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Small Unit Tactical Problems

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Warfighting Skills Program

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Key to Geographic Symbols

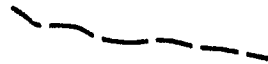
Road



Route Marker



Footpath



Bridge



Power Line



Ford



Railroad



Forest



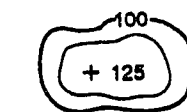
River or Stream



Buildings



Benchmark
in meters



Major Contour Lines every 100 meters

Introduction

In this course, you will apply the concepts that you learned in *Tactical Fundamentals*. You will be placed in tactical situations and then forced to make decisions and issue orders. Then, you will compare your solutions with those given in the book.

Keep the tactical fundamentals in mind as you work through each problem. You may wish to review chapter three in *Tactical Fundamentals* before beginning this course. Be creative in choosing courses of actions and planning your fire support. Do not rule out any solution because it seems unorthodox. Sometimes, unconventional solutions are the best ones.

The book solutions are not **the** solutions. Although some solutions are better than others, there are many that would work. You may disagree with some aspects of the book solutions. Remember, the purpose of this course is to develop your ability to think critically about tactics. Tactics is a dynamic process. There's no guarantee that what worked well in one situation will work well in another. As you apply some of these concepts in the field, you will find new ways to solve tactical problems. You must remember that all situations are unique and therefore require unique solutions.

CHAPTER ONE
Selecting Objectives

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Selecting Objectives

You should recall from *Tactical Fundamentals* that the ultimate objective is to defeat the enemy. Usually, this objective applies not only at the strategic level--winning the war--but at the operational and tactical levels as well. For example, at the tactical level, a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) might win a battle by surrounding and destroying a key enemy unit. If this victory allows theater-level forces to capture a key port and cut the supply line of an enemy field army, forcing it to surrender (an operational victory), then that army's surrender might compel the nation we are at war with to stop fighting and sue for peace--our ultimate goal. Defeating enemy units at each level contributes to the ultimate goal of winning the war.

Often, this principle also applies at the company level. For example, a rifle squad, as the advance guard of a rifle company in the attack, encounters a small enemy outpost on its avenue of approach. Let's assume that the squad must clear this outpost to keep the company moving forward. Destroying the outpost becomes the squad's objective. Then, the lead platoon encounters an enemy screening force which, in this situation, the platoon must destroy to keep the attack moving. Destroying the screening force becomes the platoon's objective. In this example, both the squad and platoon objectives contribute to the company objective of defeating enemy forces in its zone of action.

However, in many situations, lower level objectives may be something entirely different. For the example above, let's suppose that the company's objective remains the same, but the situation changes. Instead of destroying the enemy outpost, the squad now only needs to suppress it to keep the company moving forward. Similarly, let's assume that instead of destroying the enemy screening force, the platoon needs only to draw its attention away from the main effort. In this situation, both the squad and platoon objectives become something much different than those in the previous example.

Subordinate objectives must contribute to the overall objective of defeating the enemy. But this does not mean that subordinate units at each level can always choose *to destroy the enemy* as their objective. Therefore, the problem becomes how to choose and assign objectives that contribute to the overall objective.

Critical weaknesses

In combat, you constantly search for enemy weaknesses that can be exploited. You want to attack enemy weaknesses with the bulk of your combat power. This is the concept of soft-spot tactics. You want to pit your strength against enemy weakness. **Critical weaknesses** are those that, when attacked successfully, lead quickly to the enemy's defeat. Some examples are the following:

- Large, vulnerable logistics trains.
- Weak units.
- Exposed, unguarded flanks.
- Forces in an overextended disposition.
- Boundaries between enemy units.

These are only a few of many possible weaknesses. Sometimes, critical weaknesses are difficult to identify. In such cases, you may have to act initially on little information and feel the enemy out.

It is dangerous to try to list ways to exploit critical weaknesses because there are as many means for *exploiting* weaknesses as there are weaknesses. Still, there are a few combat-tested guiding principles that apply frequently. They are:

1. **Get into the enemy's rear or attack his exposed flanks.** In conventional warfare, you want to get around or behind the enemy's combat forces and attack vulnerable targets in his rear areas, like logistics sites, command and control, fire support, and aviation facilities. These targets are usually vulnerable to ground attack. By destroying them, you reduce his combat power and induce chaos and panic in his rear areas. Historically, this often resulted in the enemy's resistance collapsing relatively quickly. However, you must be careful as you race through a gap that looks promising. A capable and cunning enemy will try to deceive you into thinking that you have found a gap when, instead, you are entering a trap, for example, a fire sack. Aggressive reconnaissance and sound judgment are your best protection in such cases.
2. **Use surprise.** Historically, surprise causes shock and paralysis. Try to surprise the enemy at every opportunity. When you succeed, you force him to react to you. This means you retain the initiative. You will hasten his defeat when you present him with multiple, surprise threats. As he tries to keep up with changing events, he falls further behind until his reactions have no effect. When this happens, you outcycle him and defeat him.
3. **Use deception.** When you deceive the enemy, you may get him to do something advantageous to you. For example, if you set a trap and draw him into it, then you have used deception to your advantage.
4. **Win the support of the local people.** In unconventional warfare, the moral aspects of war become much more prominent than the physical. You do not defeat an insurgency by simply going out and killing guerrillas. More importantly, you must reduce any support for the guerrillas among the local population by gaining their confidence and cooperation. Do this by protecting the people from guerrilla sabotage and terrorism, while working to make their lives healthier and more prosperous. You must understand the local culture and seek to emphasize your advantages while highlighting the guerrillas' disadvantages. For example, in the 3rd Tank Battalion's pacification program during 1966-67 in the Phong Bac Hamlet in Vietnam, the Marines found that they could not win support from the local population based solely on ideology. But they did have one advantage--capitalism--that the guerrillas could not counter. Marine civic action teams helped the local peasants by installing a free market system and by teaching them how to make money. The peasants discovered the economic advantages of capitalism over socialism and prospered greatly from their relationship with the Marines. This countered the guerilla advantage in ideology and resulted in success in pacifying the village, since the peasants began informing on the guerrillas to protect their economic gains. To successfully counter an insurgency, you must look for critical weaknesses in the enemy and exploit them.

You must remember that critical weaknesses are always situational. There's no guarantee that what worked against one force will work against another. Similarly, the same force has different weaknesses in different situations. You must consider each situation as unique. Act according to each situation, not on some rule or formula.

Selecting objectives

Ideally, objectives are critical enemy weaknesses. If you find and choose a critical weakness as your objective, and attack it successfully, then you stand a good chance of winning. However, against a competent enemy, this process is seldom easy. Often, the enemy is aware of what his critical weaknesses are and hides or protects them. For example, let's assume that, in one situation, your enemy's supply dump appears to be a critical weakness. You believe that if you can destroy the dump, you will quickly defeat the enemy because he will soon run out of food and ammunition. But if the enemy knows this, he will take measures to protect the dump. He will try to hide the dump, making it difficult to find, and also protect it with both anti-air defenses and ground combat forces. Now, if you try to attack the dump, you are attacking a hard spot--a surface. To defeat the enemy in this situation, you may have to attack something else, or trick him into thinking you are attacking something else before you can attack the supply dump.

When you choose an objective, assign subordinate missions that contribute to your plan to achieve your objective. For example, let's assume that your company is attacking to destroy an enemy force in your zone. You see an opportunity to infiltrate this enemy force and attack his command post. By eliminating his command and control, you fracture his forces and then defeat him piecemeal. His command post becomes your objective. In developing your scheme of maneuver, you task one platoon with finding a gap in the enemy defense. This becomes the platoon's objective--to find a gap. You might task another platoon with suppressing any enemy defenses near the gap. Its mission also becomes its objective. Finally, you task your third platoon with exploiting through the gap and attacking the enemy's command post. You may assign each platoon an aiming point, or the platoon leaders may choose their own. Note how each of the subordinate objectives contribute to the overall objective--defeating the enemy.

Remember, the ultimate objective is moral--to compel the enemy to quit fighting. To do this, you may have to attack physical and psychological objectives first. In the previous example, you first attacked his command post--a physical objective. Most likely, the loss of the command post induced feelings of fear and isolation--psychological effects--in subordinate enemy units. This may be enough to compel the enemy to surrender, or you may have to attack additional objectives. Remember, all situations are unique and require a unique solution.

Summary

The process of identifying critical weaknesses and selecting objectives to accomplish his goals is one of the commander's greatest challenges. There is no checklist or procedure that guarantees success. You learn what works through training and experience, historical study of battles, particularly the study of why forces lose, and through knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your enemy. Figuring out how to defeat the enemy is the primary responsibility of the commander. To him, nothing else in battle is more important.

PROBLEM 1

Situation

You are the commander of L Company, BLT 3/9. Two days ago, your BLT landed on an undefended beach and moved inland rapidly. The enemy, caught by surprise, was unprepared for your assault on his right flank. Consequently, to protect that flank, he deployed only a small screening force which is falling back rapidly in the face of your relentless advance.

One hour ago, your battalion commander issued to you the following mission order:

Our mission is to attack north to prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with the enemy screening force holding San Miguel. My intent is to attack rapidly through the Rosario Valley to seize the Bolivar Bridge and block enemy reinforcements from reaching San Miguel. Focus of effort is K Company's attack up the valley. I want you to screen K Company's left flank during their advance (See figure 1-1.)

The time is now 1300, and you are advancing as indicated in figure 1-1. Two patrols that you sent out earlier to check out Hills 110 and 95 report no enemy sightings to the west or north.

