

Decisive Action's Underestimated Anti-Tank Threat

By CPT Adam Moore

As the Army continues to shift its focus from the complex environment of counter-insurgency to the fast paced operations of decisive action, we must not take the threat of enemy dismounted forces lightly. With mechanized units getting back to the basics of fighting enemy armored forces, training has been focused on combating large armored formations, particularly the threat of enemy armored vehicles. However, failing to prepare against the enemy's dismounted anti-tank capability will prove disastrous for units facing enemy forces around the world.

During recent decisive action rotations at the National Training Center (NTC), units have realized how devastating enemy anti-tank teams can be when the Contemporary Operating Force (COEFOR) maximize dismounted infantry teams to combat a unit's mounted threat. The dismounted anti-tank threat cannot be underestimated because history has shown that when a fighting force is faced with a superior armored force, the inferior force will resort to their dismounted anti-tank squads in order to create standoff and degrade mechanized forces. To prepare against this threat, units must develop training that will teach their Soldiers and leaders to utilize proper scanning techniques, maximize their use of dismounted infantry, and conduct thorough intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) during mission planning. Taking the dismounted anti-tank threat seriously and training mechanized formations to combat this threat in addition to mounted forces, units will be able to adapt their method of fighting to address any threat to ensure the enemy is destroyed quickly with minimal casualties to friendly forces.

At the NTC, battalions and companies consistently struggle against the dismounted anti-tank threat. Tank crews and platoons are extremely effective fighting the COEFOR tanks and armored fighting vehicles with the utilization of synchronized movement techniques, designating sectors of fire, and executing platoon fire commands. Companies have great success defeating COEFOR during brigade's movement to contact and attack missions but suffer high casualty rates during the execution of defensive and wide area security operations.

The COEFOR are under matched against the M1A2 and M2A3, and have adapted their tactics to rely more on their dismounted infantry in order to preserve combat power. When the COEFOR exposed their armored vehicles, mechanized companies are quick to engage and destroy COEFOR vehicles with minimal losses to friendly forces. With this feeling of battlefield dominance, units are aggressive and often over confident when moving into areas where COEFOR suffered defeat. Unit leaders focus on the COEFOR's armored threat and are caught unprepared when they begin taking casualties from dismounted anti-tank teams. Suffering from high casualties, these companies receive forces to make recovery their primary focus. This loss in manpower and equipment puts large amounts of strain on the units ability to execute mission planning which in turn allows the COEFOR time to rebuilt combat power lost during the brigade's attack.

Once leaders realize tank crews struggle to locate the dismounted teams due to their low signature, ability to utilize the terrain, and capability to move rapidly after deploying their AT weapon systems, companies start to deliberately approached contested areas with dismounted infantry forward with armor in support. Companies posture themselves to combat the dismounted anti-tank threat by placing dismounted infantry in the high ground, and plotting smoke targets to obscure platoon bounds. However, leaders pressure their subordinate units to

attack and units do not afford the dismounted infantry enough time to establish themselves, nor allow the smoke mission to develop. Companies are able to achieve some success, but become bogged down with casualty recovery when they fail to integrate dismounted infantry with indirect fires and detailed direct fire plan. The anti-tanks are effective at concealing themselves within wadis, seek protection behind large rock formation, and dig themselves in fortified fighting positions. These COEFOR are difficult to destroy and successfully degraded the combat effectiveness of advancing units. By underestimating and failing to adequately train to address the dismounted anti-tank threat, units learn a hard lesson when facing these dismounted anti-tank teams. These lessons are relevant in that the actions of the COEFOR are similar to those the Israeli Defense Force faced in 2006.

The conflict between the Israeli Defense Force and the militias of Hezbollah during the summer months of 2006 was a prime example in which an inferior force relied heavily on the use of dismounted anti-tank teams to combat mechanized forces. Outnumbered 3 to 1 with no mechanized force to combat the IDF, Hezbollah forces closed the gap with well trained fighters utilizing sophisticated anti-tank weapon systems. Using Russian made anti-tank guided missiles, Hezbollah militias could range out to 5 kilometers and cause significant damage to Israeli armored vehicles. Throughout the conflict, Hezbollah was able to damage 43 and destroy 2 Merkava tanks.¹ Hezbollah militias using the same tactics as the COEFOR, would conceal themselves within tunnels to move into position to fire their anti-tank weapon systems. Israeli Soldiers stated that they had difficulty locating the enemy and were force to constantly move for fear of being destroyed.² This tactic of hit and run not only degraded the IDF but also forced

¹ STEVEN ERLANGER and RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr., "A Disciplined Hezbollah Surprises Israel With Its Training, Tactics and Weapons," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2006.

