

Mobile Brigade Combat Team Targeting Process

“OWN the KILL CHAIN”

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The Army introduced the Mobile Brigade Combat Team (MBCT) to support division as the new unit of action. The MBCT, outfitted with equipment like the Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV) for mobility and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) for sensing and striking, supported with new communications infrastructure through C2 fix allows commanders to greatly increase operational tempo. As a result, 2MBCT required a more agile, adaptive and responsive targeting process tied to critical events instead of the 72-hour Air Tasking Order (ATO) cycle.

The challenge the fire support enterprise faced with the existing targeting process was that it remained tied to both a timeline that cannot maintain the pace of operations and resources not always aligned to the MBCT commander. To address this need, 2MBCT developed a process based on the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze (F3EA) targeting cycle anchoring it around two boards called “flash mobs,” a term acquired from 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. At the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), 2MBCT implemented this process resulting in an increased lethality for the MBCT despite some challenges.

Left: PFC Martin Martinez, a senior scout observer assigned to Multi Functional Reconnaissance Company, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), conducts reconnaissance on an enemy position during Operation Lethal Eagle 24.1 at Fort Campbell, KY, April 26 2024.

The 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), is one of the Army’s first units to prototype the Mobile Brigade Combat Team (MBCT) concept. The MBCT will be lighter and more lethal while providing increased mobility to close combat forces. The Army is undertaking its most significant transformation in more than 40 years to dominate large-scale combat operations in multi domain environments. Through Continuous Transformation, the Army will maintain dominance against rapidly evolving and emerging threats in an era of dynamic change in the character of war.

DVIDS photo by SGT Caleb Pautz, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)

The MBCT fielded new mobility, sensing, striking and communication technology to complement its unique force structure, which offered the MBCT commander an opportunity to own the kill chain organically and rapidly set conditions to win. The ISV offers an MBCT the ability to steal a march and close on its objectives through rapid ground or air assault operations at scale. 2MBCT reconnaissance and observation elements received UAS, some equipped with artificial intelligence (AI) enabled payloads, that improved target understanding and identification. Simultaneously, some of these assets were modified to provide additional strike capabilities. The improvements to the digital infrastructure from C2 fix and integrated tactical network (ITN) fielding enabled the MBCT fire support network and targeting operations to be executed on-call and persistently available across the entire battlespace. This influx of new technology allowed the MBCT to own every element of the process. Targeting efforts remained hyper-focused on setting conditions for the BCT agnostic of delivery system whether it be a fire mission, company attack or an electronic warfare (EW) ambush.

The brigade targeting process must be able to rapidly organize, gain understanding of the enemy around critical events and facilitate employing organic assets to achieve the commander's desired effects while informing division's deliberate targeting cycle. The 2MBCT process did this by assembling warfighting functions (WFFs) nested within the brigade battle rhythm and organized around critical events instead of administrative timelines. 2MBCT executed two primary targeting boards daily: a planning board (up to 72 hours in advance) and a refinement board (next 8-12 operational hours or critical event). Both boards focused condition setting by addressing one or two high-payoff targets (HPTs) to ensure organizational efforts remained focused on the critical event. Commander's guidance, terrain analysis and the enemy event temp informed selection of HPTs and identified initial areas to observe to gain confirmation of our understanding of the enemy plan. National technical means (NTM) can enhance this process, but terrain analysis—coupled with the enemy event temp—proved effective.

The Process: Supported by Technology

The **targeting board** executed off an analog or digital common operational picture (COP), overlaid with the enemy event temp, and facilitators aligned all available assets against the MBCT's future critical events. The planning board is held by the plans cell and confirms commander's priorities, identifies named areas of interest (NAIs) to confirm enemy situational template (SITEMP) and identifies initial desired effects and potential target locations. Identifying critical events (aligned with "find" of F3EA) allows for the coordination and synchronization of the enhanced observation capability of the MBCT due to its robust small unit reconnaissance capability. The multi-functional reconnaissance company (MFRC) at brigade and the multi-purpose company (MPC) at battalion (BN) are both outfitted with commercial off the shelf (COTS) small, unmanned aircraft systems (sUAS). Based on commander's guidance and desired effects, multiple observation and engagement options are developed remaining delivery agnostic. The executable targeting synchronization matrix (TSM) is produced to see each target in time and space while enabling rapid and accurate refinements. Nominations for echelons above brigade (EAB) assets and close air support (CAS) allocations that are situationally dependent and heavily reliant on available assets will also compliment the organic strike capabilities to nest with higher headquarters' ATO cycle.

The **refinement board** is held by the current operations cell, executed off the MBCT TSM and combined arms overlay and fed by the enemy SITEMP. The board takes a deliberate look into the next twelve operational hours or the MBCT's critical event, ensuring alignment throughout identification, observation and delivery of effects. The board ensures subordinate units understand task, purpose, method and effect, enabling 2MBCT's success. Units can maintain target custody with sUAS and EW systems (fix) and refine target location and weapon pairing (finish). The refinement boards serve as a distributed combined arms rehearsal (CAR) for the critical event and feed directly into the daily Field Artillery (FA) technical rehearsal conducted from the updated TSM and target list worksheet (TLWS).