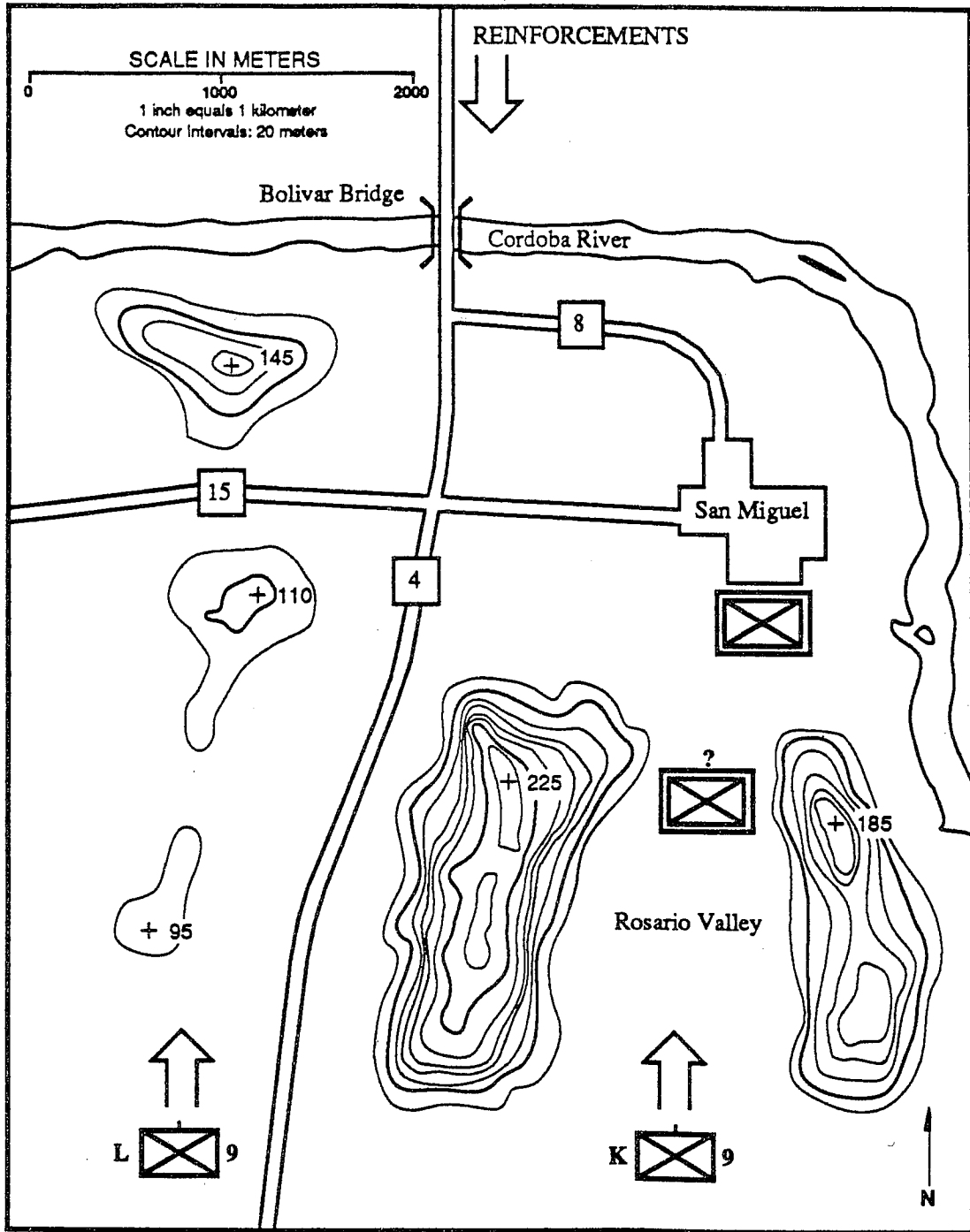


Fig. 1-1. Rosario Valley.

Requirement #1

Identify any potential critical enemy weaknesses and explain how you might exploit them. Identify the battalion commander's objective.

Solution to Requirement #1

You know that you are in pursuit of a disorganized, retreating force that is probably on the verge of collapse. Time is critical because if you allow him to reorganize and link up with reinforcements, he may organize a successful defense and prevent your force from exploiting the opportunity to get deep into the enemy's rear. In this situation, the enemy's **lack of cohesion** is probably his critical weakness. By pressing the attack and preventing him from linking up with reinforcements, you may destroy him completely and open up his flank to exploitation. Preventing the link up by seizing and controlling the Bolivar Bridge becomes your battalion commander's objective.

As the situation develops, the enemy may have other weaknesses that appear. For example, as you advance, you may locate his logistics trains or a command post that is unguarded. The cohesion of many Third World army units depends heavily on their command and control. Therefore, if you capture his headquarters, you stand a good chance of collapsing the resistance of his entire force. Or, by just getting in his rear areas and threatening his lines of communication and rear area facilities, you may destroy his resistance because panic and chaos often start in the rear and spread forward. However, since all situations are unique, the specific weaknesses which you identify and the actions that you take **must** be applied to a specific enemy, time, and place.

To exploit the enemy's disorganization, keep the pressure on him and deny him time to reorganize. As noted above, you also want to get into his rear areas and attack targets which are critical to his keeping his forces organized and fighting. You may deceive him into thinking that you are attacking in one place when you place your focus of effort somewhere else. Or, if you spot a gap or exposed flank, you probably want to exploit it and get behind him, as your battalion commander plans to do with K Company's attack up the Rosario Valley.

Requirement #2

Suddenly, you hear heavy fire to your northeast. A patrol that you sent to scout Hill 225 reports that K Company is heavily engaged with an estimated company-size enemy force in the Rosario Valley. Five minutes later, your battalion commander calls you on the radio and orders: "*Focus of effort shifts...*"

His transmission is cut off before he finishes the message. You try to raise him again, but fail. You know that I Company is in reserve, but you don't know where they are and you can't raise them or anyone else on the radio.

You decide to issue a fragmentary (Frag) order to your subordinate leaders. Write the mission order you would issue them. (You have three rifle platoons, a weapons platoon, and one section of .50 caliber machineguns, all foot mobile except the .50 caliber machineguns which are jeep mobile.)

Solution to Requirement #2

There are several courses of action which you must consider. Because of the report from your patrol on Hill 225, you should probably assume that K Company's attack has been or soon will be ambushed. K Company has run into a surface and will probably have trouble advancing if the force opposing it is determined and well-positioned. You might also assume that the battalion commander was shifting the focus of effort to your advance before his radio transmission was cut off. Apparently, you have found a gap since there is no enemy in your path along Route 4 or to your west. So, what do you do? Do you circle north around Hill 225 and hit the flank of the enemy engaging K Company? Do you bypass that force and attack the enemy in San Miguel? Perhaps, you should seize the intersection of Routes 4 and 15 to get behind the enemy force in the Rosario Valley and threaten the enemy in San Miguel. Or, do you seize the Bolivar Bridge?

Based on the situation, you should probably seize the Bolivar Bridge, or at least advance toward it until the situation becomes clearer. Remember the battalion commander's mission and intent: to prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel by seizing the Bolivar Bridge. The Bolivar Bridge is key terrain. By controlling it, you prevent enemy reinforcements from using it to effect a linkup. To control the bridge, you may establish positions either north or south of the bridge, but not necessarily on it. How you choose to control it depends largely on your estimate of the situation when you arrive there.

If you choose any other course of action, you are disregarding your battalion commander's mission and intent. You may help K Company by encircling the enemy force engaging it, but this is less important than seizing control of the bridge and preventing the linkup. You may gain much by destroying the enemy in San Miguel but it is usually better to bypass enemy forces entrenched in built up areas. In this situation, it is probably better to bypass the forces in San Miguel and cut their line of communication with reinforcements.

Assuming that the focus of effort shifts to your advance, and you decide to advance on the Bolivar Bridge as rapidly as possible, you might issue the following mission order to your subordinate leaders:

K Company has been ambushed by enemy forces in the Rosario Valley. The battalion's focus of effort shifts to our advance. I intend to advance as rapidly as possible to control the Bolivar Bridge. Focus of effort is the attack to seize the bridge.

(To 1st Platoon.) Attack north as rapidly as possible to seize the Bolivar Bridge and prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel.

(To 2d Platoon.) Screen 1st Platoon's right flank as it advances on the Bolivar Bridge.

(To 3d Platoon.) Screen 1st Platoon's left flank during its advance on Bolivar Bridge. Be prepared to cross the bridge and recon enemy forces to the North once we seize control of the bridge.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Attach the machinegun and assault sections to 1st Platoon for its advance on the bridge. Keep the mortar section in general support of the company.

(To .50 Caliber Machinegun Section.) You are attached to 1st Platoon for its attack on the bridge.

This is only one of many solutions. You might choose to keep some or most of your force in reserve. You might also attach a rifle squad to the .50 Caliber Machinegun Section and send it to the bridge as quickly as possible to secure it from any enemy advance forces that are moving toward it. But whatever your tactical solution, you must remember your battalion's objective: **Prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel.**

CHAPTER TWO

Mission Tactics

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Mission Tactics

You should recall from *Tactical Fundamentals* that the mission order is the key to operating effectively in a decentralized style of command. Marines use mission orders to speed decisionmaking at all levels while keeping subordinate efforts focused on a common goal. Often in combat, your situation suddenly changes and you do not have time or are unable to contact your senior for directions. By using mission orders, your senior commander provides you with enough guidance to take initiative and act as he would want you to.

Let's assume that you are a rifle company commander and have just received the following mission order from your battalion commander:

Enemy forces are attacking south rapidly along Highway 7. My intent is to block the enemy and counterattack in his left flank to cut him off and encircle him. I want you to block the enemy's advance along Highway 7 before he reaches the Senora Bridge. B Company's attack on the enemy's left flank is the focus of effort. (See figure 2-1.)

From this order, it's clear what your battalion commander wants to do and where you fit in his plans. He intends to block the enemy and encircle him with a counterattack. You are assigned the mission of the blocking force. He also identified his focus of effort--B Company's counterattack to encircle the enemy. With this order, you have enough information to decide and act appropriately if the situation changes. For example, what would you do if the enemy attacks along a different avenue, or if he discovers B Company's attack and counterattacks into B Company's flank? Based on your estimate of the situation, you might choose one of several courses of action. If the enemy attacks along a different avenue, you might choose to block him anyway. If you discover him advancing toward B Company, you might aid B Company by attacking him preemptively. Or, if he attacks B Company and exposes his flank to you, you might attack into his flank to exploit the opportunity and get into his rear. The course of action which you choose is situational. However, no matter which one you choose, you can be confident that you are acting appropriately because you know what your commander's intent is--what he is trying to accomplish.

To develop your own mission order, first determine your intent. Develop your intent by looking at the situation and deciding what you want to do to the enemy. Your intent must **always** relate to the enemy. You should look for critical enemy weaknesses and how you can exploit them. Or, you may be assigned a mission from your commander that helps him attack a critical enemy weakness. Your intent is your **definition of success**. It tells your subordinates what you want to accomplish. In the previous example, let's assume that you decide to block the enemy in the La Prensa Valley. You choose to block him there because you see an opportunity to trap him in open terrain. This becomes your intent--to block the enemy in the La Prensa Valley.

