

Engineer Platoon Leader at NTC

You graduated from EOBC three months ago in the top 20 percent of your class. You took a quick 30-day leave to relax and then reported to your unit ready to start work with the "Real Army."

After a hasty introduction, your new company commander briefed you on all your additional duties, told you that you would be taking over second platoon, and said that the company would be leaving for Fort Irwin, CA, to provide support to 3rd Brigade at the National Training Center.

It's now the fourth day of a 14-day rotation through the training center. Since the exercise kicked off, the task force that your platoon is supporting has conducted a night attack, a deliberate daylight attack, and is currently preparing to defend to retain a battle position. So far, your platoon has not been actively involved in any of the operations.

The S-3 has approached you several times for information he needed to write the Engineer annex to the task force operations order; but for the most part, you just attend the briefings, try to understand where your platoon fits into the order of movement, and then follow the vehicles in front of you to the objective. You are beginning to wonder when you will get a "real mission" so you can show these tread-heads what the Engineers can really do.

At 0330 you receive word to attend a warning order briefing at the task force TOC in 30 minutes. As you arrive, the S-3 is going over the general situation: The task force has received a reflex mission and will conduct a hasty attack NLT 0800. The various members of the staff go through their portions of the briefing as you settle back and

by CPT David R. Frick

mentally wonder how you're going to get all your vehicles topped off with fuel before 0800.

After the artillery finishes their portion of the briefing, you expect the S-3 to stand up and tell everyone what the Engineer mission is. Normally in an offensive operation like the one just received, the S-3 will say something about the priority of Engineer effort as being to "provide mobility support as required" and then move on to coordinating instructions.

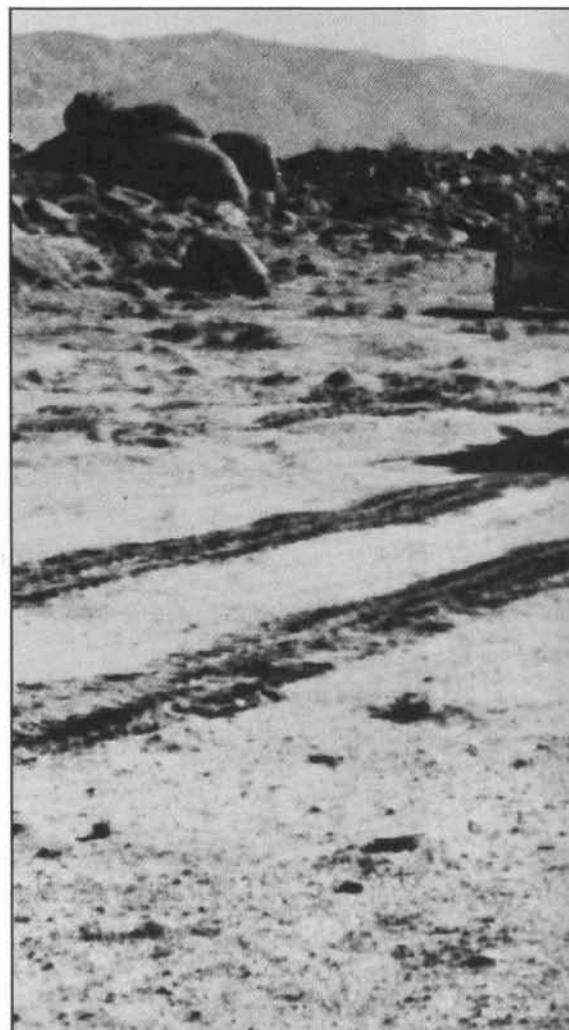
However, this time it's different. Instead of the S-3, the task force commander gets up and explains that for the last two operations, the task force has been criticized in after-action critiques concerning its utilization of Engineers. The ADC will be observing the attack in the morning, and the task force WILL function as a cohesive and coordinated Combined Arms unit. The TF commander proceeds to outline the type and size of threat-force obstacles to be expected and then turns to you and says, "What do the Engineers say about how we should breach obstacles in a situation like this?"

You stumble to your feet as your mind races for an answer to his question. Your momentary silence provides an opportunity for others in the TOC to bring up their own questions.

"Shouldn't we be attaching a squad of you guys out to each of the company teams?"

"Who actually controls you anyway?"

"What exactly can you do that the grunts can't do?"



"What kind of special breaching assets do you have?"

The commander calls for silence and waits for your response. You mention that most of your mine detectors were working before you left for NTC. Also, your platoon sergeant brought some fiberglass probes and enough demolitions to blow the mines in place once you detect them.

The S-3 then asks how you plan to solicit volunteer detector operators for the upcoming assault under direct fire . . . Silence . . . Anxious to get yourself out of the line of direct fire, you fall back on the old cop-out you learned at the basic course and mutter, "Sir, I'll look into it and get back with you ASAP."

