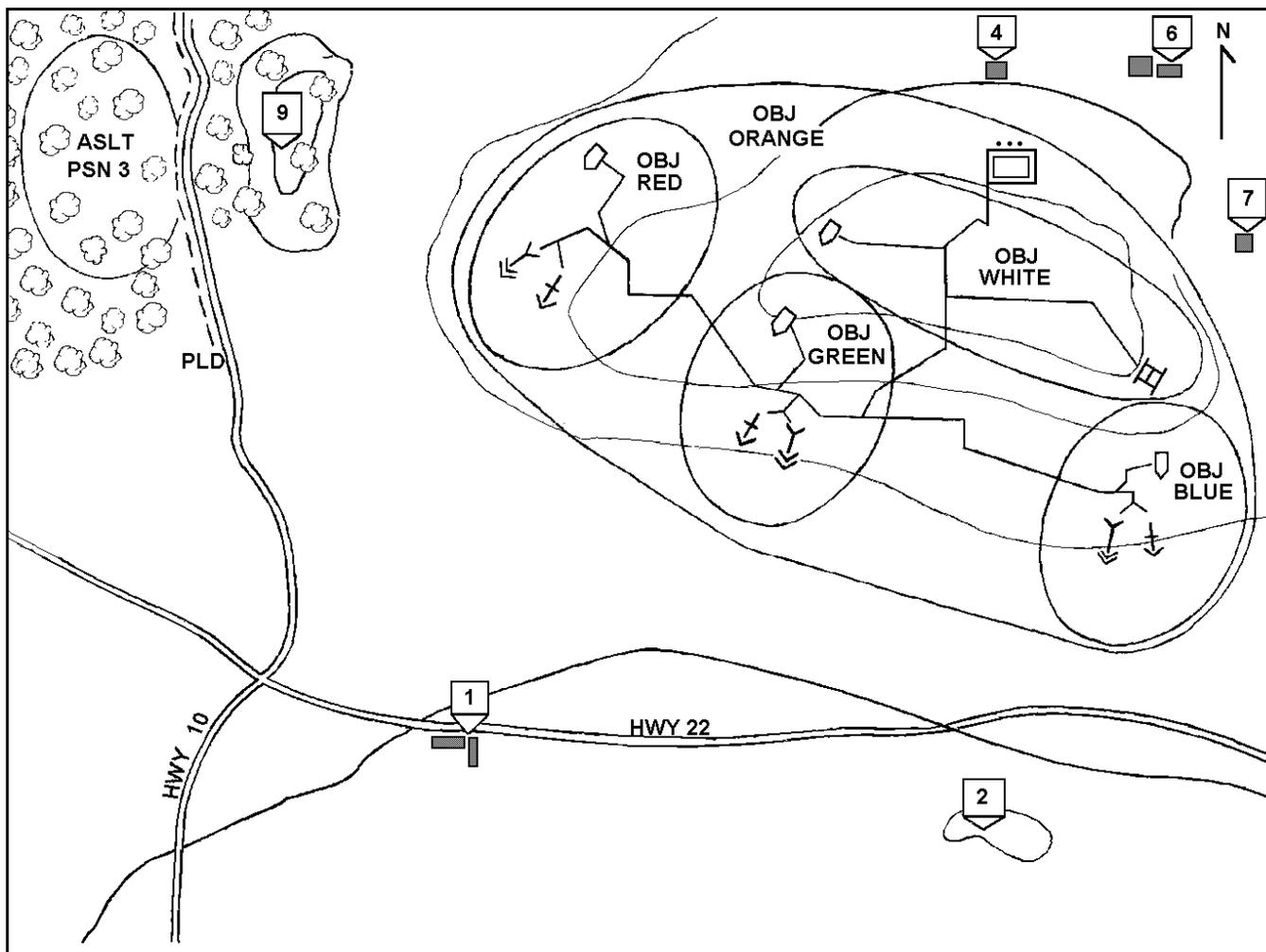
ures on the flanks and beyond Objective Orange that support the company's follow-on, support-by-fire mission.

The commander develops his plan for the below-ground battle around which the rest of the scheme of maneuver will develop. Looking initially for a direct assault on the decisive point, Objective White, from the entry point, Objective Red, the commander determines this is not possible without attacking through Objective Green. Additionally, once Objective Green is seized, the enemy on Objective Blue is rendered irrelevant since mounted elements can be brought up around Red and White once they are seized without interference from Blue. The scheme of maneuver will include an eventual assault on Objective Blue, but only after White is seized and the mounted elements are beginning their subsequent mission from positions behind Objective White. Based on this plan, the commander plans his assault on Objective Red and the overall direct fire plan.