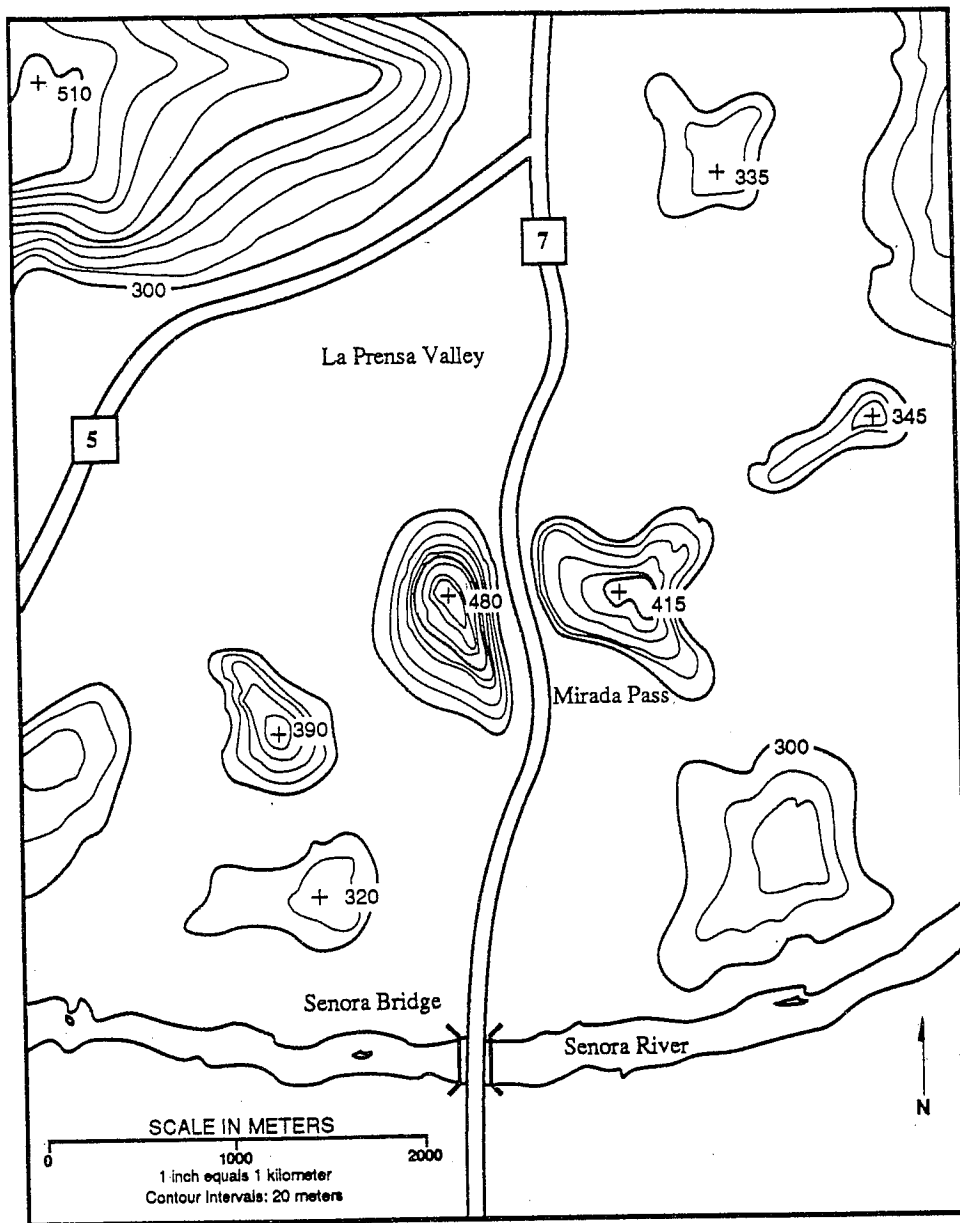


Fig. 2-1. Mirada Pass.

Second, you develop a scheme of maneuver to accomplish your intent. For this example, you might choose to stop the enemy's progress in the Mirada Pass and then counterattack before he deploys in the La Prensa Valley. By using the Mirada Pass as a choke point and counterattacking aggressively, you should confuse and delay him long enough to allow B Company to get around his flank. Since the enemy situation is unclear and you are unsure of how he will react to the ambush at the Mirada Pass, you decide to block him with a small force and keep most of your company in reserve as the counterattack force. You also judge the counterattack to be decisive, so you choose that as your focus of effort.

Finally, you assign missions to your subordinate leaders in concert with your scheme of maneuver. The missions which you assign them should tell them **what** you want done but not **how** to do it. For example, when you assign one of your platoons as the blocking force, you might express its mission this way:

Attack the enemy, reference the Mirada Pass, to stop his advance and force him to deploy in the La Prensa Valley.

Expressing his mission this way gives your subordinate great latitude to accomplish what you want him to do. Sometimes, you may have to assign him a specific location, but this is not usually the case. By giving him great latitude, you allow him to react quickly as the situation changes. This is very important since he is the one at the scene and will best know how to get the result you want. When he arrives at the pass, he might find a better location for blocking the enemy. Or, the enemy might advance along Highway 5 instead of Highway 7, forcing the platoon leader to do something else to get the result you want--blocking the enemy's progress. You control his output--the result you want. Your subordinate determines how to do it.

Now, you have enough information to issue your subordinate leaders a mission order. For this example, your order might be:

Enemy forces are advancing south rapidly along Highway 7. Our battalion will block the enemy advance and then counterattack in his left flank to cut him off and encircle him. Our company is the blocking force. I intend to stop his progress at the Mirada Pass and counterattack as he deploys in the La Prensa Valley. Focus of effort is the counterattack in the valley.

(To 1st Platoon.) Attack the enemy, reference the Mirada Pass, to stop his advance and force him to deploy in the La Prensa Valley.

(To 2d Platoon.) Initially, you are in reserve. On order, counterattack as the enemy deploys in the La Prensa Valley.

(To 3d Platoon.) Support 2d Platoon's counterattack by screening his left flank.

(To Weapons Platoon.) You are attached to 2d Platoon to support his counterattack.

It's your responsibility to make sure your mission order is completely understood. You do this by having subordinate leaders back-brief important elements of the order. Through practice, both you and your subordinate leaders come to understand each other, and you learn how much latitude you can allow each of them.

To succeed in maneuver warfare, you must decentralize decisionmaking as much as possible. Centralized decisionmaking is too slow. To decentralize decisionmaking and encourage initiative, you must tell your subordinates **why** you want them to do something. In training, your goal is to get them to act in the best way possible without explicit directions of what to do. In combat, they will often face confusing, unforeseen situations that demand an independent decision. By using mission orders throughout the chain of command, Marine leaders will act appropriately without constantly waiting for guidance from above. This makes Marine units at all levels both fast and effective.

Problem 2

Situation

You are the commander of 1st Platoon, A Company, BLT 1/4. Your company is currently located at the intersection of Routes 5 and 16 as indicated on figure 2-2. A few minutes ago, your company was tasked with aiding a local militia force in securing the Melendez Railroad Station to prevent enemy interference during a major logistics resupply offload tomorrow. The enemy threat comes from a large band of irregular soldiers operating aggressively in this area. Although highly armed, the irregulars are mobile and effective. After quickly devising a plan, your company commander issued the following mission order to you and the other platoon commanders:

Our company is tasked with helping to secure the Melendez Railroad Station to prevent interference from enemy irregular forces during a logistics offload tomorrow morning. I intend to advance through the Sandino Valley, cross the St Augustine River at the fording site, and advance to Melendez Railroad Station. We'll move as a company since I anticipate enemy contact along the way.

(To 1st Platoon.) You are the advance guard during our movement and the focus of effort. Make sure you secure the far side of the St Augustine River to ensure the main body crosses safely.

(To 2d Platoon.) Follow 1st Platoon in the company column. Screen both flanks during our movement.

(To 3d Platoon.) Follow the weapons platoon in our column. You are the rear guard.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Move in the main body following 2d Platoon. Keep your mortars within range of the advance guard.

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Situation

You are the commander of 1st Platoon, A Company, BLT 1/4. Your company is currently located at the intersection of Routes 5 and 16 as indicated on figure 2-2. A few minutes ago, your company was tasked with aiding a local militia force in securing the Melendez Railroad Station to prevent enemy interference during a major logistics resupply offload tomorrow. The enemy threat comes from a large band of irregular soldiers operating aggressively in this area. Although lightly armed, the irregulars are mobile and effective. After quickly devising a plan, your company commander issued the following mission order to you and the other platoon commanders:

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(To 2d Platoon.) Follow 1st Platoon in the company column. Screen both flanks during our movement.

(To 3d Platoon.) Follow the weapons platoon in our column. You are the rear guard.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Move in the main body following 2d Platoon. Keep your mortars within range of the advance guard.

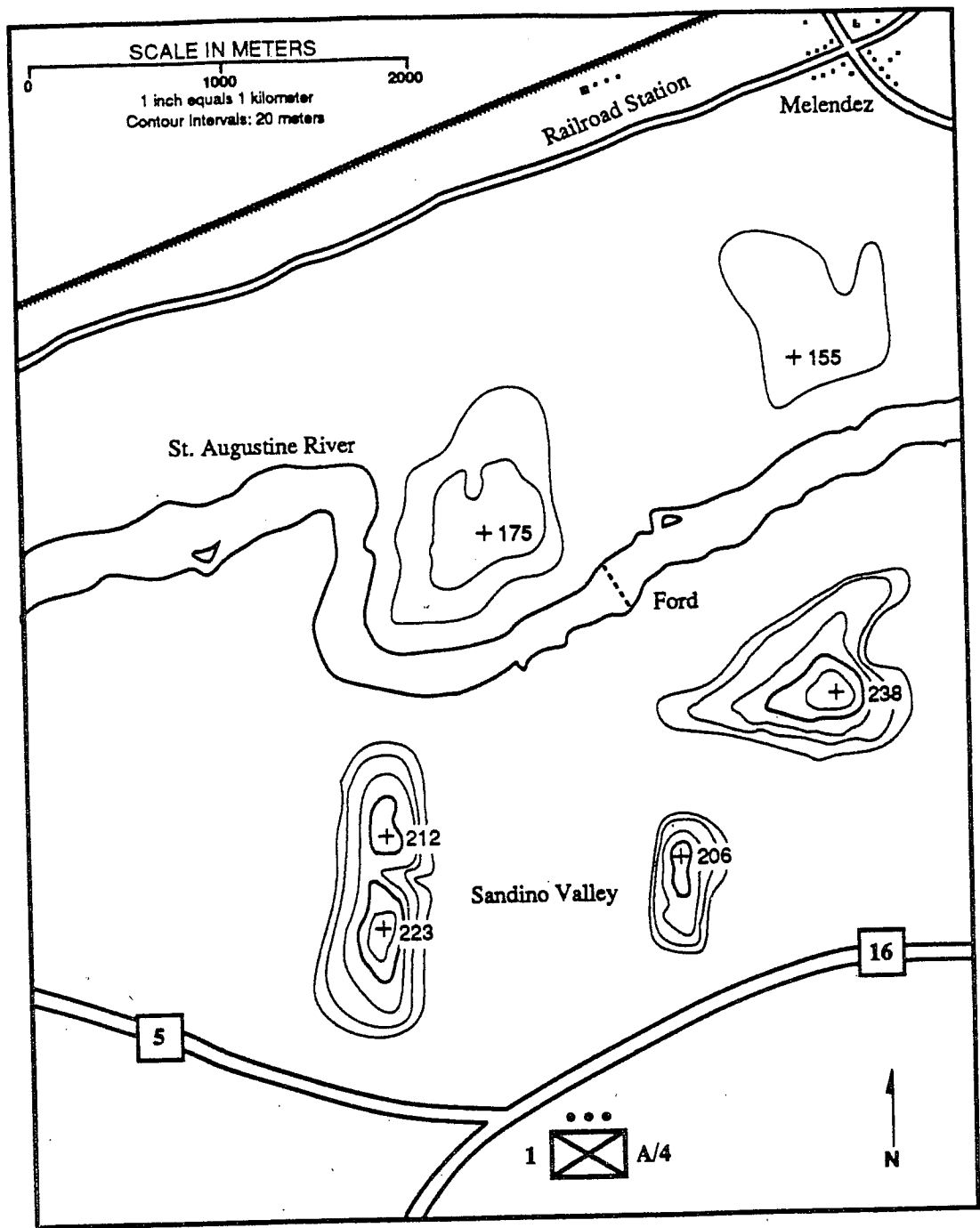


Fig. 2-2. Melendez Railroad Station.

Requirement

Write the mission order which you will issue your squad leaders for your advance to the railroad station.

Solution

As the company's advance guard, you are responsible for security to the front. The techniques for doing this are varied due to the terrain and situation. (You will study them in detail in the next course in the Warfighting Skills Program.) However, there are also tactical decisions that you will make as you advance north to the railroad station, decisions like: Where are the most likely locations that you will make enemy contact and how do you handle them? What happens when you make contact with the enemy? Do you attack, suppress, or bypass his position? In planning your use of supporting arms, how can you best use them to accomplish what you must do? In your tactical planning and execution, you have to answer these questions and others like them.

