An Engineer Reconnaissance Platoon: *A Proposal*

By Major Douglas McNeese and Captain Steven Creighton

Too often during simulated combat, engineers must painstakingly "pull" critical information from maneuver channels, only to receive reports that lack important engineer-specific details regarding obstacles, enemy engineers, and terrain. To correct this shortfall, we propose that U.S. Army engineers implement a reconnaissance platoon that is organic to divisional engineer battalions.

The proposed platoon would consist of three engineer scout squads that could be either independently sliced to task force (TF) scout platoons or operate together as a brigade reconnaissance asset. In practice and by doctrine, TF engineers attach combat engineers to their TF scout platoons to enhance obstacle identification and terrain analysis. The engineer reconnaissance platoons would support this effort three ways:

- Provide tactically proficient engineers who are trained to operate forward of the forward edge of the battle area (FEBA).
- Promote habitual relationships between scout platoons and their engineers.
- Clearly define the role of engineer squads when they support scout platoons.

Current Engineer Reconnaissance: Practice and Doctrine

During most combat operations, combat engineers support scouts and provide technical expertise about terrain and obstacles—an asset usually welcomed by the scouts. However promising this arrangement may appear, the value added is usually minimal, and the shortcomings are no fault of the soldiers. Most combat engineers are not trained in scout tactics and thus lack the tactical expertise needed to integrate properly. Furthermore, no guidelines exist for engineers tasked to support scouts. Before we can expect top performance from our soldiers, we must determine–

- Who commands and controls the engineer scouts.
- If combat engineers should ride inside scout vehicles or operate their own.
- If habitual relationships between scouts and engineers are desirable.
- The tasks combat engineer scouts should focus on in offensive and defensive operations.

Maneuver doctrine describes the engineer augmentation of TF scouts in detail, but engineer doctrine on the issue is vague. For example, FM 17-98, *Scout Platoon,* page 6-32, states, *"In reconnaissance operations, an engineer squad may be placed in direct support of a scout platoon."* Six pages are dedicated to engineer capabilities and limitations and 32 pages in the appendix address obstacles. Similarly, FM 71-2, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force,* page 3-47 (paragraph h), supports this by stating, *"Elements of the supporting engineer unit are employed with the [scout platoon] to reconnoiter obstacles."*

Unfortunately, the engineer response to these expectations is not strong. Both FM 5-71-100, *Division Engineer Combat Operations,* and FM 5-100, *Engineer Combat Operations,* repeatedly stress the importance of engineers in reconnaissance and the intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) process, but they fail to address methods of employment and command and control. FM 5-100, page 44, states, *"Engineers identify specific reconnaissance requirements and augment dismounted patrols and scouts to identify obstacle characteristics."* It goes on to say, *"During the attack, engineer reconnaissance teams and engineer units provide continuous surveillance along the routes of advance."* Here, our doctrine clearly acknowledges the need to augment scouts and to establish engineer reconnaissance teams but says nothing more—leaving implementation a hodgepodge, makeshift element determined by the task force engineer.

Mission and Employment

The engineer reconnaissance platoon should have several intelligence-gathering missions, including:

- Terrain analysis.
- Determination of trafficability on proposed routes.
- Determination of soil suitability for digging.
- Route reconnaissance, road reconnaissance, and bridge classification.
- Reconnaissance of specific named areas of interest, targeted areas of interest, and decision points that may contain obstacles or be tied into obstacle plans.

- Identification of areas forward of the FEBA suitable for FASCAM minefields.
- Covert breaching and obstacle marking.
- Detailed reporting of enemy obstacles and overwatch positions.
- Identification of threat engineer equipment and capabilities.

Information on threat engineer capabilities assists commanders and planners in determining the enemy's main effort, forward security element, and flank; and in confirming assumptions made during the IPB and engineer battlefield assessment (EBA). Enemy minefield reports should include length of frontage, depth, orientation, density, composition, and bypass information. This detailed minefield information usually is not reported by TF scouts but is critical to engineers planning a breach.

Both scouts and engineers currently have too wide a spectrum of missions and tasks expected of them, which limits their ability to do any one mission well. For example, scouts are expected to be experts in all forms of reconnaissance, enemy identification, counterreconnaissance, and enemy obstacles. Similarly, combat engineers are expected to be experts in bridging, emplacement of friendly obstacles, enemy obstacles, and reconnaissance. The introduction of engineer recon units will produce more focused combat engineers and give both scouts and engineers a more attainable scope of mission requirements.

Equipment and Organization

The vehicles currently used in scout platoons are armored HMMWVs and off-road motorcycles. Of these, armored HMMWVs would best suit the engineer recon platoon. They are fast, maneuverable, quiet, and easily maintained; provide small arms protection; and have storage space and a turret. A recon squad might consist of eight men and two HMMWVs, with four soldiers per vehicle. Additional equipment for the squad may include an MK-19 grenade launcher, a .50 caliber machine gun, squad automatic weapons (SAW), AT-4s, AN-PSS 12 mine detectors, global positioning systems (GPS), SINCGARS radios, AN-PVS-7 night vision devices, hand-emplaced minefield-marking systems (HEMMS), VS-17 panels, demolition kits, and Polaroid cameras.