The **transition from planner to executioner** is nearly simultaneous following the refinement board. The 2MBCT fire support officer (FSO), targeting officer (TARGO), S2 and FA intelligence officer (FAIO) consolidate the refinements, enhanced targeting guidance and relative inputs from accompanied WFFs. All the data is then updated on the TSM, fire support overlay and TLWS and is published through the MBCT's orders process. The refinement boards serve as a distributed CAR for the critical event and feed directly into the daily FA technical rehearsal conducted from the updated TSM and TLWS. Remaining finish agnostic (fire mission, electronic attack and/or maneuver operation) is key to the holistic approach of the targeting meetings.

The Details:

2MBCT executes this targeting process enabled at each echelon by organic formations and technology.

FIND: 2MBCT informed by the Joint and Interagency Community

- *Multifunctional Reconnaissance Company (MFRC), 3 X Multipurpose Companies (MPC), UAS, EW, and AI enabled systems*

Transformation in contact (TiC) removed the cavalry squadron, the shadow platoon and the brigade intelligence support element (BISE) from the Infantry BCT (IBCT). In its place, the MBCT established robust small unit reconnaissance capability in the MFRC at the brigade level and MPC at the BN level—both fitted with COTS sUAS. The MFRC is a highly mobile and uniquely enabled company aligned with the MBCT and direct support (DS) artillery BN that is tasked with understanding the enemy and destroying key enemy capabilities. Their team brings the capacity to gain and maintain contact through COT sUAS (Parrot Anafi Mil, Skydio X2D, Vesper, PDW C100) and EW systems (Beast +, Beast, Kraken, TEWS-I and Signal harvest). These capabilities are aligned against the commander's intelligence and targeting objectives through our process highlighted above. The MPCs serve similar purposes but are tasked with counter-reconnaissance efforts as well for their parent BN headquarters.

Each of these assets can be employed effectively with a detailed terrain analysis and enemy event temp. However, utilizing passively collected intelligence and EAB assets gained through deliberate liaison officer (LNO) networks at our higher headquarters can allow us to greatly increase the effectiveness of our limited elements. The LNO network is led by the FAIO at the division analysis and control element (ACE) and supported by the BCT with the correct information technology and guidance to help the MBCT achieve its information requirements and targeting objectives.

FIX

- *Multifunctional Reconnaissance Company (MFRC), 3 X Multipurpose Companies (MPC), Mortars, Artillery, UAS, and EW.*

Similar capabilities to the “find” step exist to conduct secondary roles by fixing a target. Here, what is old is new again. The MBCT focuses on getting a human observer enabled by UAS or other technology to fix the HPT and ensure delivery of the desired effect. Through the usage of the MFRC and MPCs accompanied by their sUAS, EW systems, they track and maintain target custody. Simultaneously, they conduct location refinement and weapon pairing based off organic assets available often found in the “finish” step. Weapon systems normally used to finish can be re-tasked to fix the enemy for a predetermined set of time, enabling the detailed precision required to finish. While the MFRC and MPC are focused elements for this discussion, any company in our MBCT with a forward observer team can and does execute this task.

FINISH

- *6 x M777 Howitzers, 12 x M119A3 Howitzers, 120MM / 81MM Mortars, Switchblade one-way attack drones, Infantry Battalions*

The MBCT is organically aligned with their composite FA BN; this being the linchpin of the kill chain. The FA BN equipped with 6 x M777 howitzers and 12 x M119A3 howitzers remains the most casualty producing weapon system on the modern battlefield. The MFRC, equipped with loitering munitions, such as the Switchblade 600, provides one-way strike

capability, which is primarily reserved for the most critical or advantageous HPT based on commander's guidance. Involvement of Infantry BN commanders and their staff at the targeting boards streamlines the utilization of maneuver units or their mortar systems as delivery mechanisms in support of MBCT targets. Nominations for EAB assets and CAS allocations that are situationally dependent and heavily reliant on available assets will complement the organic strike capabilities. The overarching point to how the MBCT finishes is that it is agnostic to the ways and means in which it is executed.

EXPLOIT

- *Multifunctional Reconnaissance Company (MFRC), 3 X Multipurpose Companies (MPC), Drones, EW, EAB Collection Assets, NTM.*

One of the most significant advantages of the MBCT force structure, paired with the targeting process and technology, is its ability to enable ground units to gain and maintain contact with the enemy and never allow them to regroup. For 2MBCT, this can be as simple as maintaining visual contact via UAS and shifting indirect fire as an enemy retrogrades. The actions depend again on our organic ability to sense and affect our HPTs. Here our utilization of sUAS from either the MFRC, MPCs or company organic forward observers tied back into delivery systems and the F3EA targeting process in the flash mob are critical to success.