To screen your company's front, your platoon will usually patrol aggressively in the direction of advance. Depending upon the situation, these patrols may be of squad or fire team size. As with other tactical operations (attacking and defending), use mission orders and designate a focus of effort. The latitude with which you allow your subordinates to choose objectives and aiming points depends entirely upon the situation and each subordinate's capability to operate under mission orders. Some subordinates will be more capable than others, and you should tailor your instructions accordingly. For example, let's assume your 1st squad leader is extremely bright, capable and aggressive. In past operations, he's proved to you that he performs well under mission orders--he understands your intent and always acts appropriately. By contrast, your 2d squad leader is not so capable, and your third squad leader even less so. You must tailor your mission order accordingly. For this tactical problem, your mission order might be:

Our company moves out in 30 minutes to secure the Melendez Railroad Station for an important resupply evolution tomorrow morning. We are the company's advance guard and the focus of effort. I intend to maintain a rate of advance of 2 kilometers per hour as we advance up the Sandino Valley, cross at the ford site, and approach the railroad station.

(To 1st Squad.) You are the point element and focus of effort. When you arrive at the railroad station, secure any approach from the north until the rest of the company arrives.

(To 2d Squad.) Screen the right flank of the 1st squad as we advance north. Make sure you thoroughly check Hills 206, 238, and 155 for any enemy. When we arrive at the railroad station, I want you to secure the road intersection 500 meters east of the station until the rest of the company arrives.

(To 3d Squad.) I want you to screen 1st squad's left flank from when we leave our present location until we arrive at the Melendez Railroad Station. Make sure you thoroughly check Hills 223, 212, and 175 for any enemy. When 1st squad arrives at the St Augustine River, I

want you to place yourself where you can support them by fire as they advance on Hill 175. When we arrive at the railroad station, I want you to advance to the farm northwest of the station and position yourself to stop any enemy attack from the West.

Remember, when you issue a mission order, it's **your** responsibility to make sure your subordinates know what result you want. Because your subordinate leaders vary in their ability to understand mission orders and act appropriately, you must tailor your instructions accordingly. You learn how to best communicate what you want to each subordinate by practicing mission orders in all you do, both in the field and in garrison.

CHAPTER THREE

Focus of Effort

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Focus of Effort

In *Tactical Fundamentals*, you learned that choosing a main effort, or focus of effort, was one way to harmonize subordinate actions in maneuver warfare. This happens because all of your subordinate units know what your focus of effort is trying to accomplish and work to support it. Let's review and look in detail at the concept of focus of effort.

Remember that your focus of effort is **your bid to act decisively against the enemy**. When you choose a focus of effort, you say, in effect, *"This is my bid for victory; everything else is secondary."* All subordinate units that are not assigned the focus of effort must work to ensure its success. When you choose a focus of effort, you may have to accept risk elsewhere, particularly if you are outnumbered. In combat, you must do this because you will lose if you try to cover all the bases. Instead, you must choose a course of action directed at the enemy's critical weakness and focus all your efforts on exploiting it. This is the surest, and often the only, means to victory.

Whether attacking or defending, you must have a focus of effort at all times. Your focus of effort is not simply a unit, such as, **2d Platoon is the focus of effort**, or a location, like **the focus of effort is the enemy's right flank**. It is a **relationship** between the unit you choose and the enemy weakness that unit must exploit. For example, in one situation, you might express your focus of effort this way:

Focus of effort is 2d Platoon's counterattack to cut the enemy's line of communication.

It's important that you identify not only **who** the focus of effort is, but also **what** they are assigned to do. This tells all your subordinate leaders what you are trying to accomplish.

You can choose only **one** focus of effort for a particular mission. Otherwise, you risk confusing your subordinate leaders as to what specifically they must support. You cannot say, *"If the enemy does this, focus of effort is here, if he does that, focus of effort is over there."* However, you may change the focus of effort to take advantage of an unforeseen opportunity or to adjust to a sudden, unexpected threat. When you train your subordinates to think alike, they will often take appropriate action in the absence of orders and shift the focus of effort as the situation changes.

Finally, you must take every measure available to fully support the focus of effort to ensure its success. Although you may not attach all your fire support assets to the unit assigned the focus of effort, all your fire support planning must support what the main effort is trying to do. This means that in some situations you may detach supporting arms from some units that normally own them. For example, as a rifle platoon commander, you might sometimes concentrate all of your Squad Automatic Weapons (SAWs) under your direct control to effectively concentrate their fire. When the situation demands extraordinary measures, you must not be constrained by thinking conventionally. Sometimes, unconventional solutions are the best ones. Try unconventional solutions frequently in peacetime so that you have a good feel for what works and what doesn't when you go to war.

PROBLEM 3

Situation

You are the commander of A Company, BLT 1/6. Your company is deployed as a forward security screen in the BLT's zone of action as indicated on figure 3-1. Several hours ago, your S-2 informed you that a large, mechanized enemy force is advancing south and expected to attack west of your present position in BLT 2/6's zone of action. After the S-2's brief, your battalion commander issued you the following mission order:

Enemy forces are advancing south along Route 95 and expected to attack soon in BLT 2/6's zone of action. Commander, RLT 6, intends to delay the enemy as he crosses the San Luis River and then counterattack to encircle him from the east and destroy him. Our BLT will counterattack when the enemy has crossed the river and divided his forces. My intent is to screen avenues of approach into the enemy's left flank, and as the situation develops, counterattack and destroy him. You will screen avenues of approach north of the San Luis river and to our west to determine the enemy's disposition. On order, Companies B and C will counterattack into the enemy's flank. Initially, your screen is the focus of effort.

The terrain in your zone is flat, heavily wooded, and broken only by narrow roads and small clearings. The San Luis River is a major obstacle to movement. The only locations in your zone of action where vehicles may cross the river are at the three bridges. Your company is organized and equipped as a light infantry company. It is entirely foot-mobile. Your table of organization includes:

- 3 rifle platoons.
- 1 weapons platoon.
- 2 sections from the Anti-Armor Platoon.

Since the enemy situation is unclear, you decide to deploy one platoon forward as a reconnaissance screen, and kept the rest of your company in reserve near Center Bridge. Suddenly, your company tactical radio net starts buzzing with activity. The squad positioned along Route 10 reports an enemy column of at least 10-15 tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) rapidly advancing south along Route 10. Almost simultaneously, you receive a similar report from the squad located at the intersection of Campana Road and Route 14.

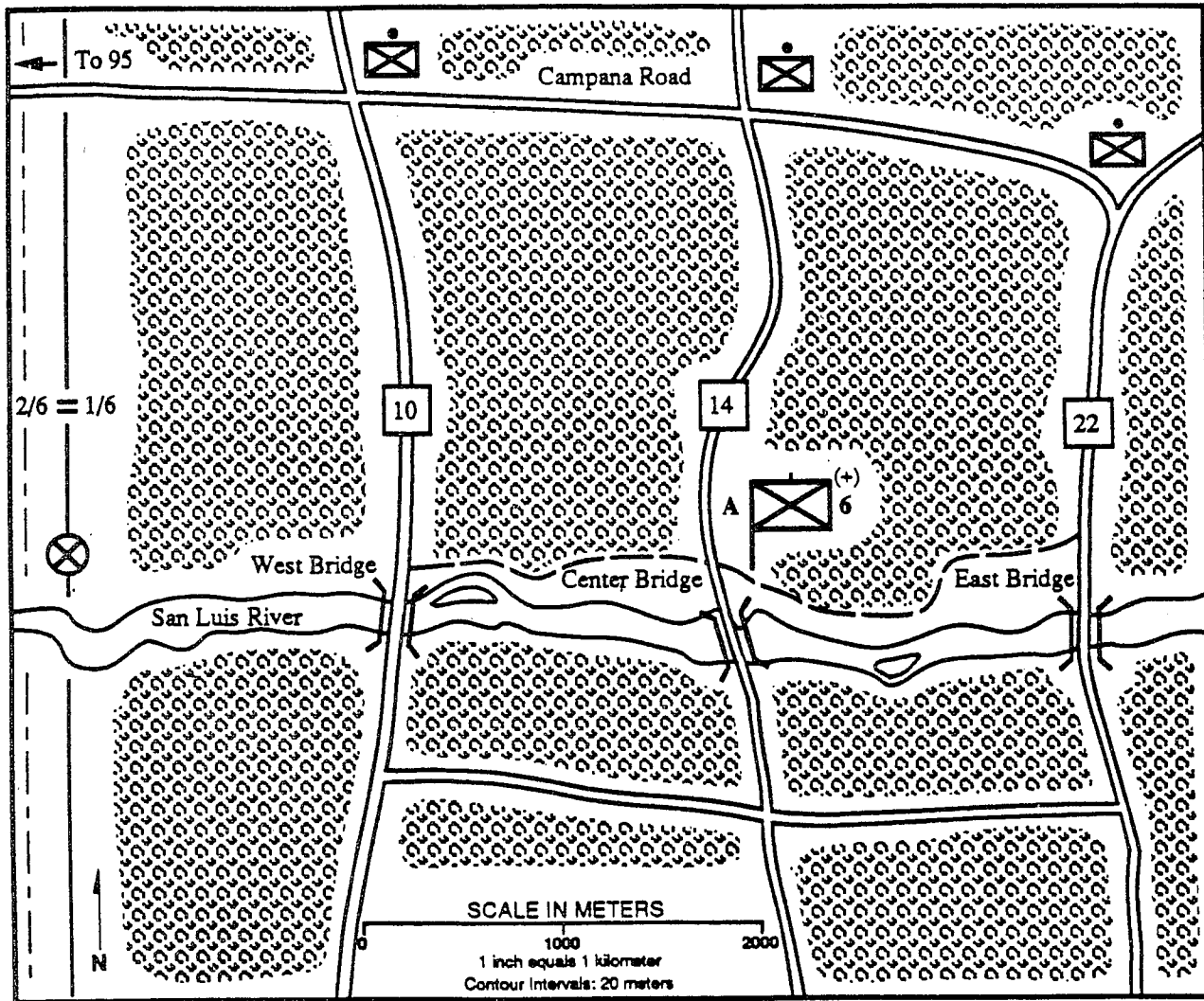


Fig. 3-1. San Luis River Bridges.

Requirement #1

Identify several courses of action that you might take.

Solution to Requirement #1

With 20-30 enemy vehicles headed your way, you can reasonably assume that the enemy's main effort is directed at your BLT, not BLT 2/6. You must immediately report your situation back to your BLT commander so that he knows what is going on. Then, you need to start thinking about what to do. Because your BLT commander demands great initiative, and uses mission orders, you will not wait for orders before you act. Confident that you are doing what your senior wants because he has trained you rigorously to think tactically like himself, you assess your situation and act immediately.

You can logically assume that your BLT's mission will change since the enemy situation is dramatically different than planned. You might assume that your BLT now becomes the blocking force while BLT 2/6 or another maneuver element becomes the counterattack force. If your BLT is the blocking force, you need to think of ways to slow the enemy's progress to gain time for your BLT commander to organize a coherent defense. Should you try to prevent the enemy from gaining control of Center Bridge? Should you try to control all three bridges or you withdraw south of the bridges and ambush the enemy as he crosses them? Should you ambush the enemy columns along the roads north of the bridges? Or, should you let the enemy columns pass and assume that friendly forces to your rear will handle them?

