

OPFOR Engineer Platoon Leaders Learn Their Combined-Arms Trade

By Captain Glenn Matlock, Jr.



By and large, junior officers who serve as combat supporters with the opposing force (OPFOR) at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, develop a firmer grasp of combined-arms operations than their peers who serve in different branches and/or duty locations. Engineer platoon leaders serving with the 58th Combat Engineer Company (CEC)—the separate company that supports the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) in its OPFOR mission at the NTC—learn and master their trade as combined-arms combat supporters. They practice multiechelon leadership, hone their skills as staff advisors, develop a higher degree of situational awareness, and repeatedly plan and conduct a combined-arms operation. Then, they put all the pieces of the combined-arms operation together in a large-scale-conflict scenario.

Serving in Multiechelon Leadership Positions

The learning curve for junior officers in the OPFOR is steep because they typically serve in

positions that represent units one to two levels higher than their actual unit. For example, a platoon replicates a company and a company replicates a battalion. As such, the leadership also must rise to the occasion of the troop-leading duties that the replicated unit requires. Put simply, a platoon leader in garrison becomes a company commander on the battlefield.

When the 11th ACR takes on the role of the OPFOR, it fuses two maneuver squadrons together to replicate a motorized rifle regiment (MRR), consisting of four motorized rifle battalions (MRBs) and each implied headquarters element. In support of the OPFOR mission, the 58th CEC coordinates the efforts of a visiting engineer company with its internal capabilities to replicate the 46th Krasnovian Engineer Battalion.

To simplify the process of supporting the OPFOR in each of its dynamic missions on the NTC battlefield, the 58th CEC incorporates the duties of the three line platoon leaders into components of the OPFOR campaign. One platoon leader is responsible for coordinating the

company's support for offensive operations, such as meeting battles, MRR penetration missions, counterattacks, raids, and decoy missions. Another platoon leader coordinates the company's support to defensive operations, including deliberate and hasty defenses, covering-zone operations, and security-zone operations. The third platoon leader either augments the executive officer as the operations officer in the field or manages sustainment projects tasked to the company. The assault-and-obstacle platoon leader advises maneuver commanders on all survivability operations.

In defensive operations, such as MRB deliberate defenses or MRR security-zone defenses, the platoon leader responsible for defensive support coordinates not only the efforts of his platoon but also those of the other platoons in the company and an additional company of augmentee engineers. In terms of execution, the defensive platoon is responsible for the entire defensive operation, a planning and supervising task usually tackled by

a company or battalion. Likewise, the offensive platoon leader is responsible for all engineer support to the MRR in offensive operations, usually a task for an engineer company or battalion commander.

Engineer platoon leaders have the opportunity to staff and plan the operation that they will support, develop the accompanying engineer overlays and estimates, and then execute and supervise that operation. Platoon leaders can observe their overlay becoming not just a complex obstacle belt but a full-blown engagement area. Their level of involvement stretches through the entire defensive operation as they overwatch the critical areas in the obstacle belts—supervising the execution of situational obstacles, reporting the enemy's positions and activities while conducting breaching operations, and calling for fire. Not only do the platoon leaders experience the magnitude of providing engineer support to a regiment-sized unit, but they also witness the effects of their mission on the higher unit's mission and on the enemy.

Serving As Unit Leaders and Staff Officers

Combat supporters who are with the OPFOR wear dual hats, serving both as their respective unit leader and as the regimental staff officer. In the OPFOR, there are no staff officers who are equivalent to assistant brigade engineers to serve as the link between the regimental staff and the 58th CEC. Instead, the platoon leader who supports offensive or defensive operations is the engineer advisor to the staff and commander. These platoon leaders, with varied assistance from the executive officer, attend the planning sessions for the war games, orders, and rehearsals that are pertinent to either the offensive or defensive operation.

