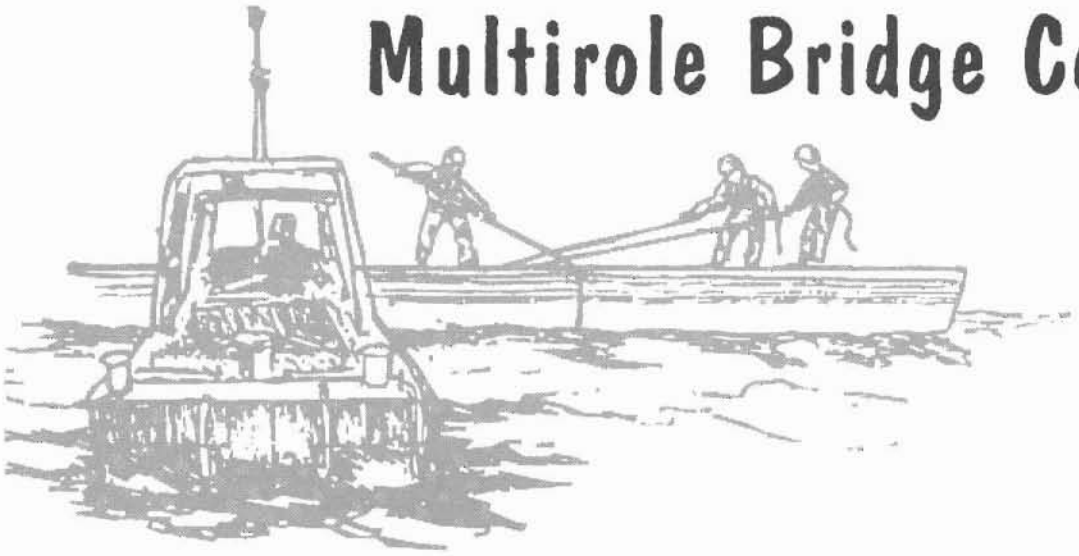
The Emerging Multirole Bridge Company



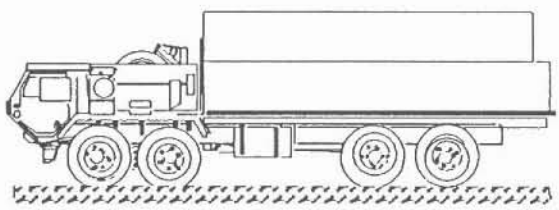
By Rebecca Johnson and Alan Schlie

These are exciting—yet challenging—times in the bridging community, with major changes facing the "bridge company" that exists today. The force projection mandated by Force XXI requires a refined focus for bridging. Our doctrine is sound; but there are ways to increase training opportunities, develop more knowledgeable leaders, and shift the focus of organizations to meld with the bridging systems forecasted for tomorrow's battlefield.

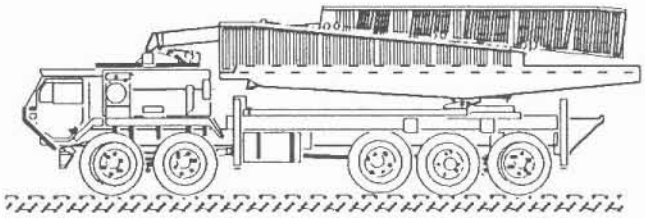
From the METT-T perspective of increased and more varied missions, a proliferation of enemies, an unchanging terrain, a reduction of troops, and compressed time schedules, it is clear that commanders must adjust the way they prepare for and execute bridging missions. Reduced budgets affect manpower, force structure, new equipment procurement, current bridge stock maintenance and storage, and training opportunities. The shift to CONUS-based staging and contingency planning means that U.S. forces will no longer have large numbers of readily available bridge units dedicated solely to either float or fixed bridging. This need for increased versatility will affect both the Active and Reserve Components.

The U.S. Army Engineer School is reevaluating how to meet the Army's bridging requirements and river-crossing operations for Force XXI and beyond. With the new integrated information processing systems of Force XXI, river-crossing opportunities will be quickly identified and execution will rely heavily on rapid-response capability for bridge companies.