The commander divides his scheme of maneuver into four phases. The first phase comprises the movement from the company assault position to the support-by-fire positions at CP 1, 1st platoon (-), and CP 2, 2nd platoon, and the movement of 1st platoon to its assault position. This phase also includes the establishment of fire superiority and suppression by the tank platoons onto Objective Orange. The second phase is the assault, by 3rd platoon, to seize Objective Red. The third phase is the main attack through Objective Green to seize Objective White. The fourth phase is the movement of 1st platoon and the BFVs of 3rd platoon to support-by-fire positions behind the objective in the vicinity of CPs 4 and 6 and beginning to suppress the objective to the north. Simultaneously the infantry, with continued supporting fire from 2nd platoon, assaults to seize Objective Blue.

If written out, the details of the scheme of maneuver for the first three phases might look something like this:

Phase I: 1st PLT (-) moves to support-by-fire position vicinity of CP1 and suppresses the enemy on OBJ Red. Simultaneously, 2nd PLT establishes a support-by-fire position vicinity of CP 2 and suppresses the enemy on OBJ Green and White. Tank platoons plan



for maintaining suppression for 15 minutes until 3rd is ready to cross PLD and assault Red. 3rd platoon moves to Assault Position and 1st squad prepares to assault. Alpha section BFVs establish support-by-fire vicinity CP 3 to suppress Red and support dismounted assault as needed. Bravo section and 2nd squad remain in Assault Position as company reserve; be prepared to assume Alpha section mission.

XO move with 3rd platoon and be prepared to assist in suppression of Red from CP 3.

FSO establish overwatch vicinity of CP2. In this phase, artillery will neutralize Red, White, and Green, in that order of priority, and suppress Blue. Mortars will smoke the area between CP3 and Red and, as a deception measure, smoke east of Blue. CO and reserve tank section will move to and occupy a position behind CP 1 and be prepared to assist suppression of Red. Phase ends when 1st squad is ready to assault, and the enemy on Red, Green, and White are suppressed. 3rd will sig-

nal that they are set via FM and a red followed by green star cluster over CP3.

Phase II: At 3rd platoon's signal, the CO and reserve will move forward to assist 1st platoon in suppression of Red. 2nd will continue suppression of Green and White. On order, the infantry will cross the PLD and seize Red. 3rd platoon leader will signal for shifting of direct and indirect fire off of Red via FM, two red star clusters, and red smoke. At that signal, 1st platoon will shift to suppress Green, 2nd will shift to suppress White and Blue, CO and reserve will cease fire and move back. XO and Alpha section BFVs support by fire as needed by 3rd platoon leader. Bravo section will remain in Assault Position. Indirect fires will shift off of Red as stated, but will continue as in Phase I. Phase will end when Red is seized. 3rd will signal this via FM and yellow smoke from Red.

Phase III: This phase will begin, without pause from phase II, on the signal from 3rd platoon. 3rd will attack

to seize Green and White. They will mark forward progress of lead three-man team with orange flag on long-whip antenna extending above-ground and yellow smoke when each objective is seized. 1st platoon (-) will pause to rearm behind CP1, CO and reserve will move up and continue suppression of Green. 2nd will continue suppression of White and Blue. All direct fires will remain 50 meters ahead of 3rd platoon's signal flag. Bravo section will revert to 3rd platoon control in this phase.

Once 1st platoon (-) has rearmed and is back at CP 1, reserve tanks will be prepared to lead 3rd platoon BFVs under the XO's control in an assault from CP3 to CPs 4 and 5. FSO will lift fire off of Green at the beginning of this phase and continue mortar suppression of White and Blue. Lift fires off of White on signal from 3rd that Green is seized.

The reader gets the idea. A final note in this example is the positioning of the company leaders to provide redundant

command and control and observation of critical places on the battlefield. The CO is positioned to get as large a view as possible, but with control of the direct fire suppression as his focus. The FSO is positioned away from the CO for a necessarily redundant view of the objective, and to rigidly control the indirect fires to ensure suppression and avoid fratricide. The infantry platoon leader, in the trench with his trench clearing teams, is not in a position to accurately adjust the indirect fires, so this task is the focus of the FSO. As stated, the infantry platoon leader is in the trench with his dismounts because the below-ground battle is his platoon's critical task. As we have seen, the progress of the below-ground battle and signaling of that progress drives the entire direct and indirect fire plan. It is essential, therefore, that the platoon leader is present in the trench even though his actual span of control is limited to a few individuals. In general, the XO should be at the second most important place on the battlefield. In this case, he is positioned to closely monitor the progress of the infantry and provides the commander with another, closer view of the critical entry phase of the assault. He is also postured to provide supporting tank fire and lead a mounted assault following the infantry when the opportunity arises. The first sergeant, not specifically mentioned in our example, is forward with some capacity to quickly rearm the support-by-fire elements to preclude them from the time-consuming task of taking ammunition out of hull storage. He can put ammunition on his M113 as well as the maintenance track and the M88 recovery vehicle. If the situation allows, he might even control an ammunition-laden HEMMT behind the support-by-fire positions. The first sergeant's critical task is to monitor ammunition expenditure and prevent any pause in suppression because of ammunition shortages.