Command and Control

In a task force, the scout platoon serves as the commander's eyes and ears on the battlefield. The scout platoon leader takes orders and sends reports directly to the TF tactical operations center (TOC). Similarly, the engineer recon platoon leader should send reports directly to the engineer battalion TOC. This reporting procedure will provide brigade and TF engineers with direct links to engineer-specific intelligence forward of the FEBA. Currently, brigade and TF engineers obtain that intelligence, often by pulling it secondhand through maneuver S2 channels or by finding it the hard way—such as running into an enemy mine.

Engineer recon squads should be tied into brigade and TF reconnaissance and surveillance plans and employed in one of three ways:

- Sliced out, with each squad supporting a scout platoon.
- As a platoon, working for the brigade engineer.
- As a mixture.

In the last two scenarios, forward employment of an engineer reconnaissance element will require special measures for resupply, presumably by the same element that resupplies the scouts.

Threat Engineer Reconnaissance

Engineer battalions in the former Soviet pact forces have used engineer recon platoons for many years. Their platoons provide squad-sized engineer recon patrols (ERPs) that colocate with division and regimental recon patrols. The ERPs send engineer-specific intelligence to a director of engineers at both regimental and division levels. Although the recon companies of motorized rifle regiments and tank regiments consist of motorcycles and BMP and BRM armored vehicles, the engineer recon platoons have BTR armored vehicles. The platoons also have DIM truck-mounted mine detectors and VHF radios.

Engineer Reconnaissance Training

Training combat engineers to be qualified engineer reconnaissance scouts would neither be difficult nor require an additional military occupational specialty or time away from Fort Leonard Wood. The following program proposal is austere because combat engineers often are *tactically* deficient not *technically* deficient when operating forward of the FEBA.

The long classroom hours spent in basic and advanced courses for engineer officers and NCOs (EOBC, EOAC, BNCOC, and ANCOC) have produced well-schooled leaders. However, training in tactics such as noise and light disciplines, stealth movement, breaking contact, and reporting is lacking. Unfortunately, on-the-job training often leads to "the untrained leading the untrained" and specialty training in the Ranger and Scout Platoon Leader Schools is mainly for officers. Moreover, the Sapper Leader Course at Fort Leonard Wood focuses on light operations. The following tiers would establish a sound training program for engineer scouts.

1. Increase instruction for officers in EOBC to include task force scout operations (how they are employed and how engineer recon squads can assist scouts with gathering intelligence). Continue to send lieutenants to the Scout Platoon Leader Course at Fort Knox after they graduate from EOBC,

and add a combat engineer reconnaissance course to Fort Leonard Wood's program of instruction.

2. Train NCOs at the proposed combat engineer reconnaissance course at Fort Leonard Wood. As a branch of the Sapper Leader Course, it would be similar to the Scout Platoon Leader Course but tailored for engineers.

3. Provide motivated basic trainees desiring to be scouts with additional advanced individual training immediately after graduation. This special module would teach the basics of enemy obstacle identification and reconnaissance. Upon arrival at their units, these soldiers would receive additional training from NCOs trained at the combat engineer reconnaissance course.

Meet the Challenge!

The potential benefits of adding a combat engineer reconnaissance unit to our force structure is apparent at all echelons. Engineer recon platoons would assist scouts in gathering intelligence and significantly increase the level of combat engineer expertise throughout the Corps. Why not provide highly trained engineer soldiers tailored to meet the challenge! Implementing this platoon would be relatively simple, and soldiers from squad leader to division engineer would benefit. Essayons!

Note: Since this article was written, the Experimental Force at Fort Hood has added a reconnaissance section to the engineer battalion headquarters as part of their organization. In addition, the Engineer School is currently writing FM 5-170, *Engineer Reconnaissance,* which will addresss many of the concerns in this article. The authors' concerns, however, are still valid and are provided to stimulate discussion.

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The ENGINEER Writer's Guide

We think engineers take a special pride in their profession, and *Engineer* is always looking for articles from readers who want to share their expertise, experience and ideas.

If you're a potential contributing writer, here are a few "writer's guide" tips to steer you in the right direction:

Articles may discuss engineer training, operations, doctrine, equipment, history, or other areas of general interest to an engineer readership.

We're especially interested in articles that have a "how-to-do-it-better" theme. For instance, we're not looking for articles telling readers how you conducted a routine field exercise. But if you think you have a "new-and-improved" way of conducting a tactical operation, training exercise, or other operational procedure that may prove helpful to other engineers—that's what we need.

Articles should generally come from contributors with firsthand experience with the subject being presented. Avoid theatrical writing styles like: "It was a dark and stormy night...," or "...the soldier blazed through the jungle on his lumbering D7, providing a trail of freedom for the other vehicles..."

Articles should be concise, straightforward, and in the active voice.

Length should range between 2,000 and 4,000 words and text should be typewritten and double-spaced. Generally, each such page will contain from 200 to 250 words. Provide a disc with the manuscript.

Articles containing attributable information or quotations not referenced in the story should carry appropriate footnotes.

Manuscripts must be original, unpublished, and not under consideration by another publication.

All submissions are subject to editing.

Contributors are encouraged to include black-and-white or color photos, artwork, and/or line diagrams that illustrate information in the article.

Include your full name, rank, current unit and job title. Also include a list of your past assignments, experience and education; your mailing address; and commercial daytime phone number. Send articles to: Editor, *Engineer Professional Bulletin,* ATTN: ATSE-TD-D-EB, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri 65473-6650.

If you have questions about an article you're working on—or considering writing—call Cathy Eubanks or Shirley Bridges, at DSN 676-4104, or commercial (573)563-4104. We look forward to hearing from you.