Regimental and squadron staff officers and commanders depend on engineer platoon leaders to be experts in the mobility/countermobility/survivability Battlefield Operating System (BOS). Engineer lieutenants must be masters of their field craft because



An OPFOR engineer helps his squad create a breach lane.

the success of the NTC operation depends on it. For example, the platoon leaders who support defensive operations advise MRB commanders on engagement-area development, situational-obstacle use, and engineer blade assets for all the defensive missions for a given rotation.

There are usually five battle scenarios for the force-on-force portion of the rotation, with at least two or three of them being defensive missions for the OPFOR. Therefore, the defensive platoon leader must coordinate with three separate MRB commanders to plan engagement-area development for each rotational scenario. Planning must include analysis of the enemy's possible courses of action, deception, flank security, mobility of the combined-arms reserve, and the location of fighting positions and obstacle belts in relation to system capabilities of both forces and terrain. In short, the engineer platoon leader must craft an engagement area that optimizes engineer assets and time, maximizes the use of terrain, protects friendly combat forces, and fully supports the MRB commander's intent and scheme of maneuver. These tasks normally are performed by an engineer-battalion staff or by an engineer-company commander. Platoon leaders in the 58th CEC perform the tasks with minimal supervision, in addition to performing their platoon-leader duties. As a result, junior lieutenants practice the higher-level planning and staffing

process, which provides them exposure to the combined-arms planning process.

Learning Through Repetition

Junior officers who serve with the OPFOR practice combined-arms operations several times per month every month. At the NTC, there is always a next time. Leaders can take away lessons and apply what they have learned repeatedly throughout their tenure of leadership. Furthermore, since the OPFOR must be a freethinking opponent, the scheme of engineer operations must constantly adapt to the capabilities of the visiting brigade combat team, the regimental commander's intent, and the past lessons learned. Thus, combat-engineer platoon leaders can apply both the positives and negatives of lessons learned for the same type of operations (for example, security-zone defense) and apply them as they plan, staff, and execute engineer operations for future battles. As a former commander of the 58th CEC said, "You have a rare opportunity to make a plan and then see the execution of that plan."

The success or failure of the regiment provides instant feedback on the junior officers' decisions and actions before and during an operation. Unlike many of their maneuver companions, platoon leaders from the 58th CEC attend the regimental after-action reviews ("hot washes"). There they receive instant feedback not only on their unit's success

or failure but also on how it affected the success or failure of the OPFOR.

Developing Situational Awareness

In general, combat supporters develop a high degree of situational awareness because they typically support echelons two and three levels higher than their own. Unlike their maneuver and engineer counterparts at other duty stations, OPFOR engineer platoon leaders must attend war games, staff synchronization drills, regimental operations orders, back briefs, and regimental rehearsals. Thus, they develop an understanding of the mission as a regimental operation as opposed to a sub-unit-level operation.

The mission itself requires that the platoon leaders operate at a higher level of situational awareness, because they must synchronize the transition of assets from unit to unit—sometimes several times in one operation. Although they may be task-organized to one MRB at the onset of a mission, they are regimental assets and must act to accomplish the regimental mission. For example, platoon leaders must anticipate encountering situational obstacles throughout the depth of the battlefield simultaneously and must advise the maneuver commander on how to employ engineer assets both before and during the mission.

The task organization of engineers changes from mission to mission in an offensive campaign with the OPFOR. Engineer platoon leaders play a crucial role in determining that task organization because they are ultimately the ones who advise the regimental staff and commander on how to best employ engineer capabilities based on intent, terrain, and enemy capabilities. The typical task organization of engineers during an offensive operation is to attach a mobility support detachment (MSD) with the forward security element and a mobile obstacle detachment (MOD) and a Volcano (UMZ) with the advanced guard main body; then, an MSD and an MOD travel with the main body. However, depending on a rotational brigade's

propensity to use and proficiency in using situational obstacles, both MSDs may be "front-loaded" with the advanced guard. Likewise, the UMZ and the MODs may be task-organized as an independent situational-obstacle detachment traveling with the antitank battalion to seal assailable flanks autonomously of the main maneuver effort's ability to develop the situation. The engineer platoon leader, under the coaching of the 58th CEC commander, makes these determinations and recommendations in the planning processes that go into each mission.

