

# Tactical Employment Of the Heavy Mortar Platoon

by Captain Matt Sebenoler

A wave of apprehension washes over me. I sit in my office as the new battalion mortar platoon leader and think, "What the hell do I do now?" All around me, infantrymen prepare for the day's event: EIB training. I feel very alone. What happened to the casual days in the motor pool, doing important things like changing track and performing grease gun maintenance? What do you mean the gut truck doesn't stop here?

I feel like a fish out of water, but I have a plan. I lean back in my chair, clear my throat and say, "Hey platoon sergeant, how about showing me your FM 7-90?" He slowly lifts his head to meet my eye, takes a drag from his cigarette, chokes down at least a pint of the blackest coffee I have ever seen from a mug the size of a small mop bucket and says, "What's that...Sir?"

What had I gotten myself into this time?

Eventually, wedged behind a bookshelf, I found the manual I was looking for — FM 7-90, *Tactical Employment of Mortars*. I began to read.

Later that month, I attended Infantry Mortar Platoon Officers Course and learned everything I ever wanted to know about the 4.2-inch mortar. I was now an expert, in the Army's opinion. All I had to do now was prove it to somebody.

In all fairness to the reader, I will begin by giving you the doctrinal solution, FM 7-90, on how one should employ a mortar platoon. Then, I will proceed to tell you why little of this works, based on my experiences as a mortar platoon leader before, during, and after Desert Storm. I will also provide a tactical alternative to doctrine that proved very effective in combat.

Doctrinally, the mortar platoon breaks down into six squads of four men each;

two fire direction centers, also with four men each; and a headquarters section with four men. Each squad rides into battle on an M106A2 Mortar Carrier, with a driver, ammo bearer, assistant gunner, and gunner. Each fire direction center rides in an M577 Command Post, with a driver, check computer operator, chief computer operator, and section sergeant. The headquarters section is the platoon leader and platoon sergeant, who each have a HMMWV, and their respective drivers. A simple math check tells you that the platoon has 35 enlisted soldiers and one officer. Uncle Sam, however, thinks you only need 34 enlisted. The first organizational problem was to find a driver for the platoon leader. No problem! Just take an ammo bearer from one of the gun tracks and drive on. But remember, one of your squads is now short a man.

The general concept of mortar employment is actually quite simple. The platoon operates as split sections. Each section will have three squads (three tubes), a fire direction center, a section sergeant, and either the platoon leader or platoon sergeant. The platoon leader is usually with alpha section, and the platoon sergeant is with bravo.

The purpose of this two-section approach is two-fold. First, splitting the platoon into two separate elements increases its survival chances, which allows the platoon to provide indirect fire for the battalion even if one section is destroyed. Second, it allows the platoon to accomplish its mission of providing responsive, accurate indirect fires to the battalion as these sections move by either alternate or successive bounds. After a section completes a bound, the platoon leader or platoon sergeant is responsible for ensuring that the section is properly laid. The platoon leader or platoon sergeant then leaves to recon the next position and prepare

it for the next bound. The four-man fire direction team processes mission data in the M577 and sends this data to the guns via land line. That's basically it.

Of course, mortar platoons don't always operate in split-section configuration. They can act as separate sections as I've just discussed, as a whole platoon, or even as individual guns. The situation will dictate the employment technique. The important thing to remember here is that all this stuff is doctrine, and, as we all know, sometimes doctrine doesn't provide the best solution.

After reading FM 7-90, attending IM-POC, shooting a few live fires, and passing a platoon ARTEP, I felt pretty good about my platoon's ability to perform in combat if necessary. About a month later, we got a chance to prove it. Deploying to Operation Desert Storm woke me from my false sense of security and demonstrated that I had some serious problems. I wasn't as sure that all the pieces of the pie fit together properly within the platoon anymore, and I needed to evaluate its configuration.

According to the book, we were doing everything right, but my platoon sergeant and I agreed that we needed to make some changes. My platoon sergeant had served in combat during Vietnam and this experience proved invaluable to our reorganization process. "The first problem we got," he said, "is that all our eggs are in one basket." It took a full five minutes of verbal exchange between us before I finally realized what he was talking about.

Doctrine calls for three of the most important individuals in the platoon to ride in the same vehicle — the chief computer, the check computer, and the section sergeant. He was telling me that we should split this group up on separate vehicles to maximize the surviv-

ability of the fire direction center and the platoon's combat effectiveness. All this accomplished initially was to create more problems. We deployed to Saudi Arabia with many unanswered questions.