Before concluding, a final point on preparation is in order. Preparation for the assault must begin before planning — that is, in training in garrison or before commitment to battle. Given the fact that the commander may have little or no time available between planning and execution of the assault, he can minimize this difficulty by training that anticipates this mission. First and foremost, he and his leaders must thoroughly understand the nature of the assault mission and the considerations outlined above. The commander must train his company in standard and flex-

ible direct fire control techniques. His attached infantry must be well schooled in the team drills and individual tasks upon which every below-ground battle is based. Finally, he must habitually practice task-organizing at platoon level. Infantry and tank platoon leaders must know how to work with one another and with attached engineers, so that specific task organization for an assault is possible with little or no preparation time.

The principles of the assault outlined above are not intended to be applied blindly, as if they were some company battle drill. Like all doctrine, these principles are designed to educate the commander's judgement, not tell him what to do. However, these principles are of no value unless they are thoroughly assimilated. Frederick the Great summed it up nicely: "Gentleman, the enemy stands behind his entrenchments, armed to the teeth. We must attack him and win, or else perish... If you don't like this, you may resign and go home."¹³

As professionals, we must understand the assault, the most basic and most difficult of all missions. Merely hoping that we will know what to do when the situation arises is not a path to success. We must train ourselves, our leaders, and our soldiers in the conduct of the assault, or else we may as well "resign and go home."

Notes

¹Helmuth Graf von Moltke, *Moltke on The Art of War* (Presidio Press, Novato, Ca., 1993), p. 158.

²Colonel James B. Gunlicks, "Cobra Team" leader, Operations Group, National Training Center, Ft. Irwin, Ca., in an officer professional development session with Armor Officer Advance Course students, May, 1993.

³The following are some of the main doctrinal references on this subject :

FM 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, December, 1990, Chapter 4, pp. 4-22 to 4-32. This normally excellent manual, as usual, has the best description of this mission available. In this chapter, there is an excellent discussion of how a commander plans for an attack. However it "glosses over" the actual assault and jumps almost immediately from planning to consolidation on the objective. The section entitled "Assault of a Strongpoint" is good, but brief, and tends to treat the subject as a unique situation instead of a routine method for dealing with any enemy position.

FM 71-123, *Tactics and Techniques for Combined Arms Heavy Forces*, September, 1992,

Chapter 3, pp. 3-156-168. This section is highlighted by an excellent description of infantry trench clearing procedures.

FM 71-123, pp. 3-112 to 3-116. This section, "The Assault," delineates the difference between what occurs above and below ground. In combination with FM 7-10, this manual is the best available source for extrapolating a complete picture of the planning requirements for this mission.

FM 71-1, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*, November, 1988, pp. 3-26 to 3-27, "How to Assault" is far too brief. "Assault of a Fortified Strongpoint," pp. 3-40 to 3-51 concentrates almost exclusively on breaching.

FM 7-7J, *The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad*, May 1993, "Battle Drill 6: Enter/Clear a Trench," pp. 3-38 to 3-43, good description of this critical task and the coordinated use of dismounted infantry and BFVs.

⁴John A. English, *On Infantry*, (Praeger, Westport, Conn., 1984), p. 49.

⁵For a discussion of the decisive point, see the author's article, "The Decisive Point," in the July-August 1994 issue of *ARMOR*.

⁶A.A. Vandegrift, as quoted in FM 1, *Warfighting*, p. 1.

⁷As stated above, FMs 7-10, 71-123, and 7-7J have good descriptions of trench clearing drills.

⁸FM 7-10, p. 4-29.

⁹S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, (Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1978), p. 83. In Chapter 6, Marshall presents an excellent discussion of the relationship between fire and movement.

¹⁰Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers*, (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, New York, 1953), p. 7. Rommel repeatedly mentions the importance of initial fire superiority and the importance of volume over accuracy in the opening moments of an action.

¹¹FM 71-1, pp. 3-23 to 3-25.

¹²An excellent discussion of direct fire control is found in Miller and Averna's article, "Direct Fire Planning," in the November-December 1993 issue of *ARMOR*.

¹³Frederick the Great, as quoted in the *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, ed. Robert Debs Heinl Jr. (United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, Md), p. 20.

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