

EMBRACING A DIVISION LEVEL APPROACH TO GAP CROSSING OPERATIONS

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Having observed numerous War Fighter Exercises (WFX) as a Senior Mentor for the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) over many years, a consistent theme is a failure to plan and organize at the division level for opposed gap crossing operations, specifically, river crossings. This paper is intended to briefly discuss my observations on the common approach divisions use, background to the problem, and suggestions for division leaders and planners to better plan, resource, command, and control (C2) what is an inherently complex task.

In my view, there is a fundamental lack of understanding on how to frame the problem resulting from Army organizational changes and experiences over the past 20-25 years. Divisions recognize these operations are their problem set and they do have success during WFXs. However, they normally task organize assets from the maneuver enhancement brigade (MEB) to brigade combat teams (BCT), turn the operation over to the BCT commander for execution, and then wonder why it wasn't as successful as planned and anticipated.

BCTs can be successful in conducting river crossings during WFXs but are normally encumbered with attached MEB assets to do so. I submit a BCT commander has enough to do with the C2 of his organic units of 7-8 battalions without managing additional resources of which he has limited knowledge and experience. What I am promulgating here is if we accept that these operations are intended to be a division-level responsibility, then divisions must embrace the planning, synchronizing, and C2 required and stop abrogating the responsibility to BCTs.

Development of our leaders at the company, battalion, and brigade levels used to routinely include education and training on the tenets of breaching obstacles. Over the past 15-20 years of operations, we have not focused on obstacle and gap reduction training to the extent we did before 2003, so we are likely undertrained, uneducated, and/or inexperienced. As well, there are few in the force today that have actually conducted river crossing operations as we once routinely did during frequent, large scale training exercises in Germany and Korea.

Dismantling division engineer brigades in the mid-2000s wasn't helpful as it removed the fount of experience and knowledge on how to actually execute these difficult operations. The structure and organization of the MEB is intended to help correct this deficiency and provide engineer and military police assets which are no longer resident in the active component as they once were. However, the Army's active component seldom sees, understands, or trains with a MEB until a WFX, though MEBs are not always included as a training audience in every WFX. In FY 22, for example, only one MEB is scheduled as a training unit for the five WFXs and in FY 23, only two. This results in divisions misusing the MEB due to a lack of understanding about their purpose, organization, and doctrinal responsibilities.

An additional reason why we appear to be deficient in planning, preparing, and executing these operations may be that we have lost what was once beaten into our psyche and training. Most combat arms leaders at the rank of COL and above are familiar with the SOSR-A acronym (suppress, obscure, secure, reduce, assault). These breaching fundamentals (see ATP3-21. 20) were commonly understood at battalion and BCT levels, if not throughout the force, and were the basis for obstacle reduction training.

Notwithstanding the observations discussed above, why do divisions normally struggle? Basically, I just don't see divisions taking ownership and developing plans using a SOSR-A approach. BCTs are tasked and expected to attack to the river, execute a river crossing with provided resources, and then continue the attack with their own assets. This often results in failure as the BCT has little combat power remaining to assault across the river, assuming they were successful in getting there in the first place and then conducting a crossing.

FM 3-94 (division operations) describes the doctrine and control measures for conducting division gap crossing operations and provides the basis for what should be a well understood approach. FM 3-81 describes the MEB doctrine for these operations and numerous other doctrinal manuals discuss and describe breaching and gap crossing operations. The doctrine is evident and always has been, but divisions generally don't use it, as far as I have observed.

Let's assume my premise of how divisions usually approach this issue is valid. There will be some who disagree and argue the division plan is a division operation, to which I would simply ask; Show me how at the division level you embraced this as a division fight and controlled multiple brigade-sized units? What units did the division C2 to synchronize and direct overwhelming combat power to facilitate the crossing? And then, what formations did you designate as the support, breach, and assault forces?

What follows is a discussion of an approach based on doctrine, one that is easily seen as a true division fight and reflects ownership at that level. SOSR-A describes the breaching fundamentals, but the division must properly organize to facilitate their application. The doctrine specifically requires designating a support force, breach force, and assault force, which are all task organized accordingly. Though not discussed here, this operation requires intelligence focus, protection asset positioning (through the MEB), logistical support, and the use of other multi domain assets such as electronic warfare and cyber to enhance success.

To begin, the Deputy Commanding General for Maneuver (DCG-M) is responsible for controlling this fight by doctrine and design. He establishes the Division Tactical Command Post (DTAC) with the main effort BCT (the supported unit) commander in order to coordinate activities of other supporting units and assets involved. By definition, if you are not the main effort BCT, you are a supporting unit. The division then organizes per the doctrine.

Support Force. In a division controlled fight, the main effort BCT is tasked as the support force to attack in order to defeat enemy forces and secure the near side of the river. Weighting the main effort with additional combat power and reducing the width of their zone of attack would increase their probabilities for success in getting to the river but is not normally seen. After defeating enemy forces in zone, the BCT is now able to suppress the far side with direct fires under the BCT commander's C2 and postured to adjust obscuration fires.