The decision you should make is by no means simple or straightforward. If you try to control all three bridges, you are probably making a mistake. The enemy has at least 20 vehicles advancing on two axes. You can assume that these are reconnaissance forces, so you know that he probably has a good size force trailing them. If you try to control all three bridges, you dissipate your forces. You only have a company while the enemy has at least a battalion and probably much more. If you try to hold all three bridges, you will probably lose all three relatively quickly. Instead, if you concentrate your forces to control Center Bridge, you should succeed, at least for a while. Still, you will lose many Marines in denying the enemy the use of the bridge.

Withdrawing south of the bridges appears to be your least desirable option. If so, you most likely surrender the initiative to the enemy since he then decides when and where to cross the river. Unless you have a definite reason for withdrawing south of the bridges, e.g., if you plan to blow them up, then you should probably not withdraw without doing something.

The terrain in this situation gives you one big advantage over the mechanized enemy forces. In close, heavily-wooded terrain, light infantry is much more mobile than mechanized forces. The mechanized forces are restricted to moving only along roads and vehicle trails. Because of this, light infantry forces can ambush the enemy vehicles at close range along the roads and then withdraw into the forest. Therefore, you might choose to ambush the enemy columns at several locations north of the bridges. This would delay him, and you may even stop his advance for awhile if you use your forces skillfully.

There is another option that provides you with interesting possibilities. Let's suppose that instead of blocking or ambushing the enemy reconnaissance columns, you let them pass while you disperse your unit into the forest. Then, after the enemy's combat forces pass by, you suddenly reappear and start raising havoc in his rear area with platoon or even squad-size attacks on his command posts, logistics units, and

supporting arms and air defense units. This is sometimes called a granular defense. The terrain that you are fighting in is ideal for these types of raids, particularly if the enemy has large, vulnerable rear area facilities. With luck, you might find a critical enemy weakness and bring his advance to a sudden halt. The key question is: Which course of action provides the desired effect against the enemy? What would your senior want you to do if he were here? If you allow the enemy's combat units to pass and then ambush targets in his rear areas, will this slow him and disorganize him enough so that your BLT succeeds? If your BLT is organized, trained, and equipped as a light infantry force, you should feel confident that your BLT can handle the enemy's combat forces. The terrain on which you are fighting is light infantry terrain. You have the advantage as long as you don't give the enemy a fixed target to attack. As a unit leader in combat, you will often face decisions like these. To succeed, you must quickly develop a reasonable course of action and then execute it vigorously.

Requirement #2

Choose a course of action, and write the mission order which you would issue your subordinate leaders.

Solution to Requirement #2

Let's assume you are bold and decide to use a granular defense. You decide to allow the enemy combat forces to pass, while you seek soft spots in his rear areas. You hope to find a critical weakness and attack it. In this way, you will help your BLT suck the enemy force into a trap and disorganize him--your assumed mission based on the situation and your knowledge of the intent of the commanders two levels above you. The mission order that you issue subordinates might be as follows:

The enemy's main effort has shifted from BLT 2/6's zone of action to ours. Our BLT becomes the holding force to allow RLT 6 to maneuver against the enemy and destroy him. My intent is to infiltrate advancing enemy units and attack soft spots in his rear areas. Attacks against enemy units along Route 10 are our focus of effort.

(To 1st Platoon--currently deployed as your screening force.) Continue as a reconnaissance screen along Routes 10, 14, and 22 north of Campana Road to provide battalion with information about the enemy.

(To 2d Platoon.) Infiltrate and attack enemy rear area units along Route 10. Do not go north of Campana Road unless directed. You are the focus of effort.

(To 3d Platoon.) Infiltrate and attack enemy rear area units along Route 14. Do not go north of Campana Road unless directed.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Attach the machinegun and assault sections to 2d Platoon. Keep the mortar section in general support with priority of fires to 2d Platoon.

Requirement #3

Explain why you designated the focus of effort as you did.

Solution to Requirement #3

Your focus of effort is your bid for success. It must be decisive. In the previous order, 2d Platoon's attack along Route 10 was the focus of effort. The commander chose this as the focus of effort because he thinks this is where he will find a critical weakness. If so, he wants to exploit that weakness to do something decisive to the enemy. He is not likely to destroy the enemy with his focus of effort alone. But if he finds the right weakness and attacks it, he will be doing something important to help the BLT carry out its mission.

Note that this entire process of estimating the situation, choosing a course of action, and communicating your instructions, took only a few minutes. The situation demanded it. You did not have time to pass the enemy spot reports to your BLT commander and wait for him to send you new orders. Although you took the initiative and acted, your BLT commander may call you on the radio in 5 minutes and direct you to pull back south of the river. If that happens, issue another frag order to your subordinates and act accordingly. Sometimes you will do one thing when your senior would have wanted you to do something else. That happens in combat. But in this situation, you don't have time to wait. The enemy surprised you and is moving toward you rapidly. You need to do something to regain the initiative.

The best preparation for war is facing situations like this one in free play exercises. With this type of training, you learn to work effectively with both your seniors and subordinates. This is especially important to leaders who use mission orders.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Reserve

CHAPTER FOUR

The Reserve

In combat, Marine units maintain reserve forces from the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) level down to the rifle company and sometimes platoon level. Although the reserve was not addressed in *Tactical Fundamentals*, it is important in tactics.

In combat, you maintain a reserve for several reasons. Keeping a reserve gives you flexibility in reacting to the unexpected. One thing you can always count on in combat is that things will seldom, if ever, go exactly as you planned. Remember, the enemy has an independent will. He tries to deceive you and impose his will on you just as you try to do the same to him. Keeping part of your force in reserve allows you to deal with surprises--both good and bad--in a timely manner. If instead you commit all of your forces and suddenly find you need a reaction force in a hurry, you will probably not be able to quickly pull one of your subordinate units back and have it deal with the threat. Using a reserve gives you flexibility.

Maintaining a reserve also keeps your disposition ambiguous in the eyes of the enemy. This is important in order to retain the initiative. When you engage the enemy, he will try to discover your disposition and what you are trying to do as quickly as possible. You will try to do the same to him. The larger the force you keep in reserve, the more ambiguous the picture you present him. If instead you commit all your forces early on, you may surprise him initially, but he will probably discover what you are trying to do and use his reserve to react accordingly. Then, you surrender the initiative to the enemy and lack the forces to get it back. One oft-stated maxim of war is: "*The force that last commits its reserve usually wins.*"

In the attack, your reserve may well be your exploitation force. You would hold it back until you spot an opportunity, and then use it to attack a critical weakness decisively. Often, as much as two-thirds of your force will be kept in reserve to exploit such opportunities. In the defense, your reserve will often be your counterattack force. Often, you will use a small-size force deployed as a security screen to discover the enemy's disposition, and then counterattack violently as enemy weaknesses appear. In both cases, you would probably designate your reserve and its mission as your focus of effort.

In the tactical use of the reserve, there are several principles you will generally follow: First, as uncertainty grows, you want to maintain a larger percentage of your force in reserve. This gives you greater flexibility until your picture of the enemy's disposition and what he is trying to do becomes clearer. However, there may be situations where you face imminent danger and have to act decisively before you would like to. In such situations, you **must** make a decision and act. When you do act, do so in such a way to buy time until you can read the situation and develop a solution. But you must never be caught not doing anything. Doing something is always better than nothing.

Second, you want to exploit success with your reserve, not reinforce failure. This seems like common sense, but you will frequently read historical accounts of battles where this principle was violated, often resulting in defeat. Your reserve is

your knockout punch, to be delivered against the enemy at the proper place and time. To commit the reserve to try to salvage a bad situation is almost always a waste of men and material.

Finally, when you commit your reserve, you want to reconstitute another reserve as soon as possible. This should probably be the least committed of your forces. The longer you go without any reserve, no matter how small, the more you invite trouble.

Like the other important tactical decisions which you will make in combat, your decision of where and when to commit the reserve is based on **judgement** learned through education and practice. Using your reserve properly is one of the most important tools you have to deal with the uncertainty and surprise inherent in battle.

PROBLEM 4

Situation

You are the commander of F Company, BLT 2/5. Your battalion is involved in a regimental-size operation to destroy enemy forces that are retreating. While pursuing the enemy this morning, Company E made contact with what appeared to be the rear guard of the enemy unit. The engagement became a battle, and it soon became apparent that the enemy had switched to the offense and was attacking. Within four hours, your battalion became heavily engaged against a numerically superior enemy force, perhaps as large as a regiment.

It is now 1830. Sunset is in one hour. As the battalion reserve, your company is about to be committed in a helicopterborne assault on what appears to be the enemy's left flank. A few minutes ago, you received the following mission order from your battalion commander:

E Company is under heavy pressure from enemy forces attacking south along Route 3. I want you to counterattack west from the vicinity of Hill 225 to turn the enemy flank and relieve the pressure on E Company. Your counterattack is the focus of effort.
(See figure 4-1.)

You hustle back to your company and issue a brief warning order to get its preparation underway. Then, you study your map and situation to figure out your course of action. You know nothing about the enemy in your zone of action except that he is heavily engaged with E Company near Hill 145. The terrain is a mixture of open, cultivated areas and small forests. Although the weather is good, it will be dark in about 60 minutes. After studying your map and talking with the helicopter flight leader, you choose the open area west of Hill 225 as the primary landing zone (LZ) and the area northwest of Hill 225 as the alternate. The flight leader informs you that he has only three CH-46 helicopters available and will have to make two trips to get your entire company into the LZ.

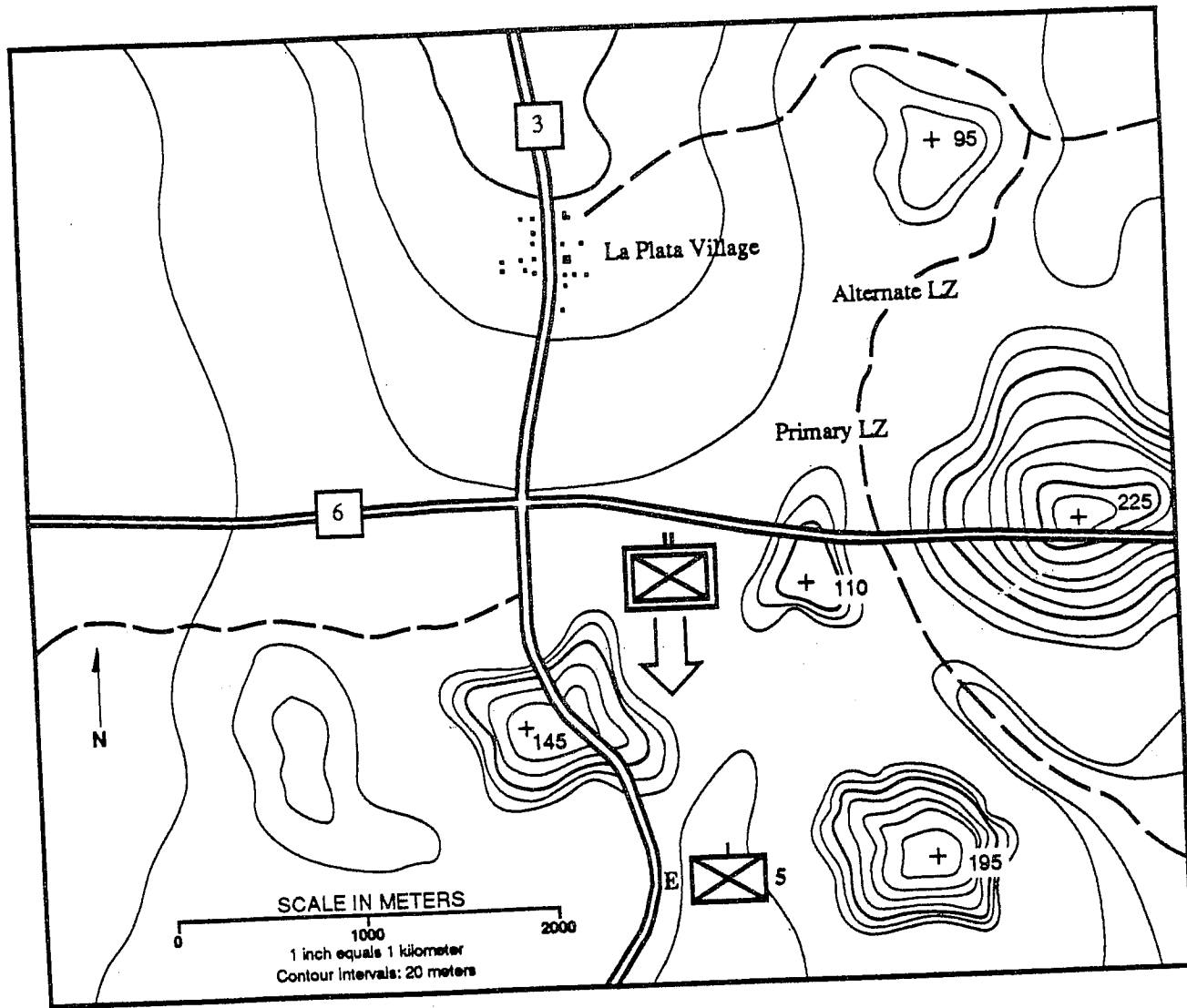


Fig. 4-1. La Plata Crossroads.

