Activating an MRBC: Challenges and Opportunities in Mobilizing a Force Multiplication Unit

By First Lieutenant Chan D. Kim

Creating and sustaining lines of communication in order to equip and supply land forces are keys to success in large-scale combat operations. Assured mobility becomes more difficult when echelons of battalion and above must cross water obstacles. Land force commanders rely on engineers—specifically, multirole bridge company (MRBC) engineers—to rise to these challenges. In a world with capable, modern, and agile forces that enable the rapid massing of fires and penetration of lines, the need for MRBC units is growing; thus, the activation and mobilization of such units are more critical than ever.

The collaboration of multiechelon headquarters, the absence of a preexisting MRBC within 150 miles of Fort Stewart, Georgia, and pandemic-infused complications shaped the operational environment; and, recognizing the importance of the MRBC, the U.S. Army modernization effort led to the 16 October 2021 activation and mobilization of the 497th MRBC, 92d Engineer Battalion, Fort Stewart. The 497th MRBC supports the 20th Engineer Brigade, XVIII Airborne Corps, and is aligned with the armored brigade combat teams within the 3d Infantry Division. This activation/mobilization offered many challenges and opportunities.

The MRBC is a unique engineer company that enables the mobility of land forces across austere and aquatic obstacles. MRBCs have organic assets to improve, repair, construct, and demolish bridge sites. They can also raft, bridge, and assault across wet gaps; control traffic; and support survivability operations. The unique capabilities of the MRBC increase land force combat power following the breach of inland water obstacles. Coordinated at echelons of division or higher, MRBCs efficiently and effectively enable maneuver forces to build and multiply combat power on the far side of the obstacle.

Company Footprint Establishment and Training Area Development

The absence of an active MRBC on or near Fort Stewart led to an extensive organizational effort to learn and network across the Engineer Regiment. The lack of the needed technical expertise prompted the MRBC and the 92d Engineer Battalion to consult with observer coach/trainers and sister MRBC units at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Despite the numerous consultations and engagements, on-the-ground knowledge of MRBC equipment and its maintenance requirements remained insufficient for planning and establishing a proper footprint. These limitations, compounded by limited facilities and funds for force structure change on the installation, led to faulty MRBC assignment of the footprint. Although acquired motorpool space temporarily resolved the issue of equipment receipt and storage, critical issues soon became apparent. Specifically, the overhead lift capacity and dimensions of the maintenance bays were inadequate for the routine maintenance of lengthy MRBC equipment. In addition, tight corners in the vicinity of supporting structures led to limited maneuverability, added risk, and the need for extra caution in operating common MRBC equipment such as bridge transporters.

Furthermore, the unique training assets required for a Regular Army MRBC, which include a wet gap that is adequate for validating a 200-meter-wide company with survivability and traffic control operations, did not meet environmental constraints. Specifically, key limiting factors included a lack of road infrastructure, limited maneuver space, and mobility corridors that allowed for only one-way traffic (which increases the risk involved in MRBC operations). Given only limited, predictable requests from U.S. Army Reserve and Army National Guard MRBCs within Georgia, Fort Stewart had been able to sufficiently accommodate two to three annual training events at a single training area that is often used by civilians for recreational purposes. However, the area offered limited resolution with regard to the 497th MRBC need for more versatile, dynamic training environments that can accommodate night operations, live fires, and CBRN scenarios. These limitations, in conjunction with MRBC training being constrained to one operational area and the acquisition of appropriate approval for varying risks undergoing an evolution, add to the complexity of MRBC mission-essential task training events.

Despite its difficulty in establishing a foothold on Fort Stewart, the 497th MRBC successfully received its personnel and equipment prior to its activation in June 2021. The ability of the 497th MRBC to effectively communicate with the 3d Infantry Division, the Directorate of Public Works, range control, and various other entities to address and

alleviate these ongoing difficulties led to unique opportunities, such as opportunities to participate in construction and survey projects across Fort Stewart. The MRBC was also successful in obtaining approval for training with multiple headquarters. In addition, the lessons learned led to the detailed equipment area analysis necessary for 3d Infantry Division engineers to intake equipment with specialized/detailed maintenance needs. The process of conducting detailed equipment area analysis created the potential to activate two more units within the 92d Engineer Battalion, with minimal impacts to external units across Fort Stewart.

Receipt of Equipment via Lateral Transfers and Fielding

As implied by its name, an MRBC can accomplish varying mission sets—and it does so with assigned organic equipment. However, for the 497th MRBC, this ability was hindered by the difficulty in receiving proper equipment via lateral transfers from other units, by funding, and by fielding issues within several echelons. The difficulty, rooted in the reorganization of the MRBC table of organization and equipment and Army modernization efforts, increased with minimal coordination from the losing unit and external failures.

A Soldier constructs an IRB by joining the IRB bays and pumping the lever to secure the locks.

A lateral transfer, a tool used by two units to transfer government property from one to another, is often managed by commanders to shape and modernize their units in accordance with the Army vision. Because (despite its inactive status) the 497th MRBC received equipment prior to the effective date (E-Date),[1] there were substantial errors in administrative paperwork, which were driven by a lack of awareness about MRBC activation. These errors, compounded with the failure of external units to conduct proper inventories and maintenance, resulted in the frequent rescheduling and delay of lateral transfers involving up to 640 pieces of equipment. (An MRBC is fitted with 1,683 items.) Increases in the disposition actions of simultaneously receiving and conducting turn-ins added to the complexity of property book management.

