THE EOCOP AND ITS PLACE IN LSCO

By Captain Stephen M. Hartman

"Anyone can recognize a pattern; it's having the courage of your convictions to act on it that matters. Audacity isn't taking senseless risks or being rash; it's a natural by-product of confidence and knowledge . . .."

—Pete Blaber[1]

The Army is making a concerted effort to address challenges arising from large-scale combat operations (LSCO) conflicts. As tragic as the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia is, it has provided the United States and its allies with the opportunity to develop technology, training, and a force structure to better suit possible near-peer conflicts within all warfighting functions. One area of focus within the explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) community involves understanding where EOD battalion and group leaders can best support a maneuver commander's intent during LSCO.



An EOD technician participates in a 2-day Unmanned Aircraft System Threat Defense Course.

During counterinsurgency operations, EOD leaders at the 71st Ordnance Group, Fort Carson, Colorado, and their subordinate battalions proved to be invaluable through their ability to relay and map the evolution of enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures; provide expert analysis on improvised explosive device (IED) trends within a combined joint task force commander's area of operations; and ensure that EOD forces were equipped with nuanced EOD explosives, equipment, and tools inherent to the EOD mission. The IED challenges faced in the counterinsurgency fight made multiplicity of the EOD capability more important than ever. As IEDs have proven to be a formidable adversary to the greatest Army in the world, this looming threat will likely never cease to exist. Additionally, the complexity of IEDs would presumably evolve as technology evolves. Both points are evident in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The importance of IEDs and like threats that have been notable in recent counterinsurgency conflicts can be diminished by the vast explosive, chemical, and sometimes nuclear threats that may occur during Phases II and III of a LSCO conflict. Maneuver commanders do not have the appetite to stop the pacing and tempo necessary to be competitive in a LSCO fight—and rightly so. EOD leaders and those within the protection warfighting function must discern ways to provide maneuver commanders with a greater ability to make informed decisions while also maintaining a productive offensive operation.

As divisions and corps train in decisive-action training environments, EOD battalions and groups simultaneously seek to integrate with their respective maneuver counterparts (EOD battalions aligned to a division, EOD groups aligned to a corps, and so on). These invaluable repetitions are essential in warfighter exercises, as they allow staff at all levels to synchronize warfighting functions to enable victory,

stress the importance of staff and staff functions, and most importantly, allow for innovation within warfighting functions and processes in preparation for LSCO with a near-pear threat. Of the innovations within the EOD community, implementation and evolution of the explosive ordnance common operating picture (EOCOP) have most benefited the commander's decision-making process in the decisive-action training environment.

In support of I Corps during Warfighter Exercise 23-1, the 71st EOD Group fully implemented the first iteration of EOCOP, utilizing a Command Post Computing Environment (CPCE) as the essential medium. Provided by the EOD commander, the ECOP portrays a myriad of explosive threats and exploitation opportunities. The EOCOP is scalable, as it highlights explosive hazards and explosive-based considerations from the company to corps levels. Utilizing the CPCE and other battle-tracking mechanisms, EOD commanders can articulate explosive threats, which, without the EOCOP, would be unbeknownst to a commander. Unlike an obstacle overlay, the EOCOP illustrates unexploded ordnance saturation zones (which become inadvertent minefields) resulting from high rates of enemy and friendly fires. These saturation areas can potentially slow and canalize movement due to the presence of scattered munitions, which may include large amounts of high explosives and/or armor-piercing technologies. The EOCOP also tracks locations/discoveries of high-priority weapon caches/ammunition supply points and possible weapon technical intelligence locations/discoveries. The EOCOP has the incredible potential to inform commanders, influence their decision points, and provide the insight necessary to allow survivability of maneuver and logistics. With the EOCOP, EOD leaders provide value by recommending division and corps sustainment areas and identifying locations with greater explosive risks to forces, as well as pinpointing appropriate locations for consolidation of gains and preparation of a defense—all without running the risk of revealing a commander's maneuver tempo.