Requirement # 1

Write the mission order which you would issue your subordinate leaders. (Note: You are organized as a T/O Marine rifle company, which has 3 rifle platoons and one weapons platoon.)

Solution to Requirement #1

It's clear what you have to do in this situation. You need to attack west to hit the enemy where he is vulnerable and force him to withdraw from his attack on E Company. Unfortunately, your task is complicated by elements outside your control. You know almost nothing about the enemy's disposition. The little you do know is probably outdated because the situation is fluid and changed dramatically during the day. Worst of all, you can move only half of your company at one time, which means you probably won't have your entire company in the zone until after dark.

After studying your situation, you decide that the best course of action is to send out a reconnaissance screen to the west from the lead element into the zone. This screen will determine the enemy's disposition. You will use the rest of the lead element to secure the zone from enemy counterattack. When the rest of your company arrives, you will move out and develop the situation based on reports from your reconnaissance screen. Because you know so little about the enemy's disposition, you will keep most of your company in reserve until the situation becomes clearer. The mission order which you issue subordinates might be as follows:

E and G Companies are in heavy contact with enemy forces attacking south. Our mission is to land near Hill 225 and attack west into the enemy's left flank to force him to withdraw and relieve the pressure on E Company. I intend to send out a reconnaissance screen from the lead element flying into the LZ to determine the enemy's disposition. Then, I intend to attack west and develop the situation based on reports from the reconnaissance screen. Initially, focus of effort is the reconnaissance screen.

(To 1st Platoon.) You are in the lead element. Deploy to the West, reference Hill 110, as the company's reconnaissance screen.

(To 2d Platoon.) You are also in the lead element. Secure the LZ from enemy counterattack until the 2d wave arrives, and we move out. When we move out, you are in reserve along with 3d and weapons platoons.

(To 3d Platoon.) You are in the 2d element. Be prepared to attack west, reference the intersection of Routes 3 and 6 to destroy enemy forces retreating north along Route 3.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Send the machinegun section in the lead element to help secure the LZ from enemy counterattack. Keep all sections in general support initially until the situation develops. Be prepared to support 3d Platoon's attack.

Requirement #2

Assume that you decided to use the course of action described in the solution to requirement number 1. You fly in with your lead element (1st Platoon, 2d Platoon, and the machinegun section) and arrive in your primary LZ at 1910--just 20 minutes before sunset. You conclude that it will take at least 30 minutes to get the rest of your company into the LZ. As your reconnaissance screen moves out, you receive the following frag order from your battalion commander:

*E Company is in imminent danger of being overrun.
Attack immediately to link up with and relieve the
pressure on E Company.*

You explain to your battalion commander that you only have half of your company in the zone, but he insists--move out! You change your plan and decide to issue a frag order.

Write the Frag order you would issue your subordinate leaders.

Solution to Requirement #2

At this point, time is critical. You must attack west and you don't have any time to find out what's in front of you. Calling back your reconnaissance screen, you quickly issue the following frag order:

E Company is about to be overrun. My intent is to get behind the enemy unit attacking E Company and attack it from the rear.

(To 1st Platoon.) Attack southwest reference Hill 145. You are the lead platoon and the focus of effort.

(To 2d Platoon.) Leave one squad to secure the LZ, and move the rest of your platoon in trace of 1st Platoon. You are in reserve.

(To machinegun section.) Follow 2d Platoon in the attack. You are also in reserve.

You hope that a sudden attack on the enemy's flank or rear will force him to withdraw. Remember, the situation is probably as unclear to him as it is to you. When you make contact, he won't know whether you are a platoon, company, or even a battalion hitting his flank. You hope to exploit his uncertainty and increase his fear by your bold, resolute action.

Note:

This problem is based on actions during Operation Union II in South Vietnam in June of 1967. On June 4th, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines (-) was committed as the division reserve to relieve pressure on the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which was in contact with a North Vietnamese Army unit of approximately regimental size. In the dark and with no knowledge of the enemy's disposition, 2/5's battalion commander decided to advance to gain contact with the enemy despite having only one and a half of his rifle companies in the LZ. Contact was made at about 2030 and the pressure on 1/5 was relieved almost immediately.

CHAPTER FIVE

Combined Arms

CHAPTER FIVE Combined Arms

You should recall from *Tactical Fundamentals* that the concept of combined arms is more than just organizing all the various combat arms on the battlefield. It is organizing and using the various arms **and** maneuver in a purposeful way. The goal is to put the enemy in a dilemma: to place him in such a position that whatever action he takes is to his own disadvantage. When this happens, you hasten his defeat. Not only do you destroy him physically, e.g, his troops and equipment, but mentally and morally as well.

In the twentieth century, the trend has been to lower the level at which units are organized into combined arms teams. For example, in most pre-World War I armies, the lowest level of integrating two different weapons was the infantry battalion. Typically, the battalion had anywhere from 4-8 rifle companies, and a heavy weapons company including 4-6 heavy machineguns. The *rifle* company was just that: three or more platoons equipped with single shot, breech-loading rifles. The only other weapons in the company armory were pistols which headquarters soldiers and the company bandsmen carried. However, by 1918, most infantry battalion organizations were much different. By then, the battalion was truly a combined arms team. It might include attached artillery, engineer, and mortar units in addition to its machineguns. The rifle company in 1918 did not resemble its prewar organization. It included light machine-guns, mortars, and other assault weapons, all organized into combined arms teams at the **squad** level.

The trend toward lowering the level of combined arms organization, established in World War I, continued through World War II up to the present. With the advent of large armor formations in World War II, non-armor units found the need for anti-armor weapons. This resulted in adding anti-armor units to the infantry battalion, and in some cases, to the rifle company. Today, the Marine fire team can be called a combined arms team, organized with its rifles, squad automatic weapon (SAW), and grenade launcher. With this brief history of combined arms teams, let's now turn to the leader and how he gets maximum effect with combined arms.

How does a leader combine his firepower and maneuver to get the maximum combined arms effect? First, the leader must ensure that his unit has effective standard operating procedures (SOPs) and immediate action drills for enemy contact. Your SOPs must be tactically sound, and your Marines must be drilled to act or react instantly to either gain or maintain the initiative. For example, let's assume that your platoon is advancing on the enemy when you encounter an enemy unit also on the move. Let's suppose that you spot each other at the same time. Your Marines must react instantly to gain the initiative. In this situation, you may want to fire a heavy volume initially to gain fire superiority, and then suppress the enemy so that you can maneuver part of your force against him. When the enemy sees that he is outmaneuvered, he may panic or freeze from shock. Either reaction is to your advantage. You must have a preplanned drill for such an encounter because time is critical. If you have to stop, organize your forces, and pass orders when you suddenly make contact, you risk surrendering the initiative to the enemy. In situations like these, swift, violent, offensive action is imperative. By quickly and effectively combining your arms and maneuver, you take the initiative from the enemy.

Second, the leader must think of creative, innovative ways to combine arms in his tactical planning. SOPs and immediate action drills are **short term** means for combining arms. When the leader plans his use of supporting arms and maneuver for maximum effect, he is using **long term** means to combine arms. In this context, the use of combined arms falls in the realm of the **art** of the commander. Only by thinking and planning creativity, and often unconventionally, does the commander maximize his effect of combining firepower and maneuver.

Remember, in combat, you must ultimately defeat the enemy's moral quality--his will to fight. Since all situations are unique, use various means to compel him to surrender. In some situations like most Marine battles against the Japanese in World War II, you will have to kill almost every soldier before the enemy quits fighting. In others, you will defeat him primarily through maneuver. But in combining your firepower and maneuver, your goal must always be to put the enemy in a dilemma. When you do this, you destroy him not only physically but psychologically, and you hasten his defeat.

PROBLEM 5

Situation

You are the commander of Weapons Platoon, C Company, BLT 1/9. Your company is currently deployed on the southern slope of South Mountain (see figure 5-1). You face an enemy force of approximately one company that is dug in on Hills 512 and 475. Your company is tasked with destroying the enemy to enable the BLT to attack west along Route 7.

The time is 1800. A few minutes ago, your company commander issued his subordinate leaders the following mission order:

Our BLT will attack west tomorrow morning to destroy a major enemy communications center. Our mission is to destroy the enemy force currently on Hills 512 and 475 before the BLT attacks to enable the BLT to use Route 7 during its attack. I intend to infiltrate the enemy tonight through the draw between Hills 512 and 475 and assault his positions from the rear. Our attack is the battalion's focus of effort.

(To 1st Platoon.) You will lead the advance from our position north through the draw and into the enemy's rear area. Then I want you to destroy the enemy on Hill 512.

(To 2d Platoon.) You will follow 1st Platoon until the draw splits northwest of Hill 475. Then, I want you to destroy the enemy on Hill 475.

(To 3d Platoon.) You will follow 2d Platoon through the enemy's position. I want you to remain in reserve in the draw northeast of Hill 512. Be prepared to counterattack the enemy unit near Hill 428 if they attempt to relieve enemy forces on either Hill 512 or Hill 475.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Support the company's maneuver by fire from the time we cross the crest of South Mountain, until we consolidate on our objectives. I do not want to alert the enemy that we are attacking, so do not fire any preparatory fires. However, be prepared to suppress any enemy positions that discover us and hinder our advance.

You have the following fire support available:

- 1 M60 machinegun section (6 M60 machineguns.)
- 1 assault section (SMAW and AT-4 rocket launchers.)
- 1 60mm mortar section (3 M224 mortars.)
- 1 battery of 105mm howitzers in direct support (DS).
- 1 platoon of 81mm mortars in DS.

Attachments:

- 2 sections from the battalion's Heavy Machine Gun (HMG) platoon (.50 caliber and Mk19 HMGs.)
- 1 section from the battalion's Anti-Armor platoon (Dragon medium anti armor weapon).
- 1 section of combat engineers.