Ongoing updates to the MRBC table of organization and equipment—such as the exclusion of dry support bridge and other unit kits—further added to the complexity. This degraded certainty on equipment receipt and planning timelines. The updates impacted the Army Tank-Automotive and Armaments Command, Army Material Command, fielding of M30 bridge erection boats and M15/16 improved ribbon bridges (IRBs)/ramps. The updates and consequential delays resulted in longer timelines for sufficiently training equipment operators and maintenance personnel. The delayed training timelines and external funding issues for shipments introduced unpredictability and created reactive (rather than proactive) actions from the 497th MRBC. IRBs are designated as pacing items—vital pieces of equipment that the MRBC needs in order to accomplish its assigned mission—and the delay resulted in readiness issues.

Despite the frustration of the equipment receipt process, the 497th MRBC successfully adapted to unpredictability through a multitude of internal systems such as the Lateral Transfer Program. Often aided by the 92d Engineer Battalion logistics officer/property book officer, the 497th MRBC attracted support from higher headquarters and the 3d Infantry Division in targeting nearby units, identifying organic elements within the battalion, and focusing on deactivating units. This method maximized installation transfers, minimizing travel and enhancing communication. Once the lateral transfer parties had been identified, the MRBC effectively communicated the activation status of the 497th and shared checklists that included key documentation such as disposition orders, delegation authorities, hand receipts, and multiple points of contact for the MRBC and the battalion. The lateral transfers included organic support for conducting on-site inspections and maintenance to minimize errors and enhance lateral transfer completions. The flexibility of the lateral transfer program allows adaptation to changes through weekly prioritization in conjunction with modernization efforts, alignment and scheduling of targeted dispositions, and fielding with experts who were already present in order to leverage their technical knowledge about inspections and maintenance.

The 497th MRBC and the 92d Engineer Battalion also successfully noted signs of delays in order to minimize readiness issues. By building a line of communication across the Fort Stewart installation (specifically, with the Force Management Plans and Operations Division, which delivers the fielded equipment from shipment contractors to the MRBC), the MRBC successfully gathered on-the-ground data and

created accurate timelines. The positive rapport allowed the MRBC to readily adapt to the pending shipment delays and adjust planning and scheduling for training.

Integration Into Army Systems

The U.S. Army uses various online Army systems such as the Digital Training Management System (DTMS) and the Global Combat Support System–Army to collect, analyze, and update unit data such as that contained on a unit status report. The 497th MRBC overcame a multitude of challenges with these systems, primarily driven by its inactive status (prior to the E-Date). The greatest challenge for the MRBC was its integration into DTMS—not only due to E-Date issues, but also to changes in the operational Army, such as changes in the administration of the Army Combat Fitness Test and in record keeping. The 497th MRBC was unable to activate its own account on DTMS until the E-Date, meaning that analog record keeping was conducted to meet reporting requirements from higher headquarters. The problem of MRBC integration into the Global Combat Support System–Army was not as significant; however, integration necessitated increased reliance on the 92d Engineer Battalion staff and, at times, higher command actions for routine maintenance and supply activities that could normally be achieved at the company level. Compiling information from various systems into a unit status report was a challenge when painting an accurate battlefield picture for higher headquarters.

Soldiers take part in a boat school, a modification of driver's training for bridge crewmembers.

Other systems, such as the Transportation Coordinators' Automated Information for Movements Systems and the U.S. Army Total Ammunitions Management Information System, had minimal impact on the MRBC. These systems are not routinely used prior to activation and were heavily used only when the 497th MRBC was planning for larger-scale training exercises. However, the account creation process and training of personnel for these systems did impact the training timeline; in hindsight, these residual impacts could have been prevented by earlier activation, training, and use of these critical systems. More specifically, activation of the system unit identification codes prior to the E-Date would have eased the burden of integrating into these Army systems.

Despite the internal and external challenges of integrating into the aforementioned Army systems, the 497th MRBC benefited from the use of analog systems and the opportunities to build relationships in the midst of challenges. While inefficient and somewhat cumbersome, the use of analog systems empowered the 497th MRBC Operations Section to collect and track data using other (digital) platforms—leading to functionality and redundancy during blackouts in field environments. The ability to minimally rely on a digital footprint enabled the MRBC and postured it for modern warfare camouflage. Furthermore, the process of activating accounts and integrating the MRBC into Army systems enabled communications with various entities within and external to Fort Stewart. Most notably, the 497th MRBC was able to effectively communicate with the higher headquarters readiness office to leverage company needs, advancing equipment and personnel receipt as well as training for key positions, such as crane operators and sling load inspectors. These relationships also allowed the MRBC to troubleshoot system errors using appropriate points of contact and resources that would have otherwise been idle.

Conclusion

Activating and mobilizing a unit with multiple higher headquarters and interested parties and consisting of 183 personnel along with equipment valued at more than $66 million is a massive undertaking. Despite the extensive challenges, the 497th MRBC was successfully activated, executing its activation ceremony at the historic Fort Screven on Tybee Island, Georgia, on 15 October 2021—much like its original predecessor, the 1051st Engineer Port Construction and Repair Group, did on 25 November 1942. MRBCs are critical to accomplishing the Army mission in future warfare, and the appetite is only building. Although difficult and challenging, the fruits of labor and the impact of the MRBC are much greater than the pains of its activation. The Engineer Regiment can learn from the challenges and opportunities of the 497th MRBC to alleviate these pains and more efficiently and effectively impact the U.S. Army.

Endnote:

[1]Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet 71-32. *Force Development and Documentation Consolidated Procedures,* 21 March 2019.

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