The S-3 shakes his head, and the sergeant major gives you a look that would freeze tequilla. You sit back down and for the first time since graduation seriously consider your Uncle Eddie's offer to join his insurance firm after you get out.



Sadly enough, the situation described here has occurred more often than we as Engineers would care to admit. The reasons it occurs are many, and the solutions are neither simple nor easy to implement. The purpose of this article is to focus some attention on key areas and identify some actions that will assist the platoon leader in overcoming or at least minimizing some of the problems.

To begin, the role of the Engineer platoon leader must be clearly understood. Unlike his infantry or armor counterpart, the Engineer platoon leader has two separate roles that he must fill:

- **Platoon Leader**—That of leader, manager, and supervisor of a small unit.
- **Staff Officer**—That of Engineer advisor and “expert” on the task force staff.

Understandably, this is a tremendous responsibility for anyone with the experience and knowledge of a second lieutenant to be expected to fulfill. The task is made even more difficult be-

cause most maneuver commanders and S-3s are not proficient in planning for the use of Engineers.

The result is that many times at NTC, Engineer support is relatively ineffective. Obstacles are not placed to support the tactical plan and are easily bypassed. Obstacle breaching and fighting position construction is conducted by maneuver forces alone when the bulk of the effort should be performed by Engineers.

So, how can a lieutenant with six months time in service have any impact on task-force operations in a realistic combat environment? Several points outlined below can contribute to Engineer performance at the task-force level and are within the power of the lieutenant to implement.

Be technically and tactically proficient. Know what your platoon's capabilities are in providing mobility, countermobility, and survivability support in a Combined-Arms operation. You're not expected to be a walking field or technical manual, but you

Engineers must coordinate with their supported maneuver units. The minefield emplaced by Engineers is being closed by the withdrawing Cavalry unit (U.S. Army photo).

should have a firm grasp on what your platoon's mission is and what its capabilities and limitations are. You also need to be aware of how the maneuver force plans to fight.

Here again, you are not expected to be an expert tactician, but you should be able to intelligently assess the effects of Engineer effort in the overall tactical plan. Characteristics and capabilities of U.S. weapon systems should come as second nature. Becoming proficient in this area requires a lot of individual effort on your part. EOBC gave you a basis to serve in a wide variety of Engineer assignments. Once you find yourself attached to a combat unit, the responsibility falls to you to ensure that you are professionally competent.

Seek out and insist upon joint train-

ing with your supported maneuver unit. Engineers cannot expect to train in a vacuum and then function effectively when thrown together with a combat arms unit at the last minute. Get to know the commanders that you will be working for. Understand how they operate and what they expect of you. Let them know who you are and what you can and cannot do for them.

Practice drills with your supported units and within your platoon for certain actions that are expected to occur on the battlefield. For example, your platoon may want to have breaching teams established with individual roles and actions defined and equipment identified. This ensures that everyone knows what is expected and eliminates a lot of planning and preparation time when actually in the field.

Take an active part in the task force planning and briefing sessions. Don't hold back and wait to be tasked with something to do. Seek out the S-3 and

offer to write or assist in writing the Engineer annex and obstacle plan for the task force operations order. You are the Engineer expert and have much to contribute to how the commander plans his operations.

Use your subordinates effectively. Your platoon sergeant has a tremendous amount of experience that is there for the asking. Use him and your squad leaders effectively and don't try to do everything yourself. While you're involved with the planning process (which will occupy a large part of your time), let the platoon sergeant run the platoon. Provide guidance and follow-up supervision as appropriate.

Develop a "leader's book." Compile a list of commonly referred to data and checklists that will assist you in the performance of your mission. You can't carry all your FM's and TM's to the field, so just include the information that you feel will be critical. The idea is to have something readily available

that will jog your memory and keep you from forgetting important responsibilities.

As the senior Engineer in a battalion-size unit, you have a tremendous responsibility to fulfill. You must make the effort to become proficient in your profession as quickly as possible. Most commanders will understand your situation and will assist you as much as possible. However, there is no excuse for incompetence. Remember, what you lack in experience must be made up in motivation.

CPT David R. Frick is an instructor assigned to the Field Engineering Branch, Department of Military Engineering, at the Engineer School, Fort Belvoir, VA. He has served in Engineer troop and staff assignments in Germany and CONUS. CPT Frick has a bachelor's degree in chemistry from The Citadel and a master's degree in business administration from Boston University.



The siting and construction of fighting positions is another example of the close coordination required between Engineers and their supported maneuver units. The tactical commander knows where to position his weapon systems while the Engineer knows how to construct the positions (U.S. Army photo).