"The vast training area of the NTC and the dynamic desert terrain give engineer platoon leaders the opportunity to develop a varied expertise in operations."

Engineers also learn about the other BOSs and how they all fit together. As a matter of routine, engineer platoon leaders advise peers in maneuver squadrons on employing internal and external assets to conduct an operation effectively—whether it is during an STX or a rotational scenario. Sometimes, an engineer may actually advise a peer on how to integrate all attached combat-support elements into the scheme of maneuver, or even shape the peer's scheme of maneuver. The reason engineers can do this is because they have more experience with the combined-arms concept and how each BOS fits in the picture. Integrating internal operations into a combined-arms team is essential to understanding the concept, and practicing that integration is the key to mastering it. OPFOR engineer platoon leaders practice this every month.

Putting It All Together

Officers at the NTC have the opportunity to participate in large-scale execution of exercises, putting together all the elements of maneuver and combined-arms operations. Leaders can practice their skills through train ups, rehearsals, and STXs. However, there is no substitute for putting all the pieces together. Every exercise within the OPFOR regiment is always a combined-arms operation.

Additionally, junior leaders and soldiers have the opportunity to focus on their specific tasks—whether it is emplacement of obstacles or maneuver support—because the higher-echelon leaders are very efficient in planning and coordination, which enables routine execution. The normal difficulties that hinder training in most units, such as availability of maneuver areas and training dollars, do not play a major role in shaping training for the OPFOR. While it places an unreasonable limitation on home-station training, ranges, and demolition qualification tables, the 58th CEC has the opportunity to conduct multiechelon maneuver and operations—be it in either the rotational scenario or in rotational train-up STXs. Thus, platoon leaders have the luxury of conducting essential engineer cornerstone missions and doing so at an incredibly high operational tempo.

The vast training area of the NTC and the dynamic desert terrain give engineer platoon leaders the opportunity to develop a varied expertise in operations. The NTC rotation is the end-all training event for which most other units train. It is the opportunity to put an operation together against a large force in a large training area. For the OPFOR, it occurs every month. The dynamics of supporting several headquarters and units simultaneously is a matter of routine for engineer platoon leaders who serve in the OPFOR. This allows junior officers to develop skills necessary to effectively advise and support units in multilevel operations.

The multiechelon operations encompassed in each rotational scenario

(continued on page 30)

provide junior officers with an end-state result in mind for each given mission. Platoon leaders know how they fit into the big picture and how the big picture fits into their training and performance.

Conclusion

While no one could win the argument that engineer platoon leaders at the NTC receive better overall training than their counterparts, it goes without saying that they develop and master the concept of their combined-arms role on the battlefield. The reason is simple: They do it the right way, all the way, all the time, every time. The Army depends on combat supporters to know and master their trade. When questioned about the use of engineers in the complex Force XXI Army during a visit he made to the NTC, Major General George Harmeyer (former commander of the Armor School) replied to the 58th CEC commander that “the onus would be on the maneuver commander to know how to use you.”

The truth is that only knowledgeable and aggressive combat-support officers are going to get their assets integrated properly into the combined-arms fight. Those who have served with the 58th CEC have had a good taste of that concept. Lieutenants should seek out this assignment if they want to really learn their profession.



Captain Matlock, who is currently at Fort Carson, Colorado, spent three years at the National Training Center. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he holds a master's in engineering management from the University of Missouri-Rolla. CPT Matlock recently completed the Engineer Captain's Career Course and the CAS3 Course.

Reference:

Law, Leonard J. and Ferdon, Keith R. “Red Devils! The 58th Combat Engineer Company.” *Engineer*, November 1999, pp. 28-33.