Heavy Dry Support Bridge



Transport Vehicle



Launching Vehicle

Art courtesy Teledyne Continental Motors

Common bridge transporter with improved ribbon bridge interior bay

What has emerged from a study of this issue is the concept of a multirole bridge company (MRBC). The MRBC constitutes a standardized bridge company that is equipped with bridge-erection equipment and transporters; it is capable of constructing both fixed and float bridge sets much as a unit would expend a basic load of ammunition.

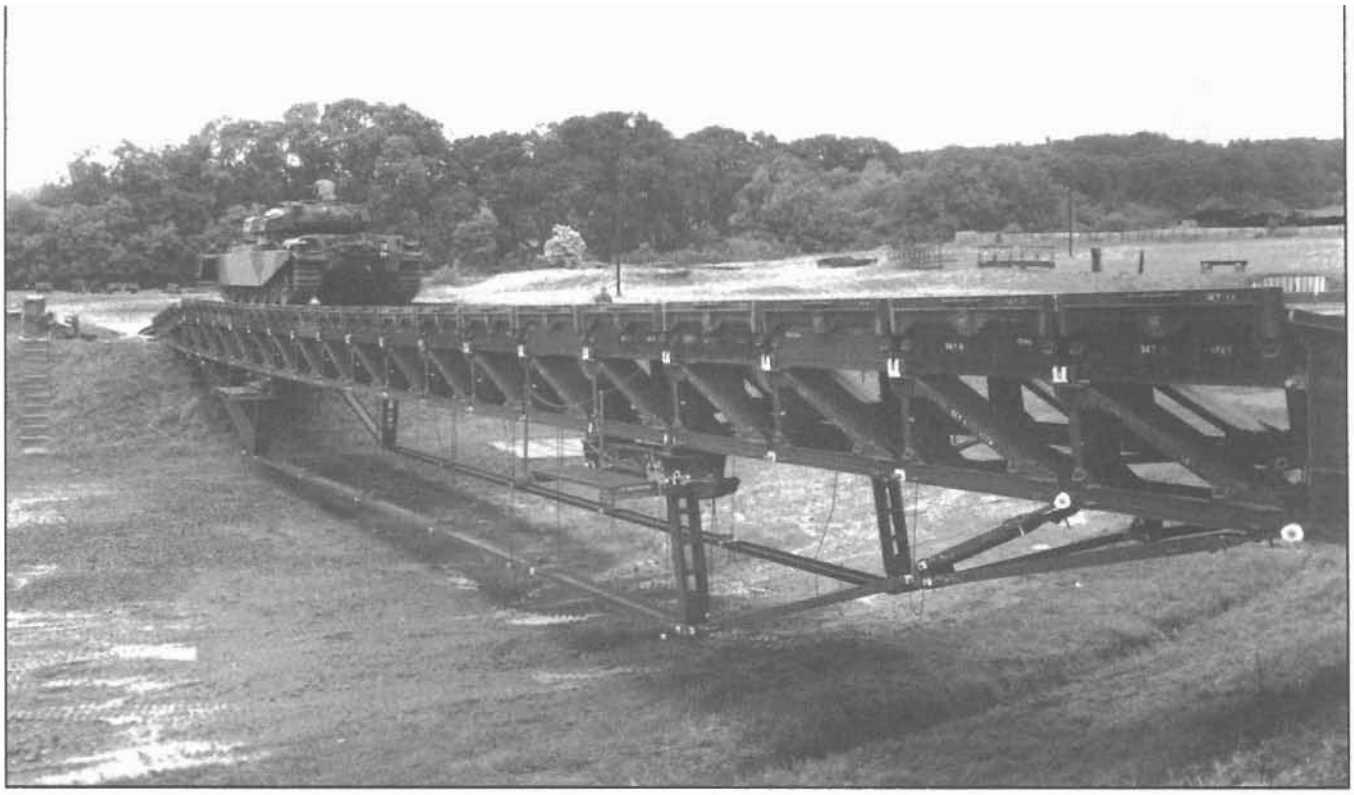
As now proposed, the multirole bridge company will be trained and equipped to install (assemble and disassemble) all types of existing and projected, prefabricated, U.S. bridging systems. The headquarters section will be able to perform the command and control functions necessary for the unit. Each bridge platoon will possess transporters, bridge-erection boats, and bridge-erection sets as organic equipment and will be capable of responding to platoon missions or combining for company missions. A support platoon will contain maintenance and equipment support, plus a small group to operate a bridge supply yard. A platoon receiving a mission will respond using an initial basic load of the desired bridge. When it completes the bridge, the platoon moves to the next site, either picking up the required bridge along the way or finding the bridge cached at the site.