As the BCT approaches the river, the DCG-M begins to control Army attack aviation and Close Air Support (CAS) into a division-planned kill box on the far side of the river. A representative from the Division's Tactical Air Control Party (TAC-P) should be located with the DCG-M to ensure face to face discussions and positive control over what the DCG-M wants in terms of CAS suppressing and/or destroying enemy forces on the far side. It would be wise to have a senior leader from the aviation brigade present as well but does not necessarily need to be the commander.

Breach Force. By design, doctrine, and organization, the MEB is the obstacle reduction force. It is never used this way because divisions normally see the MEB as a force provider and task organize their units to BCTs, as opposed to a headquarters that can enhance maneuver. The MEB possesses the engineers, bridges, sappers, and MPs to C2 the positioning of these assets to execute bridging operations and facilitate movement of the assault force. The MEB commander needs to position with the DCG-M in order to coordinate face to face with the main effort BCT commander on positioning bridges, establishing MP route control, moving assault forces into staging, and holding positions, and supervising bridging operations. This removes these responsibilities from the main effort BCT commander who has plenty to do otherwise.

Due to attrition, the need to displace, and ammunition basic load configurations, the BCT has inadequate cannons and ammunition to provide the required obscuration needed to get a bridge into the river. Battalion mortars are inadequate and cannot carry the required smoke ammunition to provide the desired effects. As a result, the Division Artillery (DIVARTY) commander must plan obscuration fires and control available assets for a certain and defined period of time that has been planned, war gamed, and rehearsed.

Several options come to mind. For example, DIVARTY might use the available cannons from the main effort and adjacent supporting BCTs artillery. Adjacent BCTs might scream in horror and pain, but remember, they are supporting units for the main effort BCT. Other solutions are certainly viable, such as requesting Corps cannon support for a limited time to deliver obscuration fires and/or using the assault force artillery. Regardless, the DIVARTY commander needs to control these obscuration fires while the BCT adjusts the effects. Thus, the DIVARTY commander also needs to locate with the DCG-M at the DTAC, as well, to control obscuration fires and reduce friction in providing them.

Concurrently, once the main effort BCT reaches the river, direct and indirect fires must be concentrated on the far side to secure (by fire initially) ground for the far side bridge

placement and the employment of sappers and infantry to establish a far side foothold. We now have CAS, Army attack aviation, DIVARTY, and the main effort BCT employing direct and indirect effects across the river, all under the DCG-M's control with leaders of these organizations collocated with him.

Assault Force. After fighting to secure the near side, the main effort BCT normally has inadequate combat power remaining to provide an assault force of adequate size to seize the first terrain feature on the far side (the bridgehead line identified in the plan and indicated with a graphic control measure). A division-level operation designates another BCT as the assault formation. This requires movement under MEB control through the now stationary main effort BCT and passing over the bridge(s) to attack subsequent objectives. The assaulting BCT commander, therefore, needs to locate with the DCG-M and other commanders to coordinate and execute this operation.

As the assault force begins passing through the main effort BCT, the division shifts the main effort to the attacking BCT and the stationary BCT can begin to refit and resupply to prepare for future operations. Once the assault force is across the river, the commanders of the BCTs, MEB, and DIVARTY can go their own way as the complex task of C2ing this operation is complete. As a side note, the MEB retains control of the bridges throughout the operation, controls movement of other forces over the bridges, and plans for the future disposition of the bridge companies. That's their job and they know how to do it – divisions need to understand the MEB and trust them!

An argument can be made that with the current C2 systems divisions have, there is no need to collocate all these commanders with the DCG-M and the operation can be executed in a distributed manner. That's certainly true, but nothing replaces face to face coordination with the key leaders involved to reduce friction, overcome problems, and eliminate any miscommunications. Additionally, the generator will always fail at the most critical time.

In conclusion, after a brief discussion on shortcomings routinely observed during division WFXs in conducting complex river crossing operations and some reasons to explain them, what is presented here is a doctrinally based division-level approach. This approach applies the same SOSR-A fundamentals and organization of forces we use at lower levels and will assist division leaders and planners in framing the problem and developing plans which provide overwhelming combat power at a decisive point, in order to achieve mission success.

It requires divisions to embrace their responsibilities through the organization of support, breach, and assault forces and provides effective C2 through the DCG-M. He must drive the operation's execution from the forward positioned DTAC with the involved commanders from the main effort BCT, MEB, DIVARTY, assault force BCT, and representatives from the aviation brigade and the TAC-P collocated with him. To further ensure success, divisions must focus intelligence, position protection assets, posture logistical efforts, and use other multi domain assets. Using this approach and

methodology, one can clearly see it is an operation planned, organized, and executed as a division-level event. We can do better than we usually observe, our Soldiers deserve it!