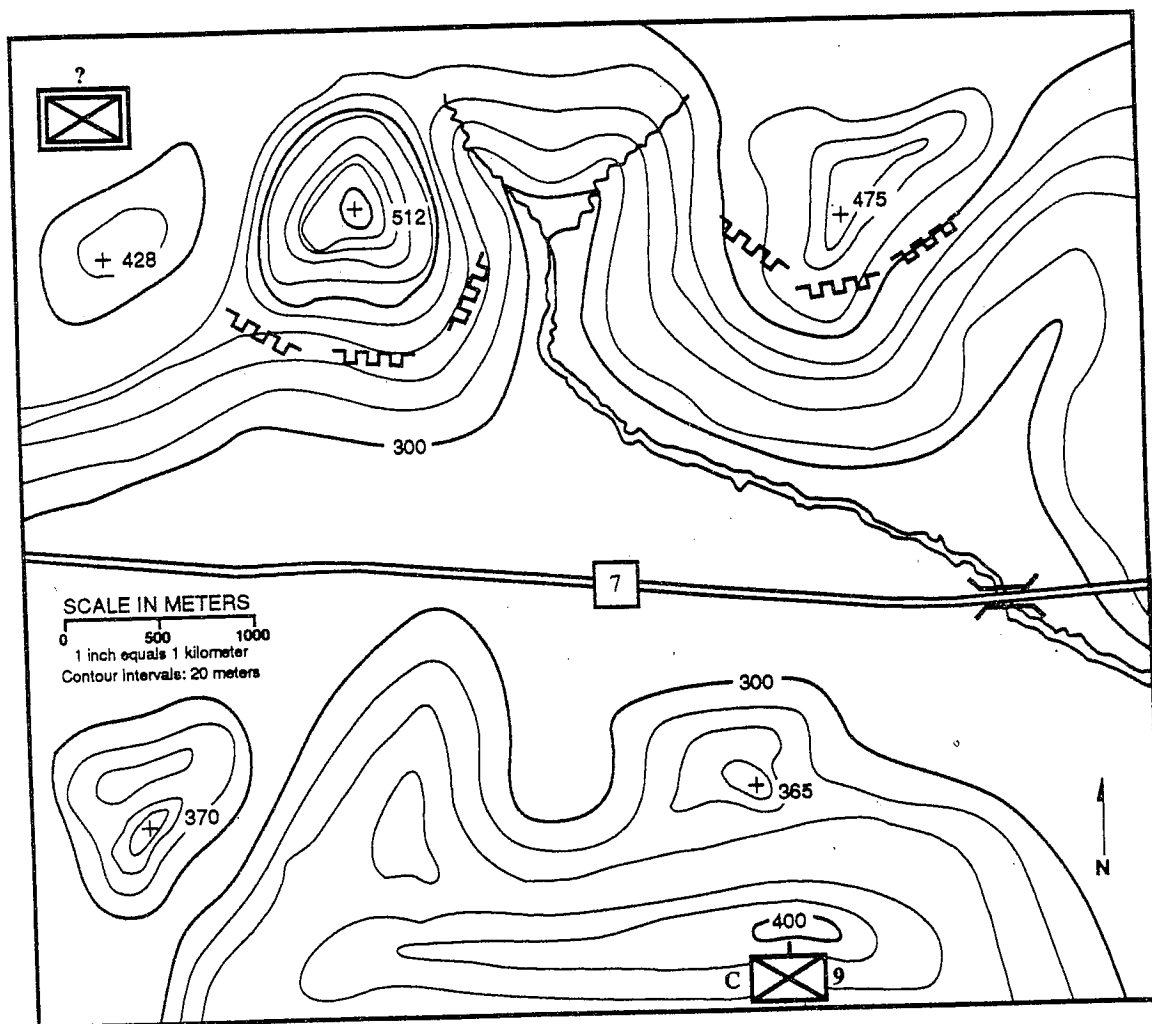


Fig. 5-1. South Mountain, looking north.

Requirement

Plan your use of supporting arms for the company's attack.

Solution

The company commander's plan appears to be straightforward and feasible. But you know that in combat, things seldom go as planned due to friction. Therefore, assuming that the attack will go according to plans you need to start planning, but also develop contingency plans for those problems that you anticipate.

Ideally, the company will infiltrate through the draw undetected, get behind the enemy, and assault his positions from the rear. The surprise from an aggressive force suddenly assaulting the enemy from his rear might be enough to unnerve him and force him to surrender with little resistance. If the enemy does resist, he should be at a disadvantage since his positions are oriented forward while your maneuver forces are assaulting from his rear. However, assaulting prepared positions is usually difficult and is costly in casualties if the enemy is not surprised. In such cases, you will want bunker-busting weapons up front with the assault forces. Located up front, they are responsive and can help clear strong positions that small arms fire or indirect fire weapons can't destroy. Therefore, you should probably attach your assault and Dragon sections to the maneuver platoons to have them forward where they may be needed. Although the Dragon is an anti-armor weapon, it can be used to good effect against bunkers. In the Falklands in 1982, the British used Milan antitank missiles effectively when assaulting Argentine positions.

One problem which you should anticipate is that maneuver forces will not make it through the draw undetected. A competent enemy would recognize the draw as a vulnerability and take measures to secure it. He might position observation and listening posts in it to detect infiltrators. He might also emplace obstacles such as barbed wire, mines, or booby traps, and then cover the obstacles by fire. You should recall from *Tactical Fundamentals* that in so doing, he uses the concept of combined arms. The enemy may also position indirect fire final protective fires (FPF) in the draw or even set up direct fire weapons that cover it. He may also use security patrols to guard the draw. You cannot know for sure what measures the enemy has taken to protect the draw, but you can make reasonable assumptions based on how he operated in the past. Did the enemy use obstacles effectively? Did he have a sophisticated mine capability? Did he use FPFs properly? How aggressively does he patrol while in the defense? Base many of your decisions on answers to these questions and others like them. Assuming that the enemy is competent and uses obstacles well, you will probably want to keep your combat engineers near the front to clear obstacles that the infantry can't breach. If your company commander sends a reconnaissance patrol into the draw before the attack, you may also want to include engineers in it. If you expect that the enemy will fire indirect fire FPFs into the draw, you might request counterbattery and counter mortar radar support from higher headquarters and task the 105mm Howitzer battery with suppressing any targeted enemy batteries. Finally, preplan your own on-call indirect fire targets in the draw to have indirect suppressive fire ready if needed. If maneuver forces run into a hard spot in the draw, you want to suppress it immediately so that they can get around it. In this way, you use the combined arms concept properly.

You have many options in planning the use of your machineguns. You might want to emplace your heavy machineguns on the finger extending north from South Mountain to suppress enemy positions that can fire effectively on your maneuver forces in their advance. Although locating the heavy machineguns on the finger puts the enemy positions at or beyond their maximum effective direct fire range, you can use them

effectively in the indirect fire mode at such ranges. To best use your M60 machineguns, you probably want to deploy them with the maneuver forces to provide fast, suppressive direct fire where needed. You also have numerous options in using your mortars. You might want to use the 81mm mortars to suppress on call targets during the assault and keep your 60mm mortars in reserve so that you will have them ready to help repel enemy counterattacks while your maneuver forces consolidate their objectives.

You also need to plan fires on enemy reinforcements located near Hill 428. You should have preplanned indirect fire targets located on and around Hill 428 to delay enemy reinforcements and isolate your company's objectives.

You cannot prepare for every contingency. But in deliberate attacks, you must anticipate events and plan as thoroughly as time allows. You must plan your supporting arms, not simply to kill as many enemy soldiers as you can, but to support maneuver by suppressing and isolating enemy positions. Using supporting arms effectively creates a dilemma for the enemy. It destroys him not only physically, but also mentally and morally.

CHAPTER SIX
Attacking and Defending

CHAPTER SIX

Attacking and Defending¹

To most Marines, the attack and defense seem very different. This is because in most Marine schools, you are taught that tactics are grouped in either of two categories: **offensive tactics** or **defensive tactics**. You are taught that when you are in an offensive posture you are **attacking**. You also learn that the mission of the Marine rifle squad in the attack is to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver, and that the squad accomplishes this by offensive forms of maneuver, like frontal, flanking, and infiltration attacks. In defensive tactics, you learned that the rifle squad's mission is to repel the enemy's assault by fire and close combat. You also learned defensive techniques like how to plan and establish defensive positions and how to conduct an ambush. In the classroom, the distinction between offensive and defensive combat is clear.

However, in practice, there are no such things as purely offensive and defensive tactics. In an offensive posture in combat, you will find many situations where you use a combination of attacks and defenses. The same is true when you are in a defensive posture. For example, let's suppose your company is attacking, and you, as the 1st Platoon Commander, receive the following mission:

Screen the 2d Platoon's right flank as it attacks north along Route 5.

You study your situation and mission and consider several alternative courses of action. Based on the situation, you might position yourself on the right flank of the 2d Platoon and move parallel to its direction of advance. Or, you might locate one or more places where the enemy could ambush the 2d Platoon. You designate these locations key terrain and send patrols out to check each location. Then, you position the rest of your platoon where it can react quickly to any enemy threat. Because your company uses mission orders, you know that you are allowed great latitude to carry out your mission and your commander's intent. Depending upon the situation, you know that you can preemptively **attack** any enemy threat to the 2d Platoon's right flank, or seize key terrain that blocks the enemy advance on the 2d Platoon's right flank and **force the enemy to attack you**. Although your company is in an offensive posture, you may use various forms of attacking or defending (or both) to carry out your mission.

As you can see, the distinction between offensive and defensive combat is vague, particularly in fluid situations. You must avoid having the mind set of "*Because we are on the offensive, we must be attacking.*" In many situations, you will transition frequently between the offense and the defense. You will have to decide when to attack or defend, when to assault or bypass enemy positions, and when to hold terrain or surrender it to the enemy. In Marine exercises in the past, many of these decisions were made for you. For example, in the past, you may have been given a mission like, "*Defend Hill 312,*" without understanding *why* you were to defend it. Before maneuver warfare became doctrine, many Marine commanders tended to centrally control their units. But in the decentralized style of command inherent to maneuver warfare, Marine leaders at all levels now make these type of decisions.

Retaining the initiative

In fluid combat, both the offensive and defensive postures are closely related. Whether or not you retain the initiative depends largely on how well you understand this relationship. In *Tactical Fundamentals* you learned that initiative in this context is competitive. You try to force the enemy to react to what you are doing, and he tries to do the same to you. If you are successful, you have the initiative. You can retain the initiative in either an offensive or defensive posture. For example, when you choose when and where to defend, you choose where to fight. You have the initiative. However, if your defense ties you to a piece of terrain or fixed location in a way that denies you the option of switching to the offense, you will probably give up the initiative. When this happens, the enemy dictates where and when he will attack. He has the initiative.

There are several means by which you retain the initiative:

1. **Transition quickly between the offense and the defense.** When you transition between the offensive and defensive faster than the enemy, you retain the initiative. For example, let's assume that your platoon is advancing on the enemy. You are attacking. Suddenly, you spot an enemy unit advancing toward you. Since you spot him before he spots you, you quickly set up a hasty ambush. When he approaches, you violently ambush his lead elements, killing several of his soldiers and gaining fire superiority. If he then chooses to break contact and retreat, you switch quickly from the defense back to the offense. Using a small element to pin the enemy down and slow his retreat, you quickly maneuver the rest of your platoon around and to his rear to encircle him and cut off his retreat. In this way, you destroy his entire force. Because you transit quickly and skillfully from the offense to the defense, and then back to the offense, you won the engagement.