As prefabricated bridging is replaced by nonstandard or more permanent bridging, the platoon will respond to bridge-retrieval missions. Retrieved bridges will reenter the supply system or be stored in the unit's bridge supply yard. The MRBC's capabilities will give commanders the ability to quickly maneuver and respond, through either fixed or float bridging or a combination of bridging appropriate for the mission.

This newly structured MRBC will operate within a "lane" on the battlefield (an area defined by a maneuver brigade's area of operation) and provide the necessary bridging for multiple axes of advance. Trailing closely behind the combat forces, it will move forward when necessary to support assault crossings. Additional MRBCs—provided from corps assets—may be assigned to the lane when gap-crossing requirements exceed the capabilities of a single MRBC.

During peacetime, the more flexible and versatile MRBC will also allow MOS 12C soldiers to improve their proficiency. Units will maintain an initial basic load of various bridge types in their storage yard in sets, by truckloads, with the fixed bridging remaining on pallets. Platoons will alternate through training cycles on the different sets. The dividends paid from increased training opportunities will provide an expertise not currently maintained by "single-specialty" bridge units.

During deployments, the type of bridge required on entering the theater will be uploaded first, with the remaining basic load from the storage yard following quickly and possibly becoming part of the unit's "footprint." The numerous types of bridges immediately available also will enhance the engineers' ability to respond to civic-action missions.



Medium-girder bridge

Final decisions as to the size and end-state composition of the multirole bridge company have not been made. However, many units can expect to have the heavy dry support bridge (HDSB) and the improved ribbon bridge carried on heavy expanded mobility tactical truck (HEMTT)-chassis transporters. Interim organizations will include basic loads of the medium-girder bridge (MGB), Bailey bridge, and ribbon bridge carried on the current transporters. Whatever the organization's stage of development, the multirole bridge company will not be dedicated to only one type of bridging. Bridge specialists must continue to be proficient in all types of prefabricated bridging.

An evaluation of the MRBC's command and control capabilities is scheduled during the 74th Assault Float Bridge Company's deployment to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, in July 1995. Multiple missions of float bridging, fixed bridging, and logistics hauling will provide the basis for the evaluation and provide cross-training opportunities. The results and the experiences of the participants will be used to make final adjustments to the concept and doctrine.

MRBC engineers cannot exist on the battlefield without support from other branches:

- ***Quartermaster***—to order and track bridge stocks
- ***Transportation***—to haul replenishment bridge sets
- ***Ordnance***—to repair transporters, erection boats, and bridge components
- ***Air Defense Artillery***—to protect crossing sites during and after construction

Treating bridging as a commodity, instead of bridge company table of organization (TOE) property, will highlight the criticality of branch interaction and demand more notice at every war-gaming exercise. Missions executed on the battlefield must first be practiced in training exercises.

Versatility, as stated in FM 100-5, *Operations*, denotes the ability to perform in many roles and environments during war and operations other than war. It allows a smooth transition from one mission to another. Versatility requires competence in a variety of missions and skills, which suggests that all military organizations must have the ability to organize in various combinations and the capacity to redeploy from one area or region to another without losing focus. Versatility is the result of well-led, well-trained, and well-equipped forces; high standards; and detailed planning. Versatility ensures that units can conduct many types of operations, either sequentially or simultaneously, with the same degree of success.

Military bridging is a critical element in maneuvering on the battlefield. Since bridge construction is an engineer mission, the multirole bridge company will ensure the versatility engineer bridge units need to meet the challenges of Force XXI.

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