EOD technicians participate in a 2-day Unmanned Aircraft System Threat Defense Course. (U.S. Army photograph by Staff Sergeant Apolonia Gaspar)

While the EOCOP proved undeniably effective during its first actual implementation in an exercise environment, value could certainly be added. First, EOD missions and future operations could be reported through the CPCE, as that is the Army program of record. EOD technicians currently report all missions, demolition operations, technical intelligence discoveries, and many other actions through the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Information Management System. The issues with the current means of reporting are that it is stovepiped within the EOD community, as only EOD technicians may utilize the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Information Management System, and the information input into the system is not illustrated to enhance understanding of the battlespace regarding explosive hazards. Hybridizing EOD reporting requirements with the capabilities of the CPCE would allow for a better shared understanding of the battlespace, modernized EOD reporting, and increased efficiency within EOD formations. Additionally, using the CPCE



Teams ran full mission profiles during the 71st EOD Group maneuver support training. (U.S. Army photograph by Staff Sergeant Apolonia Gaspar)

to report EOD incidents would allow EOD teams on the ground to make reports to EOD leaders in real time. This repository of information could also be used to address and mitigate issues during the stabilization phase of the of the operation. A well-established and sustained EOCOP is imperative for successful joint communication and protection efforts within the area of operations. Enforcing a shared understanding of explosive hazards on the battlespace allows all agencies, departments, and branches of the military to benefit from a well-maintained and disseminated EOCOP. Second, and more importantly, integration with an artificial intelligence/machine-learning system is essential for EOD support for discerning explosive and explosive ordnance threats. The platform must be capable of searching for, and deriving meaningful information from, web-based sources such as various media outlets, social networks, news stories, uploaded videos, and video logs in order to gain an information advantage. The platform must then be able to identify, recognize, and distinguish explosive ordnance threats found during searches and logically categorize them on a map within the CPCE. Commanders who gain an informational advantage can quickly and accurately gain situational awareness, allow for informed and swift decision making, and exert influence in their areas of operations. Such capabilities would provide EOD battalions and groups with historical and real-time information and intelligence on unexploded ordnance; new explosive hazards or munitions requiring reporting and/or interrogation; and emerging adversary tactics, techniques, and procedures. With these capabilities, EOD leaders may present lifesaving recommendations to and for Soldiers on the ground and ensure that EOD technicians are better equipped to mitigate, attack, and exploit explosive threats with precision and veracity.

As the Army seeks to better understand roles and best practices within the LSCO paradigm, it is imperative that EOD professionals—as well as all other professionals within the Army—seek to evolve and prepare for the possibility of a LSCO fight. EOD personnel have a profound opportunity to assist commanders in making knowledgeable and audacious decisions to fight and win our Nation's wars.

Endnote:

[1]Pete Blaber, *The Mission, the Men, and Me: Lessons From a Former Delta Force Commander*, Dutton Caliber, New York, 2017, p. 234.

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area. If the PPL were integrated as a product to synchronize operations for the next 72–96 hours—along with the air tasking order framework that fires personnel use to plan air support, indirect fires, and aviation attacks—into centralized planning, that would be useful! Integrating the PPL into the air tasking order cycle would allow for thorough staff analysis and coordination to maximize resources, while also enabling the commander to assess risk to the mission during decisive operations. Like the fire support coordinator who (with the targeting team) provides approved guidance, the high-payoff target list, the attack guidance matrix, and target selection standards in relationship to the intelligence and operations situation briefings, the protection coordinator provides guidance on resources needed to protect the approved PPL, assesses task force capabilities and the availability of resources, and then deconflicts future PPLs—all while coordinating resources for decisive operations 72–96 hours before an operation. Protection must be engrained in commanders' thought processes and integrated into the operations process.

If protection in 2040 resembles what it does today, our Army risks failure. Although opinions differ, most leaders can describe what protection currently looks like, what enables it, and what effects it has on mission success. If you ask those same leaders about those same three aspects of protection in 2040, I wonder if you would get any answer at all—never mind differing opinions.

In closing, I offer this description of protection in 2040: "Protection in 2040 will be fully integrated into the operations process through the commander's decision boards, enabled by machine learning and algorithms that fuse data and information to assist commanders in making informed, real-time, risk-based decisions and by systems supported by human-machine integration that provide protected maneuver to enable precision fires."

Endnotes:

[1]AFC Pam 71-20-7, *Army Futures Command Concept for Protection 2028*, 9 April 2021.

[2]Ibid.

[3]General James E. Rainey, Association of the United States Army Global Force Symposium and Exposition, Huntsville, Alabama, 28 March 2023.

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