To transition quickly in fluid combat situations, you must avoid the danger of thinking of combat in **phases**. In deliberate combat, there will be times when tempo is low and operations will be phased, such as the preparatory, conduct, and consolidation phases of an attack. But this type of thinking is dangerous in fluid situations because you tend to focus on the steps you take in each phase and fail to quickly transition from one posture to the next. When this happens, you lose the initiative to a competent enemy. Then, your actions become less and less relevant as he outcycles you. You may conduct the smoothest, best-coordinated attack, only to find out that you attacked too late.

2. **Use ambiguity and deception to create surprise.** When you present an ambiguous posture to the enemy, you raise his level of fog. Similarly, when you deceive him and then suddenly do the unexpected, you surprise him. If so, he must react to you; you have the initiative. For example, you might make the enemy believe that you must defend a large, static installation but surrender the installation when he attacks it. Then, you ruthlessly counterattack his critical weakness and destroy him. In this way, you use deception to your advantage.

Attacking

Any force that moves to engage an enemy force or to seize terrain is attacking. Because you are **attacking**, this does not necessarily mean that you are **assaulting**. The assault is only one of several potential actions that fall under the heading of

attacking. The assault is where you physically move upon the enemy. It is the ultimate commitment of closing with him. There are several ways to assault enemy positions. Against a very weak position, you may deploy your Marines in a skirmisher-type formation and assault his position frontally by fire and movement. Or, against a stronger position, you may suppress his position and assault on a narrow front, creating a breach that you can penetrate and exploit. Probably the most desirable type is to assault his position **from the rear**, either by turning one of his flanks, or infiltrating his position and turning on him by surprise. When you assault him from his rear, you generally lose fewer Marines and less material.

However, when you attack, you don't necessarily close with the enemy as in an assault. You may attack the enemy by seizing and holding a piece of terrain that is important to him or threatens his line of communication. Then, you may force him to assault you. You may also attack the enemy, but not necessarily assault him, to draw his attention away from somewhere else. The key point is: There is more to the attack than just the assault.

Defending

Any force employed to counter an anticipated enemy attack is said to be **defending**. In defending, you don't need to be in static positions. Defenses can be static or mobile. In the defense, your mission is not simply repelling the enemy's assault. The defense provides you with another opportunity for **destroying him**. A well-planned defense sucks the enemy in until he is in a disadvantageous position relative to yours. Then, you quickly switch over to the offense and destroy the enemy while he is vulnerable. In effect, you use the defense to draw him in, trap him, and ambush him.

In planning and executing your defense, you always want to surprise the enemy, to hit him when and where he least expects it. That way, you keep the initiative. If you surrender the initiative in the defense, you give the enemy the opportunity to find a way to exploit your weaknesses and defeat you.

Summary

By now, you should realize that any distinction between the offense and defense is somewhat vague. In the attack, you may use both offensive and defensive tactics. For example, when you attack, you feel out the enemy, find his weaknesses, and exploit them. Let's assume that you attack an enemy who you know is overly aggressive. Rather than assault his positions, you probe them to draw him into an ambush. In this way, you combine both offensive and defensive tactics in your attack. Likewise, you may do the same while defending. In the defense, you hide your disposition or deceive the enemy to draw him into a trap. Then, you switch quickly to the offense to destroy him while he is vulnerable. Whether attacking or defending, you must always remember that your goal is **defeating the enemy**.

The key to retaining the initiative is to **transition** between offensive and defensive postures more quickly than the enemy. The thinking leader finds creative, sometimes unconventional ways to do this. He finds ways to combine both offensive and defensive tactics to keep his enemy guessing and off balance. However, you cannot do this if you try to organize all your planning and execution in rigid phases. You must have the flexibility to adjust rapidly according to changes in the situation. Otherwise, you will lose the initiative to a competent enemy and he will defeat you.

Note

1. Much of this chapter is based on the article "*Attack or Defend?*", (*Marine Corps Gazette*, June, 1983), by Col Michael D. Wyly, USMC (see Appendix.)

PROBLEM 6

Situation

You are the commander of E Company, BLT 2/7. Your BLT is fighting guerrillas in an insurgency in a Third World country. The guerrilla forces in your tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) are lightly armed but extremely elusive and excellent fighters. Your company has been chasing a small band of guerrillas for several days in hopes of trapping and engaging them decisively. So far, you have had little success since the few times you did catch them, they were able to break contact and get away.

Due to success in your civic action program, the local populace is beginning to cooperate with you in your efforts to eliminate the guerrillas. Currently, you are located on a finger south of a forest, as indicated in figure 6-1. You have reliable information that the guerrillas you have been chasing are located in the forest to your north.

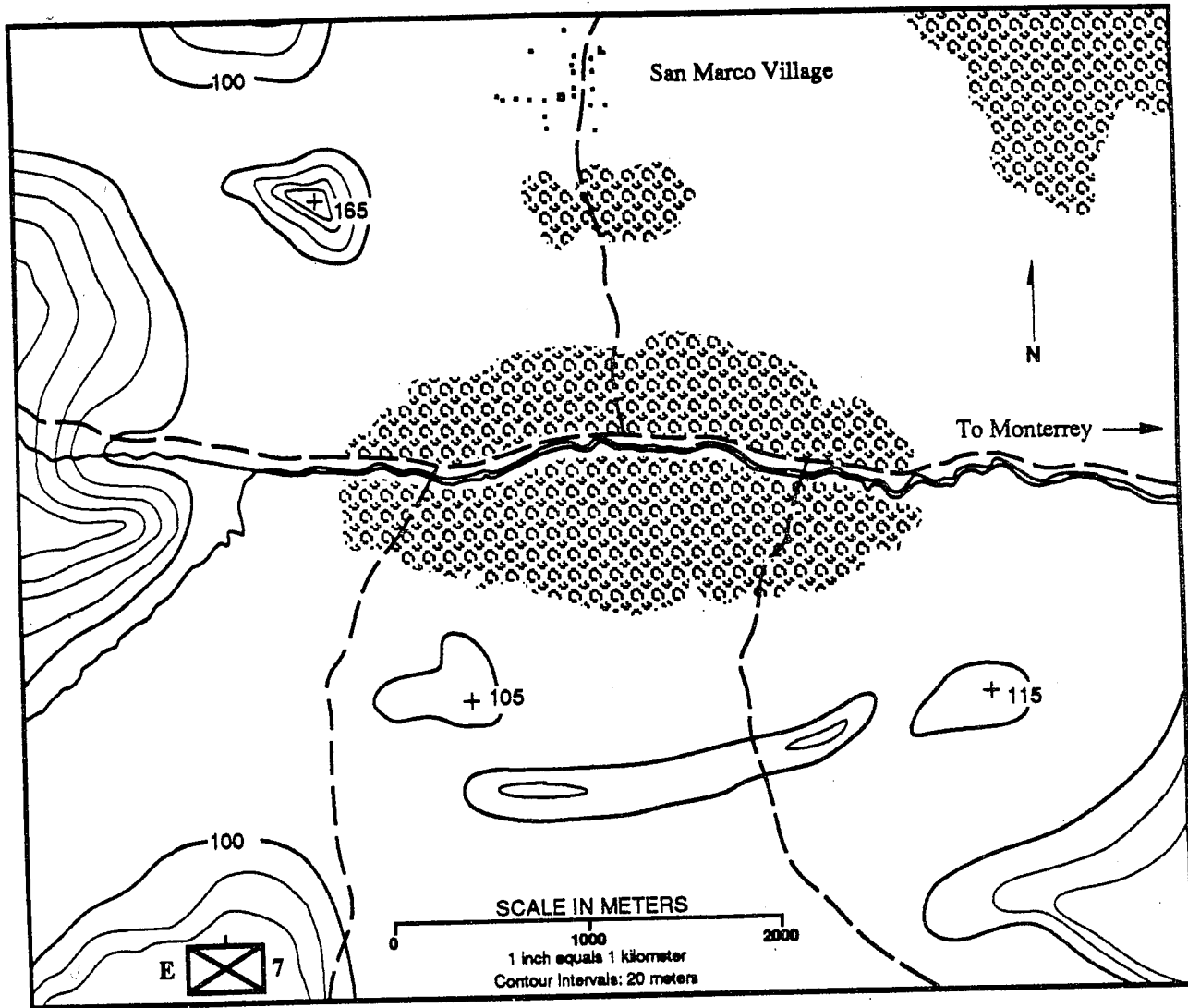


Fig. 6-1. San Marco Village.

Requirement #1

Identify several courses of action that you might take.

Solution to Requirement #1

You should probably assume that the guerrillas know where you are and are watching you. Your simplest course of action is to advance north quickly and either trap them in the forest or push them north and try to envelope them as they leave the forest on the north side. But it seems likely that this won't work since you haven't managed to catch them in the three days you've been chasing them.

An alternative is to send an ambush force around to the north in the vicinity of Hill 165 and the forest south of San Marco village. Then, you could advance with the rest of your company from the south and try to push the guerrillas into the ambush. But this plan would take time to set up, and there doesn't appear to be a concealed route for the ambush force to use. Once the guerrillas spot the ambush force moving north, they will probably head east and escape toward Monterrey.

To prevent the guerrillas from escaping east, you might task a second ambush force with moving rapidly northeast to establish an ambush north of Hill 115. You should send this force out as quickly as possible since the guerrillas will probably move quickly once they realize you know their location. Furthermore, you want to keep this ambush force small and direct them to use a concealed route to their ambush site to avoid detection.

To deceive the guerrillas, you might have your other ambush force move to its ambush site north of the forest using an unconcealed route. When the guerrillas spot this force, they may move toward your ambush near Hill 115. You cannot surround the forest and cover every possible escape route. But you can think creatively to develop a course of action that might encourage the enemy to do what you want him to.

Requirement #2

Choose a course of action and write the mission order that you would issue your subordinate leaders (Note: You are organized and equipped as a T/O rifle company which has three rifle platoons, and one weapons platoon.)

Solution to Requirement #2

Let's assume you choose the last course of action described previously. Your mission order to subordinates might be:

We have reliable information that the guerrilla force we've been chasing is located in the forest to our north. I intend to establish an ambush site east of the forest near Hill 115 and push the enemy into it. Main effort is the ambush site.

(To 1st Platoon.) Move west and north from our position to an ambush site near Hill 165. I want you to use an unconcealed route, so the enemy sees where you are going.

(To 2d Platoon.) On order, I want you to attack north through the forest to force the enemy out of it. Stay west of the trail to our right front.

(To 3d Platoon.) Send one squad out to establish the ambush site near Hill 115. With the rest of your platoon, attack north reference Hill 105 to force the enemy out of the forest. Stay east of the trail to our right front.

(To Weapons Platoon.) Attach two machinegun squads to 1st Platoon. Attach your other machinegun squad and your mortar section to the ambush force from 3d Platoon. Keep your assault section in general support of the company.

Note that in this course of action, you use both offensive action (the attack into the forest) and defensive action (the two ambush sites.) You may recognize that this course of action resembles the classic hammer and anvil tactic of pushing the enemy into a stationary force with a mobile one although your ambush units need not remain stationary.