We arrived in Saudi Arabia, got our equipment from the port, and deployed to the desert. I understood the concept of separating the key personnel within the platoon to enhance its survivability, but I had trouble with one small subject. Where does everyone ride? This seemed like such a simple question while cruising the training areas at Fort Riley. Now, when the stakes were higher, this question became very difficult to solve. The problem, ironically, is the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant. Doctrinally, we accomplished our individual tasks while riding in our assigned vehicles: the two HMMWVs. The two section sergeants were the track commanders of the M577s and the computer operators also rode on these command tracks. During Desert Storm, my battalion commander restricted all HMMWVs to the field trains, effectively leaving us two vehicles short. Now I had to reconfigure the platoon's fire direction centers, establish new load plans for its equipment, and find a place to ride.

The platoon leader and platoon sergeant became the track commanders of the two M577 command posts. It was simply the only place where one could maintain control of the unit and talk to higher at the same time (more about this later). I moved the section sergeants to the lead gun track, where he took control of that track while the platoon maneuvered; the squad leader was still responsible for the gun and his soldiers during fire missions. Being in the first track allowed the section sergeant to quickly lay the section to fire because he was right there with them. He had the M-2 aiming circle with him on the track, allowing him to dismount and begin to orient the circle before the dust had settled. To finish our reorganization, I sent the check computer operator to one of the wing tracks. He had a mortar ballistic computer with him, and would act as the backup computer operator in case the chief computer operator was killed or wounded. The chief computer operator stayed with me in the command post, and assisted me in tracking the battle between fire missions. I was happy with this solution. I believed that the combat effectiveness of the platoon greatly in-

creased with this new configuration. There remained one problem, however. If the command post was destroyed, how would I talk to higher? The only vehicles that had dual and green net (secure) capability were the M577s and the HMMWVs. Somehow, I needed to come up with some extra radios and a couple of Vinsons. Figuring that whomever got stuck driving my HMMWV in the field trains wouldn't need to talk to anyone, I stripped its commo system. I took this tangle of cables back to my platoon and managed to coerce a handy 31V communicator into installing it in one of my gun tracks. This track now had dual net green capability, and would act as my jump track if necessary.

Fully reconfigured now and prepared for battle, confidence was high as we crossed into Iraqi territory on the first day of the ground war. This confidence quickly abated, however, as the task force slowly but surely crept away from us. The fully loaded M106A2s could not handle the rapid pace of the tanks and Bradleys, and we were forced, once again, to modify doctrine. Instead of using alternate or successive bounds — otherwise common doctrinal movement techniques for a heavy mortar platoon — we displaced as a platoon and only stopped when required to shoot a mission. Although this action reduced the responsiveness of mortar fires, I felt that it was better than not having any mortars at all.

At this stage, we finally had it figured out. Our SOP went something like this: We traveled in a vee formation as far forward (usually behind the lead company/team) as possible. The M577 was in the center of the vee, providing command and control, and the company/team to our front provided us with frontal security. Upon receipt of a fire mission, I would orient the M577 to the approximate center of sector and stop. The computer operator immediately began to initialize the MBC and the M-16 plotting board. Noticing my hand and arm signals, the section sergeant would orient his track along the approximate center of sector and stop. He would then dismount, grab the aiming circle and emplace it. The other two tracks had positioned themselves by this time and the squad leaders prepared their mortars for firing. The ammo bearers quickly emplaced the aiming poles for their sights, ran to the back of the track, grabbed a loose end of wire from the DR-8 and sprinted to

the command post to hook up for wire communications. The other computer operator had completed initializing his computer and co-located with the command post to act as check computer. At the peak of their proficiency during Desert Storm, this entire operation took less than two minutes for the platoon to complete.

As we all know, doctrine is simply a guideline. The SOPs and configurations I've discussed here are certainly not the best or only solutions to the many problems we encountered during the war with Iraq. They may not even be right! The key is that, right or wrong, good or bad, they worked in that specific situation. We knew our doctrine, but consciously deviated from it because the battlefield's conditions made modification necessary. We, as the leaders of today's Army, owe it to our soldiers to give them every opportunity to succeed and win in combat. This responsibility sometimes calls on us to make some hard decisions. It would be nice to believe that every decision you might be called upon to make was neatly laid out for you in some field manual. Of course, they are not. Our soldiers' lives and mission success depend directly on our ability as dynamic leaders to adapt existing doctrine to the specifics of each new battlefield and, ultimately, to the accomplishment of the commander's intent.

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