² STEVEN ERLANGER and RICHARD A. OPPEL Jr., "A Disciplined Hezbollah Surprises Israel With Its Training, Tactics and Weapons," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2006.

them to devote resources to conduct recovery operations which inevitably delayed the ability to accomplish their mission. With Hezbollah's success against the well trained and well armed IDF, other small militia forces will mimic these same tactics to battle American armored forces during future conflicts. It is imperative that mechanized units train to address this dismounted threat in order to prevent armored units from underestimating anti-tank teams.

Often during home station training in preparation for the National Training Center, companies and battalions fail to adequately address the dismount anti-tank threat. Focusing primarily on combating armored vehicles, these units underestimated the COEFOR's ability to inflict casualties with their anti-tank weapons. During company training, more attention should be placed on proper scanning techniques between the gunner and tank commander. In the vast distances of the NTC, crews were scanning rapidly which cause them to overlook potential hiding positions anti-tank teams utilized. A technique tank commanders should use is to designate areas for the gunner to scan rapidly in order to identify armored vehicles while having the tank commander conduct a very deliberate scan for the dismounted targets with the Commander's Independent Thermal Viewer (CITV). In order to focus crews scanning techniques, thorough IBP needs to be conducted at the company and platoon level. By analyzing the terrain in conjunction with the enemy SITEMP, commanders and platoon leaders can emphasize potential enemy's composition and disposition to ensure that every enemy threat is taken into consideration. Thorough IPB will also help develop the company's indirect fire plan in addition to determining where dismounted infantry may hide. Plotting indirect targets prior to moving into an area known to have enemy dismount infantry, will facilitate the rapid execution of indirect fire to displace or destroy anti-tank teams in addition to providing concealment with smoke to provide cover for recovery operations or allowing dismounted infantry the ability to

move into position. In order to maximize the use of indirect fires and dismounted infantry, commanders must have tactical patience. Failing to do so companies will rush to move dismounted infantry into position before allowing the situation is fully developed. Companies will maneuver armored personnel carriers without smoke concealment, causing squads to become exposed once they were on the ground. Developing a training plan prior to an NTC rotation that places the importance of addressing the dismounted anti-tank threat, units will plan to combat the enemy's anti-tank capability and will be able to focus on the mission rather than conducting recovery operations.

To address the threat of dismounted anti-tank teams, mechanized companies need to emphasize the damage enemy dismount infantry can do to armored vehicles. Through the execution of gunnery, companies need to train crews on proper scanning techniques with the use of the Armor Gunnery Skills Trainer. By creating more scenarios that have long range dismounted targets with minimal exposure time, it will force tank commanders to use proper scanning techniques. Continuing with similar target sets during gunnery table III or creating a range with distanced dismounted teams, will allow crews to practice engaging those targets with live ammunition. After training crews on proper scanning and engaging techniques, the next step is to incorporate it into a tactical operation. Developing scenarios in the Close Combat Tactical Training (CCTT) that have a high volume of dismounted infantry with a limited number of armored vehicles in support, will test commander's and platoon leader's ability to conduct thorough IBP to address the mounted and dismounted threat. Executing these missions will test the company's and platoon's plan in addition to crews and sections ability to maintain a good direct fire plan. When companies and platoons are proficient within the digital simulators, field training should be executed against a lethal dismounted opposition force that will challenge the

unit's ability to fight an adaptive enemy on real terrain. Through such training; Soldiers and leaders will not underestimate dismounted anti-tank teams and will address the threat within their planning process.

Recently at the National Training Center, Soldiers and leaders have done a great job transitioning from their ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations to that of decisive action. Companies have been able to focus their efforts to address the enemy's ability to wage mechanized warfare against a near peer threat that possesses similar vehicle types and tactics. However, units underestimate the threat that dismounted anti-tank teams posed to armored vehicles and failed to adequately address this particular threat. The COEFOR at NTC expose this battalion weakness and successfully exploited it, delaying the unit's ability to achieve their mission by causing a significant amount of casualties. This threat is one that can be easily replicated by enemy forces around the world and was one that posed the greatest threat to the highly sophisticated Israeli Defense Force. Training to fight both the mounted and dismount threat is one that is imperative in order to ensure Soldiers and leaders are prepared to address any threat presented by the enemy. The dismounted threat is not one that should be feared by our Soldiers, but one that should be respected.