ANALYZE

- *Multifunctional Reconnaissance Company (MFRC), Three Multipurpose Companies (MPC), Drones, EW, EAB Collection Assets, NTM*

The key component to understanding the effects of our efforts and feeding back into the cycle is the holistic assessment of the enemy. The tasking for assessment is predominantly aligned to the unit designated to observe the target throughout its life span. The information is evaluated by the MBCT S2, FAIO and TARGO to rapidly turn it into actionable, targetable intelligence that can be applied to defeat the enemy in detail.

JRTC 24-10 The Defense:

During the refinement board focused on period of darkness 19-20AUG24 with a defined critical event of defending along PL Dogwood, the 2MBCT S2 enemy event temp identified three separate maneuver forces and two possible avenues of approach. The friendly maneuver plan was designed to turn the enemy into the main engagement area in the north along ASR Helium by utilizing decoy emitters replicating a more robust defensive line in the south. The S2 team identified two critical NAIs—2314 and 2407—to determine if the enemy would approach along the southern or northern avenue of approach and with what critical equipment. In the targeting board, the targeting team identified specific information requirements that led to task and purpose for collection assets and the MFRC to identify those forces. Additionally, we enhanced NAIs 7001 and 2408 to targeted areas of interest (TAIs) associated with organic delivery from the FA BN based on the event temp in order to destroy the enemy force in the appropriate engagement area. Those TAIs resulted in task and purpose to 2-502nd Infantry BN's MPC and FA BN. Finally, each TAI had associated observers to assess results along with layered EAB assets to enable follow on attacks. 2MCBT executed that targeting board in accordance with the published battle rhythm at 0800 the day of the defense, allowing for rapid synchronization of efforts in current operations, updated fighting products and a technical rehearsal that afternoon from sensor to shooter.

In practice, it played out almost flawlessly except for a critical misstep in the identification. Our LNO within the joint air-ground integration center (JAGIC) initially provided intelligence from NTM that identified an enemy company plus sized element moving along our northern avenue of approach. Information passed through Microsoft Teams, ATAK and MUOS over ICE to our MFRC confirmed a force moving towards 2-502's main engagement area. 2-502's MPC received that notification and utilized forward observers with sUAS to identify enemy mechanized forces along their main obstacle belt despite missing them at our initial GATOR mine obstacle belt. As the mechanized forces initiated a breach, the forward observer confirmed composition and called in the planned BN mass fire mission

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on the force. The fire mission resulted in the destruction of a company plus of mechanized vehicles and dismounts, which was confirmed through the observers and validated through JRTC Operations Group. The challenge was a misidentification of the assaulting force with the reconnaissance force leading. This ultimately led to successful destruction of the enemy’s feint and reconnaissance but left their assault force intact for future engagements. The process and its execution proved itself multiple times during this iteration. Despite errors that led to less than perfect results, we believe the core of the efforts was successful as evident by a coordinated FA BN mass inside of an obstacle tied to direct fire and observation that was all synched and rehearsed by the results of the refinement board.

Limitations and Way Forward

A critical component to this method was our command team involvement supported by a deliberate LNO. The MBCT commander dedicated at least two hours per day to these efforts and allowed the staff and subordinate commanders to execute staff work in front of him to make this successful. The 2MBCT commander placed critical personnel across the higher headquarters staff to act on his behalf. He placed intelligence leaders in the BICE and fires leaders in the JAGIC equivalent. He provided these LNOs with guidance and information technology to ensure 2MBCT’s needs were met. These LNOs proved critical to our success but came at a cost to both future and current operations.

The targeting boards adapted the F3EA targeting process into a medium that enables 2MBCT to maintain momentum and initiative but requires increased leader engagement. This process places a high demand on commanders and leaders at echelon and draws them into closer and more dynamic fights. Additionally, more discipline is required to ensure the constant flow of information—enabled by the robust communications platforms—does not cause

unnecessary confusion. Finally, leaders also must make additional efforts to continue to inform and participate in division’s targeting cycle while executing a process focused on organic assets.

Given the flexible nature of this targeting process, it compliments a more ridged military decision-making process by enabling rapid precision in execution. It is most effective when employed following mission analysis and all critical fighting products have been produced in draft, enabling further planning. This medium then intuitively acts as a transition point from future to current operations, focusing on the next critical event until fruition or until the situation on the ground dictates. The MFRC paired with unique capabilities and outfitted with emerging technology directly tied to the targeting process increased both real-time understanding for the 2MBCT command and key staff as well as increased lethality.

While this dynamic targeting process may not be adaptable to every formation type, the applicable lessons learned to all other commanders is an opportunity to unhitch from a deliberate targeting process tied to the ATO cycle that often fails to meet the needs of the close fight. This process will allow the MBCT to fit neatly inside the division as the unit of action and set the conditions to win where they fight.

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